# Finding Work: James Agee in the Office

DONAL HARRIS

JAMES AGEE MAY BE THE FIRST AMERICAN WRITER TO STAKE HIS literary career on making fun of his employer, and the form of his joke says much about the way a generation of American authors understand how literary writing relates to market-dependent definitions of writing as work. During his undergraduate years at Harvard College, Agee studied the work of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, took classes with I. A. Richards, and fashioned himself as a southern Romantic poet. He was well known among the campus literati; his first and only volume of verse, *Permit Me Voyage* (1934), was published in the Yale Series of Younger Poets and consisted mostly of work composed during college. In 1931, however, he was a college senior looking to land a job, and a career in corporate journalism promised more security than life as a professional poet. As the president of the *Harvard Advocate*, he dedicated six months to compiling an issue that parodied, in the words of his biographer, the "newest, flashiest, and most successful magazine around, *Time*" (Bergreen 103). His premise was simple: he imagined *Time* unhinging itself from contemporary coverage and reporting on major historical events of the Western world. For instance, he wrote about "J. G. Caesar," who "scribbles a good deal; not for publication, just for the pure fun of the thing," and reviewed the first performance of Aeschylus's *Electra*, the playwright's "latest nerve-shatterer," a play "well worth a trip to the new State Theater" (105–06).

Unfortunately, the young Agee enjoyed neither the lucrative occupation that allowed Caesar to write for personal amusement nor the literary prestige (and state subsidies) of Aeschylus. However, he did possess a number of literary-minded acquaintances who worked in the expanding Time Inc. media empire.[1] Thus, he sent multiple publicity notices to *Time*'s offices before the publication of the *Advo-*

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

*cate* parody as a means of self-promotion. In a particularly forward letter, he begged Roy Larsen, a manager at *Time* who also had cut his journalistic teeth at the *Advocate*, to

> [i]magine your staff set down in Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Palestine, with an uncommonly long nose for news, several amphoras of rye, vivid but confused recollections of the 20th century, a somewhat cockeyed sense of TIME, and no sense whatever of chronology; and take note. *The Harvard Advocate* has already imagined you there; has used this as a device whereby to parody TIME. . . . (Bergreen 103)

To parody *Time*—a newsmagazine by definition attached to and dependent on contemporaneity—Agee deploys the device of temporal dilation: Aeschylus rubs shoulders with Caesar; Rome, Egypt, and Greece sit side by side in a version of history that ignores the pesky problems of anteriority. This temporal dilation takes the form of spatial compression, as Agee neatly fits all the major talking points of Western history between the covers of a single, slim volume. He takes what he learned from *The Waste Land*—how to combine an immense historical perspective with radical spatial compression—and applies it to parodying a newsmagazine. What initially looks like an apt pun, a "cockeyed sense of TIME," ends up being not a pun at all but a substitution of a common noun for the trademark. As chronological specificity falls away, the tonal uniformity of *Time* style steps in to take its place. In Agee's formulation, *Time* has little to say about time; any notion of the writer's or the subject's historical context is "vivid but confused," the writing itself providing the only correlation between one instance and the next. In this trade of temporality for title, the linear timeline on which *Time* operates stretches so thin that it disappears, and narrative style replaces historicity as TIME's operative logic. As long as one writes like *Time*, any subject is up for grabs.

Agee was born in 1909, graduated from college in 1932, and arrived on the doorstep of adulthood during the Great Depression, a period that largely did away with the bohemian dream of moving to Paris and either finding a patron or eking out a living by writing for the little magazines. A likelier scenario for someone like Agee was finding work as a staff writer for a large media outlet.[2] Along with global economic upheaval, the 1930s witnessed the rise of new media corporations, most notably Time Inc., that sought out poets and novelists to fill their editorial ranks. Changing modes of artistic patronage, we will see, had deep consequences for mid-twentieth-century literary production. As poets and novelists come under the big tent of media corporations like Time Inc. as salaried staff writers, they must square their definitions of personal writing with their employer's understanding of writing on the clock. Agee's introduction to the institutional context of media corporations can be read back into what he considered his own work, illuminating the unique situation of American authors faced with the prospect of writing on company time.

From Time Inc.'s inception, in 1923, its cofounders, Henry Luce and Britton Hadden, planned to add "an appreciable something to American prose," which, as Agee saw in 1932, entailed redefining news gathering and news writing (qtd. in Elson 5). The result, referred to as *Time* style, consists of compressing not only news stories (at the beginning, no more than four hundred words apiece) but also terms: *Time* made a point of employing portmanteau words like *cinemactor*, *socialite*, *filmen*, *Hindenburglary*, and *detectifiction*.[3] One could claim that *Time*'s compression of its self-description in 1927 from "News-Magazine" to "Newsmagazine" marks the internalization of this tendency. Time Inc.'s expansion into business news, in 1930, with *Fortune*, then into photojournalism, in 1936, with *Life*, as well as its pursuit of many other print-based and multimedia endeavors, created the world's largest media corporation. From the outset it differentiated itself by its style. The linguist

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Joseph Firebaugh writes of *Time*, "Here for the first time is a popular medium of information whose editors are using the language so freely and boldly as to suggest conscious experiment" (232). Luce and Hadden wanted to enliven the drab tone of journalism, the content-over-form approach alluded to by the *New York Times*'s epithet "the gray lady."[4] *Time* countered the organizational protocols of news writing with inverted sentence structures, a chatty tone, and the aggressive compression of content and words. The magazine distinguished itself by its idiosyncratic style, so it is ironic and telling that the most famous instance of *Time* style comes from outside the magazine: in an acerbic 1936 *New Yorker* profile of Luce, Walcott Gibbs writes that, in *Time*, "backwards ran sentences until reeled the mind!" (21).

*Time*'s squareness today could not be further from its reputation in the first half of the century. Alfred Kazin attests that throughout the Depression the company's support of "poet-reporters" provided its authors with a path to literary prestige: "Never as in the Thirties, when history proclaimed itself every day in the significances of daily struggle, could a story in *Time* have seemed so significant to a writer." He describes how for those at *Time* news writing became "a literary feat because of the harsh stylistic frame to which a story had to be fitted." As a *Time* writer, "you got paid well, praised as only great writers are ever praised, and felt like you were an artist, of sorts" (*Starting Out* 104). The sticking point, of course, is buried in the implications of the "of sorts" tacked onto Kazin's assessment: the economic, aesthetic, and, in the end, epistemological baggage that accompanies a creative writer's corporate affiliations. Another longtime employee of Time Inc., Archibald MacLeish, refers to poetry and journalism, or creative and corporate writing, as "two ends of the typewriter keyboard," suggesting that because the activities share so much materially—they require the same tools, so to speak—it is difficult to cleanly cordon one off from the other (3). More recently, the French sociologist Bernard Lahire has argued that "the double life of writers" is a fundamental aspect of twentieth-century literary production. As he points out, "Unlike those people who experience their profession as a central and permanent part of their personality, writers who, for economic reasons, work a 'day job' have a cultural and 'personal' foot in literature and a material (and sometimes also 'personal') foot outside of literature (the second foot freeing the first from dependence on market constraints)" (445). While Lahire may overestimate the fullness of personality achieved through nonartists' professional work, it is worth investigating the implications of his argument for American literary history: economic necessity almost always requires artists to experience the literary field with and against other professional fields, and the sites where artists' multiple job titles intersect can impact the shape of their literary production. I want to extend Lahire's sociological investigation of "the double life of writers" into an analysis of literary form, showing how the interlocking steps of the "personal foot" and "material foot"—steps that determine which writing counts as work in a given context—can help us interpret the aesthetic concerns of mid-century American writers.

I will begin that formal analysis here with Agee and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a work he produced with the photographer Walker Evans that is perhaps the best-known literary artifact of Agee's career and of Time Inc.'s golden days atop the magazine market. By emphasizing the context of corporate news writing, I follow Michael Szalay's observation that to a "quite staggering extent . . . contemporary culture is underwritten—financially and otherwise—not by government agencies but by a small cartel of media conglomerates" (20). Jeff Allred's recent work has changed the focus from Agee and Evans's "modernist dissent against the 'continuity style' of mainstream journalism" to a more nuanced "explanation of the interplay

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of attraction and repulsion that linked artists with mass cultural institutions" ("Boring" 43). However, I depart from Allred's "pessimistic outlook" on the tenability of coupling corporate work and experimental aesthetic practice, if only to temporarily replace judgment of such employment with historical interpretation, given that the arrangement could produce something as historically and aesthetically interesting as Agee and Evans's *Famous Men*. I read Agee's performance of "attraction [to] and repulsion" from corporate work—specifically, the depersonalized work of writing *Time* style—as deeply embedded in the tripartite structure of *Famous Men*, a work Agee began on assignment for *Fortune* and cast as an antidote to mass-cultural writing. This essay extends Szalay's and Allred's discussions of corporate work to investigate how bureaucratic organization lines up with narrative style in Time Inc. magazines and how *Time* style can matriculate into the extracurricular efforts of the company's employees.

The fungibility of *Time* style is apparent from Agee's first interaction with Time Inc., when his ability to replicate *Time*'s voice, rather than the lyricism for which he is famous, won Agee a remunerative writing position. By writing like *Time* before writing for it, Agee demonstrated how its style could be transported outside the magazine and parroted by any writer bright enough to flatter *Time*'s editors through imitation. However short of funny his parody fell, Agee accomplished his larger goal: he landed a writing job. The stunt changed him from a student writing like *Time* for free into an employee, now paid to do the same task for *Fortune*, another magazine in the burgeoning Time Inc. media empire.

When Agee substitutes "TIME" for its uncapitalized homonym and then economically capitalizes on his work done in the magazine's image, he shows how mass-market periodicals like *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Life*—all three of which he wrote for—can provide an ideal setting for the simultaneous production of literary professionalism and professionally subsidized literature. We can think of the periodical prehistory of *Famous Men*, as well as Agee's notorious problems finishing the text, as a model of the feedback between corporate writing jobs and literary production. I see the issues of corporate work and corporate style as inseparable: Agee's ambivalence about the ways that his creative and work writing bleed into each other must be seen as a by-product of the Time Inc. editorial model, one that emerges out of the desire for a depersonalized corporate voice. By taking Agee's relation to Time Inc. as a case study for the nexus of corporate and aesthetic interests, I hope to shed light on the institutional situation of American writers who came of age in the wake of literary modernism and who attempted to suture that movement's aesthetic claims onto the economic reality of writing for a paycheck.

## On Company Time

In a letter to Dwight Macdonald, Agee recalls the elation of receiving the news of his job offer: "Words fail me. . . . Besides the fairly fundamental fact that I don't want to starve, there are dozens of other reasons why I want uh job and many more why I am delighted to get this one" (Bergreen 108). The reasons go unstated, but one can conjecture that they have something to do with the company's cultural centrality and the massive pool of literary talent it boasted. Kazin, who wrote intermittently for *Time* and *Fortune*, recounts with awe visiting the offices at Time Inc.: "Part of the fascination of going up to see Harriet [his friend] in the new *Time* offices in Rockefeller Center was running into James Agee, Walker Evans, Robert Fitzgerald, John Hersey. . . ." When Kazin's colleague John Chamberlain became an editor at *Fortune* in 1936—the year of Walcott Gibbs's *New Yorker* parody—Kazin met and befriended Macdonald, MacLeish, Robert Cantwell, Ralph Ingersoll, Louis Kronenberger, and James Gould Cozzens (*Starting*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

*Out* 105). Kazin depicts Time Inc. as a focal point for the circulation of literary talent, one that offers him and many others a desirable line of work at a respectable print organ.

A big part of *Time*'s reputation came from its active interest in the aesthetic form of news language. *Time*'s intervention in news writing had to do less with content than with form—with developing a form that made the news stay new. Take, for example, the opening paragraph of *Time*'s coverage of the Scopes Trial, from 1925: "Scene. In the fastnesses of Tennessee, the quiet of dawn is split asunder by wailing screams from a steam siren. It is the Dayton sawmill, waking up villagers and farmers for miles around. From 5 until 6:30 the blasts continue. The hamlet and the fantastic cross between a circus and a holy war that is in progress there come slowly to life" ("Great Trial"). In *Time*'s rendering the Scopes Trial becomes a logical extension of a broader shift toward the scientific rationalism of modernity and shows how elaborate confidence games may belie proclamations of social progress. The passage depicts Dayton as "split asunder" like a plank in the mill by, on the one hand, the businessmen who orchestrated the legal battle as a means of publicizing the city and, on the other, the fundamentalists who use the publicity as a religious soapbox. The "wailing screams" of the steam siren replace the bucolic calls of the rooster, forcefully waking the town to a new day of industrial technology. The narrative voice becomes analogous to the siren; it comes into being with the aural representation of industrial progress, and it makes the technologies of communication fundamental to bringing this scene "slowly to life," as well as to shaping the terms in which one can discuss it. Instead of adopting journalistic objectivity, the story takes an explicitly literary stance: the extradiegetic stage directions—"Scene," and later "Jury" and "Trial"—transform news coverage into a kind of closet drama with a complicated narrative point of view; the stage directions and the siren combine to bring about something like free indirect discourse. The novelty of reading *Time*, as opposed to the *New York Times*, is its novelization of news information.

Agee grew up eighty miles from Dayton, in Knoxville, Tennessee, and in several *Fortune* articles on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) he treats the rise of the New South more as an allegory than as a historical event, which makes his approach remarkably similar to *Time*'s coverage of the Scopes Trial. He refers to the "Dayton of blessed memory" as one of many "down-at-heel" villages on the verge of a delayed industrial revolution ("Tennessee Valley Authority" 632). New Deal projects like Norris Dam, rural factories, and, yes, sawmills make farmers "come to" after generations of existing in the ahistorical utopia that Agee in his parody mocks *Time* for describing. These farmers'

> forefathers settled this country in the 1700's when the effete civilization east of the Alleghenies stuck in their craws. They whipped the Britishers and Loyalists at King's Mountain. They kept much to themselves and their great-grandsons do likewise and live in much the same way, while slowly the sawmills and the mines and the railways and the highways and now TVA burn seclusion from about them. (634–35)

In a letter to his longtime friend James Flye, Agee claims Luce said that a TVA article Agee wrote "was one of the best pieces of writing he'd seen in *Fortune*" (*Letters*, 5 Oct. 1933; 66), which forces one to question the notorious mutual antipathy that Agee and "The Founder," as Agee called Luce, felt for each other. Fitzgerald argued, "Whatever [Agee] wrote for the magazine was so conspicuous that it might as well have been signed" (51); Kazin wrote that Agee was "the only writer whose individual voice could be distinguished from the anonymous smoothness" of its surroundings ("Writing" 473). Yet Agee's nativist romance of a southern existence outside time, where folks speak

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"pidgin-Elizabethan and some of their songs are still of the sea and of England," sits awkwardly next to his critique of *Time*'s form as the end of historical difference ("Tennessee Valley Authority" 635). The Scopes Trial coverage is more interested in allegorizing the machine in the garden than in the specifics of a judicial case about teaching evolution; despite Kazin's and Fitzgerald's claims, after only a year working on Time Inc.'s clock Agee adopts its tone, without the arched eyebrow that marks his collegiate parody.

It would be easy to chalk the allegorical model of *Time* style, which emphasizes the symbolic resonances rather than the ostensibly objective facts of an event, up to bad history, but it may be more productive to read it as an outgrowth of the inextricable tie between aesthetic and bureaucratic tendencies in editorial work. *Time*'s desire to aestheticize the historical moment can be seen as a response to what Luce and Hadden described as an overproduction of information in the newspapers and an inattention to the wants and needs of the average reader. "As it is now," wrote Luce in the early 1920s, "people have to think too hard as they read" (Elson 6). In this period, modernist literature took most of the blame for the mental difficulties of reading. However, Luce's most immediate referent is not "the difficulties of modernism," to use Richard Poirier's phrase for the "proposition that the act of reading should entail difficulties analogous to those registered in the act of writing" (126). Certainly, these difficulties are plentiful; one could convincingly, if broadly, define modernist style as that which requires people to "think too hard." And *Time* repeatedly disparaged modernism: it dedicated its first book review to a takedown of Eliot and Joyce as representative of a massive "hoax." "There is a new kind of literature abroad in the land," the magazine claims, "whose only obvious fault is that no one can understand it" ("Shanti"). However, Luce is responding to the difficulties of an oversaturated print landscape, one that offers the reader no method for evaluating the worth of publications before reading them. Luce points out that, counterintuitively, mass culture is difficult because there is so much of it. A *Time* advertising circular from 1925 dramatizes this: Two distraught characters, "Busy Man" and "Busy Woman," sit sadly in a living room, surrounded by newspapers. The man laments, "I bought this mass of printed matter to find out what is going on in the world, but it's no use! I am not abreast of the news in anything outside of my business." Lo and behold, "TIME" knocks on the door and saves the day, representing "a new idea of journalism. In my twenty-six pages is every fact of significance in all those newspapers and periodicals on your floor" (Brinkley 136). For *Time* modernism offers readers too little information, and mass culture offers them too much.

*Time*'s narrative mode, then, responds to a seemingly paradoxical anxiety about the loss of knowledge at the hands of unfettered and disaggregated information.[5] As Niklas Luhmann argues, when communication becomes faster and more complex it makes knowledge more quickly obsolete (85). In other words, the "information economies of scale" tip toward strategic ignorance: there is a decreasing payoff for staying current as the time span of what is considered current shrinks and the amount of information in that interval expands. Agee's depiction of *Time* as unhinged from historical specificity looks in this light like a response to the feeling that contemporaneity is awash in unprocessed data. Stretching back at least to Matthew Arnold and forward at least to Alan Bloom, the fear of intellectual dissipation at the hands of mass media is a familiar story, strongly associated with the development of modernism.[6] However, the epistemological and material foundations of Time Inc. force a reconsideration of this trajectory: they suggest that a crisis of mass culture's informational overproduction was also felt within mass culture. Though *Time* positions itself against modernist literature from the beginning, it shares

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what F. R. Leavis describes in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) as the central modernist literary technique: "a compression approaching simultaneity—the co-presence in the mind of a number of different orientations, fundamental attitudes, orders of experience" (107). Despite this shared technique, the magazine does not exhibit what Aaron Jaffe compellingly theorizes as modernism's "aversion to oversupply" (8); instead, it massifies aesthetic taste, expanding the reader's linguistic and cultural skills, and employs creative artists to presort the paralyzing crush of news into a manageable quantity. *Time* compresses to make reading easier and more rational; it becomes an interface between the raw data of history and the upwardly mobile reader. Instead of making reading as difficult as writing, the magazine reduces the effort that goes into reading while expanding the benefits of that activity. In its prospectus, *Time* decides that a news organ matters "not in how much it includes between its covers—but in HOW MUCH IT GETS OFF ITS PAGES INTO THE MINDS OF ITS READERS" (qtd. in Mott 295).

To remodel the work of news gathering, Time Inc. did not employ typical reporters; instead it hired editors who would scour the dailies and, creating a kind of Dadaist collage, remake the content of newspapers into an aesthetic object. Justifying his approach, Luce said, "It is easier to turn poets into business journalists than to turn bookkeepers into writers" (qtd. in Elson 129). The *Time* editor's work is not investigation but collation; Luce writes, "It takes brains and work to master all the facts dug up by the world's 10,000 journalists and to put them together in a little magazine" (197). The magazine founds itself not on informational originality but on the way it translates other people's research into its own voice. And because of this emphasis on stylistic uniformity, all the Time Inc. publications excise bylines in favor of a staff list in the front matter of each issue. After passing through the hands of the editor, Britton Hadden, writers' end products were supposed to be indistinguishable from one another, so attaching names to the stories became counterproductive for establishing a universal voice in the periodical.

As the magazine's editorial methodology gets up and running, the combined goals of aesthetic singularity and managerial organization become a compositional method in their own right. Though *Time* style originates with Hadden, the style slowly spreads from a reflection of his taste to a work ethic distributed across the corporation. William Gottfried, a longtime employee of Time Inc., explains how the magazine's doctrine of compression and compartmentalization, and the stylistic tics that accompanied these aesthetic practices, quickly moved from material constraint to self-censure: "The original Prospectus said that no story would occupy more than about seven inches of type. We tried to write this way, but gradually we found our medium changing under our hands. . . . *Time*-style became not a formula of words, but a kind of mental discipline" (qtd. in Elson 84). Gottfried describes the mutation of formal or spatial constraints into an approach to thinking about writing and then into an automatic way of writing that no longer requires thinking—a reflex, in the non-self-reflexive sense. Thus, we can see how a formal experiment in the content of the magazine shapes the way that workers approach the task of writing. The corporate identity is thoroughly particularized by its aesthetic form, but it cannot be attached to a person. In this respect, a *Time* editor begins to take on the definition of individual talent Eliot discusses in *The Frontiers of Criticism* (1956): "poetic originality is largely an original way of assembling the most disparate and unlikely material to make a new whole" (9). Both imagine their projects as organizing the sum total of one's reading into a new form. Just as the shared technique of compression brings Time Inc.'s style into conversation with literary modernism, the absorption of individual writers into a corporate voice can look like a bowdlerized version of modern-

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ist "impersonality," especially the one laid out in Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Here Eliot claims that an artist has "not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality. . . . The poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done" (56, 59). His theory of impersonal authorship, in which "the work to be done" overrides the writer doing the work, also, ironically, guides the editorial model at Time Inc. The difference is that no one questions who wrote *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*. Eliot's ideal author still gets to sign the finished product; there is a person's name attached to the poem or novel, as well as the figurative signature of an individual style. At Time Inc. the lofty hand that guides Eliot's individual poet, what Eliot calls "the historical sense," materializes in the suspect form of a corporate "house style," a purely textual identity that supersedes the agents who work in its name. The Time Inc. model begins to raise questions about pinpointing the creative act in an anonymous and collective text, a problem hinted at by the combination of plural and singular in Luce's assertion of "brains and work."

## Unwriting *Famous Men*

The "mental discipline" of *Time* style carries over into the "corporation story" of *Fortune*, the "photo-magazine" format of *Life*, and the "group journalism" that defines Time Inc.'s overarching editorial system (Elson 323). Though each magazine develops its own style, the organizational model that makes editorial work transferable between writers also makes the administration of that work transferable between titles. Perhaps the best evidence of this is the promiscuous reappropriation of writers among periodicals in the organization. Archibald MacLeish, something like the Platonic ideal of an administrative artist, started as an education writer for *Time*, went on to be a manager at *Fortune*, and also wrote for *Life*. Agee spent four years at *Fortune*; began writing reviews for *Time* in 1939, first of books and later of films; and after 1945 served as a "rover," writing for Luce in any capacity and for any magazine.

In 1949 Agee published "Comedy's Greatest Era" in *Life*, a long piece on silent-film humor, which one could read as his self-reflexive comment on the pervasiveness of Time Inc.'s mental discipline. The argument, that "the only thing wrong with screen comedy today is that it takes place on a screen which talks," fits well into the nonlinguistic emphasis of *Life*.[7] Verbalization, aural or written, becomes antithetical to *Life*'s visual project, and Agee repurposes the silent comedians as evidence of language's fundamental inadequacy. He refers to the "figure[s] of speech, or rather of vision" that the comedians develop not as creative acts but as "a ruthless discipline." The "business of being as funny as possible" becomes a strictly organized type of work developed to best suit the medium in which it will be distributed (70). Ironically, learning the grammar of silent film's performative work is what makes the comedians unfit for the talkies: "The only comedians who ever mastered the screen cannot work, for they cannot combine their comic style with talk. Because there is a screen, talking comedians are trapped into a continual exhibition of their inadequacy" (71). And, for Agee, the sad consequence of their overspecialization provides an allegory for the plight of the poet-reporter. After only a few months at *Fortune*, he wrote to Flye about the troubles of writing outside the corporate style: "For the past two weeks, particularly, writing has been very much on my mind. I've been steadily trying to do it, and haven't written a single good thing. The only writing I do which approaches decency is on this job—and on other stuff I seem to be pretty well congealed" (*Letters*, 14 Aug. 1932; 56).

*Time* style becomes a methodology that forecloses the possibility in its practitioners of other types of writing. Macdonald recounts a

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scene that bears this out. While writing for *Fortune*, he also contributed to a little magazine, the *Miscellany*, in his "spare time." When he sent an issue of the *Miscellany* to Luce, he received an irate letter in return, arguing that by writing for someone else Macdonald had "betrayed Time, Inc." Writing for *Fortune* "was not just a job, it was a vocation worthy of a man's whole effort, and pay and time schedules weren't the point at all. 'Why, the very name *Fortune* was thought up by so-and-so [one of my fellow editors] late one night on the West Side subway between the Seventy-second and the Seventy-ninth street stations [Luce was a *Time* man always]. This is a twenty-four-hour profession, you never know when you may get an idea for us, and if you're all the time thinking about some damn little magazine . . .'" then Macdonald is not fulfilling his writerly obligations to Luce (33; interpolation in orig.).[8] As the company style becomes both a disciplined competence and a method of work that can be applied equally to all subjects, then to write for someone else, even if that person is oneself, becomes theft.

The theft of company time Luce accuses Macdonald of resurfaces as a literal theft of company goods in the publication history of *Famous Men*. The text, which began as a three-part story on southern white tenant farmers for the Life and Circumstances section of *Fortune*, followed a circuitous route to its final—if to Agee still incomplete—form. In June 1936, shortly after Agee arrived back in New York from a six-month vacation, his editor at *Fortune* offered him the story. Unlike his usual "commercial-poetic prose" that "wasted enough time not to be by any means worth the forty dollars that was the best it could bring in," this assignment offered a return to the rural southerners Agee had covered in his articles on the TVA (Lofaro and Davis 12). He describes the three parts coming together with "the first on the family, the second a generalized piece, a big fatassed analysis of the situation of cotton economics and of all Governmental efforts to Do Something about It, which latter I was quite sure could beautifully hang themselves in their own rope; and a straight union piece" (14). In true "group journalism" fashion, he imagined MacLeish writing the middle section. Despite Agee's lofty vision, the three-part *Fortune* publication was quickly rejected by his editors, though they did not give up the rights to the work he submitted. The legal status of the document became increasingly important as Agee continued to write throughout 1937 under the encouragement of Edward Answell, a literary agent at Harper and Brothers who showed interest in printing the manuscript in book form. Because Luce refused to publish the manuscript in *Fortune* but also refused to give up his right to do so, there was a year-long period when Agee had no legal claim to the work that he considered his great artistic statement, "the best assignment I have ever had, and the only one I have a hundred per cent worked to do" (12). After a year Luce relinquished the manuscript, but Harper and Brothers eventually rejected the project because Agee refused to make suggested revisions. The manuscript did not find a permanent home until 1940, when Eunice Jessup—an editor at Houghton Mifflin and the wife of John Jessup, a colleague of Agee's at *Fortune* and the unnamed author of *Time*'s tepid initial review of *Famous Men*—showed interest in it.[9]

It is difficult to characterize Agee's activities as a writer-employee after *Fortune* killed the story. Is revision considered office work—Time Inc. still owns the words that Agee has written and he is still their company man—or has he become like his imagined Caesar, writing without hope of publication? In his application in October 1937 for a Guggenheim Fellowship (an award he did not receive), he states that any approach would fall short of his assignment, which is in limbo between work and not work. The text about three tenant families aims "to tell everything possible as accurately as possible: and to invent nothing. It involves therefore as total a suspicion

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of 'creative' and 'artistic' as of 'reportorial' attitudes and methods" ("Plans" 133). Authorial autonomy and the bureaucratic strictures of corporate employment are now irreconcilable, creating a vacuum where neither writing on the clock nor writing for oneself adequately represents what Agee sees himself doing.

Agee's anxiety over the substance of writing becomes a primary motif in *Famous Men*. In a text that could reasonably be described as one long, breathless tirade against the indignity of bureaucratic abstraction, Agee early on attempts to lay out what nonexploitative aesthetic work might look like: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement" (13). Along with his petition to have the work printed on cheap newsprint that will disintegrate before the next generation has a chance to read it, this may be the most famous example of Agee's Pyrrhic desire for textual self-immolation. Szalay finds the passage characteristic of Agee's attempt to "disavow the means of production that sustain him"—namely, corporate writing (27). Of course, the irony lies in the fact that Agee does "do" writing, and lots of it. The conditional form of "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here" attests to the impossibility of Agee's abstaining from the activity. He is compelled to write because his livelihood depends on it, just as his coworker Evans must take photographs, and just as all other staffers must write news stories that will not be attributed to them. Yet because of his institutional context, Agee equates writing with betrayal:

> These I will write of are human beings, living in this world, innocent of such twistings as these which are taking place over their heads; and that they were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings, in the employment of still others still more alien; and that they are now being looked into by still others, who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book. . . . (12–13)

The greatest offense that Agee can envision is treating his subjects as textual artifacts, which is exactly what they become as soon as he leaves Alabama and begins to document his experience. To encounter the plight of the tenant farmers "as casually as if it were a book" would be to flatten the gestural register, the one that silent-film comedians perfected before it was ruined by words.

Agee faces the choice between creating a form that can directly communicate his subjects and reducing his experience to words that are owned by a corporation. The problem with the first method is that sending a plate of food and a bag of excrement to *Fortune* as his report on the plight of tenant farmers does not exactly fulfill his contractual obligations. Agee finds work because of his ability to write like *Time*, and to refuse to write eliminates his most marketable skill. While his assertion that he would abjure writing if he could may refer to a deep skepticism of mediation, in context it looks to be about something more banal: work. He finds himself chafing at the way that writing has become a depersonalized type of work in which he can be classified as a northern spy, a New Deal do-gooder, or a corporate lackey. By organizational affiliation, his work is part of the "twistings" taking "place over [his subjects'] heads," yet these corporate machinations also take place over his head. Not writing—that is, not working—would allow him to square the circle, to erase any trace of his own labor from the document he is supposed to be compiling on his subjects. In other words, or in Agee's words, to remove the work of writing from the equation resembles displaying "plates of food and excrement" side by side. Pragmatically, this would have unappealing consequences: it would mean giving up his income and the prestigious writing position that sends him

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on paid trips to Alabama, an area he claims to be familiar with only through the twin evils of books and bureaucracy: "Tobacco Road, some passages in Faulkner, and a few meetings of the Committee for the Defense of Southern Workers" (Lofaro and Davis 13).

## Incorporating the Porch

If one way to short-circuit the logic of *Time* style, which casts all writing as work, is to extract the writing from the finished product, then another avenue, the one that ultimately guides *Famous Men*, is frantically to insert text so that the product never reaches completion. Agee writes in the preface, "Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in" (xlvi–xlvii). Ideally, *Famous Men* will not end even with this exhaustive record and analysis: Agee writes, "The present volume is merely portent and fragment" (xlvii), the first installment of what he still imagines as a three-volume opus. Agee's imagined tome will incorporate letters from readers, alternative accounts of tenant life, other journalistic attempts to describe the situation, and anything else that will keep the text from ending. In practice, Agee's encyclopedic aesthetic results in the laboriously intricate descriptions of clothing, furniture, and worn accoutrements in the farmers' houses; these passages bore down to uncover how "each texture in the wood, like those of a bone, is distinct in the eye as a razor: each nail-head is distinct: each seam and split" (Agee and Evans 142). Rita Barnard characterizes Agee's aesthetic as "the 'anorexic' response to consumer culture" because of its "fascination with the authenticity of scarcity" (6). But *Famous Men*'s form is anything but anorexic; Agee is fascinated by the fact that, when he looks closely, his subjects are surrounded by an indescribably complex array of things that he must describe to do them justice. If we stay with Barnard's metaphor of pathologized eating, Agee exhibits something closer to compulsive consumption. His method of giving each minute part of every object its due does not erase what Agee calls the "digestion into art" (11), nor does it simply refuse to take part in the consumption-production loop (which would be Barnard's formulation). Instead, Agee takes Time Inc.'s work model to its epistemological limit. If all his time belongs to his employer and his job is to write, then everything he experiences must be documented. He transforms productive workmanship into pathological graphomania.

By inserting more and more text into *Famous Men*, Agee could spread the book out forever, drowning the market relations of corporate writing in textual noise. This approach results in something like an inversion of fractal geometry, in which scalar levels that superficially look the same are actually infinitely unassimilable. Agee writes, "How am I to speak of you as 'tenant' 'farmers,' as 'representatives' of your 'class,' as social integers in a criminal economy, or as individuals, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and as my friends and as I 'know' you?" (100). First the common nouns, then the entire category of knowledge become impossibly general. Agee expresses a desire for the historical, personal, and contextual specificity that is erased in Time Inc.'s disciplinary and aesthetic model. Yet as soon as he arrives at this particularity, the existential weight of infinitely regressive singularity falls apart:

> I might suggest, [the text's] structure should be globular: or should be eighteen or twenty intersected spheres, the interlockings of bubbles on the face of a stream; one of these globes is each of you. . . . We should first meditate and establish its ancient, then more recent, its spreaded and more local, history and situation: how it is a child of the substance and bowels of the stars and of all space: how it is created

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> forth of an aberration special to one speck and germ and pollen fleck this planet, this young planet, on that broadblown field. (101)

Here we see Agee toggling between the far and near in time, space, and situation. Telling the tale of three families quickly becomes the mind-numbingly vast project of cataloging the individuality of every atom in the universe. And even if he could complete this universal encyclopedia, the structure is arbitrary, a jumble of interlocking but interchangeable spheres bumping up against one another. Eighteen, twenty, twenty thousand globules: when forced to organize, we are back in the realm of representativeness and classification. Even more, Agee must think analogically to conceive of this peculiar structure, as he compares his subjects to "bubbles on the face of a stream." He atavistically reimagines the unassimilable humanness of each of the tenant farmers as a surface phenomenon of the natural order, undermining any singularity that might be achieved through his endlessly specific descriptions. While Agee can take pleasure in the isolation of nails and boards, his methodology evaporates any trace of the human; the bubbles that float on the stream are empty of all but air. The human, in this context, looks like nothing more than the unacknowledged middle register between Agee's microscopic particularity and cosmic abstraction.

When Agee's scalar shifts in description begin to question the primacy of an individualized perspective, we can see how his attempt to write outside the Time Inc. model strangely dovetails with the editorial style he hopes to evade. This happens in the most basic organization of the text, which is not exactly "globular," though it does repeatedly attempt to hollow out the limited subjectivity of its own narrative voice. The original, tripartite structure of the magazine article survives in the "On the Porch" sections, which provide the nominal beginning, middle, and end of the work. They describe two people, ostensibly Agee and Evans, lying on the Gudgers' porch and preparing for sleep. As the house goes silent, the men hear a call-and-response between two animals they take to be foxes, whose voices stand in for the ideal form of Agee's text, "never repeating a pattern, and always with what seemed infallible art . . . the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself, and the grief of incommunicability" (468–69). The foxes bring Agee's desire for radical, nonrepeating singularity together with his desire for an undisciplined, because "incommunicabl[e]," transmission outside language. As the foxes take over, they push Agee and Evans so far out of the narrative that the men become senseless and inanimate, "left like dim sacks at one side of a stage" as the animals have "what at length turned out to have been the most significant, but most unfathomable, number in the show" (470). Like the unnamed *Time* writer whose point of view is supplanted by the wailing siren and who uses stage directions to organize the Scopes Trial, Agee ends *Famous Men* in an unconscious state. His and Evans's subjectivities are erased from the action; the final line finds them melting into the senselessness of the house as talk "drained rather quickly off into silence . . . until at length we too fell asleep" (470–71).

The second and third "On the Porch" sections expand from the previous installment, opening with its closing words, replicating the serial format that *Famous Men*'s original, periodical publication would have taken. The first opens with a description of the Gudgers' house, as it and "all that was in it . . . descended deep beneath the gradual spiral it had sunk through; it lay formal under the order of silence" (19). The passage ends with an italicized echo of the section's title, "*(We lay on the front porch:*" (21). The unclosed parenthesis signals the section's continuity with "(On the Porch: 2," which picks up the closing phrase of "(On the Porch: 1" and promotes

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it to the diegetic level. The coda to section 1 expands again in the next paragraph: "We lay on the front porch to the left of the hall as you enter" (225). Paralleling the sentence's expansion, the section dilates into a long diatribe against journalism, art, science, abstraction, naturalism, realism, and description before returning to Agee's perspective on the porch. The last line foreshadows the entrance of the foxes, who will dominate section 3: "From these woods a good way out along the hill there now came a sound that was new to us" (253). Just as the second section begins with the last words of the first, the third redescribes the sound emerging from the woods before ending at what appears to be the beginning: everyone is asleep and the house stands alone, without the intrusion of human consciousness. These three sections form an endlessly repeating loop, narratively closing off the possibility of the text's reaching completion.

In the published version of *Famous Men*, the combined "On the Porch" sections push seventy pages, but they began as a five-line poem in the journal Agee kept after returning to *Fortune* from a vacation with his wife in 1936:

> On the porch.
>
> We got back to town late in May.
> The winter before.
> The shape of the mind.
> Home. Friends. Back to work.
> (Lofaro and Davis 21)

The porch he describes here does not seem to be the Alabaman porch he shared with Evans, because the "we" alluded to above is not he and Evans but he and his wife. In fact, the biographical content of the last line, "Home. Friends. Back to work," predates the *Fortune* story, suggesting that any aesthetic reverie must always return to the ambiguous definition of "work." Though Agee attempts to extricate himself from *Famous Men*'s narrative loop by playing dead and letting the foxes take over, the "On the Porch" sections show how even his personal writing turns into the work of *Time* style. The poetry he writes about vacation comes back to his day job, and the seedling of this poem provides the organizational structure for his *Fortune* assignment. But the affiliative pull of Time Inc. goes even deeper, because as these five lines expand into the skeleton of *Famous Men*, they find Agee depersonalizing his work and giving authorial control over to the "incommunicabl[e]" noise of the world talking to itself. The text's last gesture is to erase its narrator so that, rhetorically, the "On the Porch" sections stand on their own, without an individual consciousness, like Eliot's ideally impersonal literature. If authorial impersonality offers an escape hatch from bureaucratic complicity, then it is a strange consolation because the problem of *Time* style begins with the refusal of writerly autonomy. From a certain angle, Agee's formal evacuation of personal voice from the finished product looks surprisingly like what Luce and Hadden expected of their writers all along.

The central contradiction of *Famous Men*, then, is that Agee's version of a liberated modernity—in which he takes Time Inc.'s paycheck but writes himself out of what it symbolizes—ends up reenacting the formal, editorial, and political problems he has with his employer. The structure of *Famous Men* creates a closed circuit: it removes Agee's complicity with corporate work, but in the process the book gives up on the possibility of a nonexploitative mode of representation that could actually do something for the rural sharecroppers. Paula Rabinowitz is correct that at the end of the final "On the Porch" section "the movement from the documentary image of the tenants to the narrative of his own subjectivity is complete, and with it, the movement from visual to descriptive, from the people to the self" (161–62). But if that "subjectivity" and "self" are given over to the incommunicable forces of nature, as

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they appear to be, then Agee's impersonality is an unimaginative answer to, or really a restatement of, Time Inc.'s desire to write about, then write off, "the people" and the policy issues they present. For Agee it is better to cordon off the economic question of his own corporate work—and by extension the tenant farmers' lack of access to the blessing and curse of institutionally produced alienation—and approach it as an aesthetic problem, as a crisis of textual rather than political representation. From the beginning, Time Inc.'s goal was to aestheticize its subjects, so the fact that Agee's narrative ends up mimicking a depersonalized *Time* style should not be all that surprising. Both are designed to leave things exactly as they are, because when faced with the choice between rural poverty and urban, corporate modernity, Agee cannot imagine that the sharecroppers' hell could be any worse than his own. "I could not wish of any one of them that they should have had the 'advantages' I have had: a Harvard education is by no means an unqualified advantage," he writes late in the text (310–11). It may not be an unqualified advantage, but it places him in an ideal position to equivocate between two very different types of disenfranchisement.

If *Famous Men*'s periodical prehistory shines light on some formal traces of Agee's anxiety over mid-century corporate work, its afterlife says something about how that anxiety has become an enormously productive topic in postwar culture. After flopping in 1941 and going out of print for nearly twenty years, *Famous Men* was republished in 1960 on the heels of Agee's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *A Death in the Family* (1957) to a quite different response. Agee's showy antibureaucratic stance and fetishization of particularity, after hibernating through the Eisenhower administration, fit right in when baby boomers and the New Left make radical individuality the new normal. By the time of *Famous Men*'s republication, when it is reclaimed as a forerunner of the New Journalism, the lessons of David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), which also began as a *Fortune* story, had blossomed. The artist's ennui, once strictly imagined as an outsider's affair, takes up residence in the managerial class. Corporate benefactors no longer tacitly allow their employees' displeasure with institutional order; their discomfort is expected, so that thinking outside the box can lead to market innovation. Agee's attempt to be radically unassimilable into corporate and artistic life becomes a model for the bureaucratic individualism that Thomas Frank describes in *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), a combination of managerial organization and creative personality that Agee picks up from his many years in the offices of Time Inc. *Famous Men* is championed retroactively as the most accomplished instance of its genre because of Agee's refusal to kowtow to institutional pressures. Its reclamation describes the postwar moment perfectly, because it sidesteps the fact that the institutions Agee rejects are what initiate his ability to play rebellious.

Agee's desire for an endlessly proliferating project comes to fruition in a number of ways. First, the book physically expands. In the 1960 reprint Walker Evans doubles the number of photographs from thirty-one to sixty-two, some of which predate his trip with Agee or do not portray Alabama at all, and Evans also writes a memoir about his time with Agee that has been included in every subsequent edition. In Bruce Jackson's formulation, Evans's additions "cracked the structure of the book" and show that "the book really wasn't about that very specific place but rather was about a larger slice of human experience and therefore the expansion was legitimate" (47). The particularity of "the people," it turns out, was never all that important. But the text also expands in a more ironic, if only metaphoric, way. As the biographies and critical studies of Agee's work attest, everyone can now claim a piece of what Alan Spiegel calls "the legend" of

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Agee: Catholics and atheists, communists and Jeffersonian democrats, journalists and artists, naturalists and modernists and postmodernists.[10] Also, Agee is endlessly reintegrated into the content of popular-form articles by journalists who return to Alabama to keep his report up-to-date and are always surprised that nothing has changed except the residents' attitudes toward journalists. The most elaborate of these re-creations, Dale Maharidge and Michael Williams's *And Their Children after Them* (2008), a Pulitzer Prize–winning photo-text that revisits the same families that Agee and Evans documented, discovers the families in an economic situation remarkably similar to that of 1936. The most recent, Christina Davidson's April 2010 *Atlantic Monthly* article "Let Us Now Trash Famous Authors," discusses her "Recession Roadtrip" to Alabama, during which Davidson finds herself one of many "like-minded tourists" who want to talk to a real-life "Gudger" about Agee's "timeless and powerful . . . principal theme that material poverty holds no inherent shame." Davidson is astonished that the descendants of the three families in *Famous Men* "had tired of journalists, researchers, and filmmakers turning up in Moundville looking for 'Gudgers'" (19).

Finally, even Agee's former employer reassesses its discarded text. In a review of the 1960 edition of *Famous Men*, none other than *Time* claims that the work provided a "sort of readers' underground" outside mass-cultural consumption. Concluding this fawning tribute to Agee's individualism, the still-unnamed reviewer writes, "Agee steadily retains the artist's supreme gift: he can bring even a reluctant reader into the heart of his own experience" ("In Love"). If the "artist's supreme gift" resides in bringing a skeptic into the fold, then one could argue that *Time* and Agee are artists made for each other. Together they conceptualize a form of corporate work that makes stylized iconoclasm a viable career option.

## Notes

I would like to thank Mark McGurl, Michael North, and Richard Yarborough for their invaluable support as I wrote this essay and pursued the larger project from which it emerges. Special thanks go to Sam See, who offered incisive comments during the penultimate revision.

1. Dwight Macdonald and Robert Fitzgerald, employees at Time Inc. and school friends of Agee's (Macdonald from Phillips Exeter Academy, Fitzgerald from Harvard College), vouched for Agee, helping him secure a position without a manager's ever meeting him face-to-face. Archibald MacLeish, a longtime coworker at Time Inc., wrote the foreword to *Permit Me Voyage*.

2. The other major career path available to him was moving to Hollywood and working in the studio system, a milieu famously satirized in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939). The studios presented their own set of problems for young artists (Schatz; Christensen).

3. Firebaugh presents a more complete list of these portmanteau words.

4. Schudson has thoroughly discussed the development of an objective and dispassionate reportorial voice in the late nineteenth century.

5. As Ohmann demonstrates, older titles like the *Atlantic*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Harper's* and newer ones like *McClure's* and *Munsey's* attempted to address the widest audience possible. Collages of disparate genres, authors, and narrative voices, these magazines were physically enormous. A typical issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1926 exceeded 200 pages, and it was not uncommon for *Cosmopolitan* or *McClure's* to close in on 150 pages; a 1926 *Ladies' Home Journal* was 270 pages (6–29, 53–55). For more on the editorial voice of popular magazines, see Marchand.

6. Leavis, *Mass Civilization*, and Macy provide two contemporaneous examples.

7. Allred discusses *Life*'s visual style in depth (*American Modernism* 167–98).

8. John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) is another example of a Time Inc. author's "betrayal" of his employer. Hersey, who worked as a *Time* correspondent in Japan and China during World War II, published his report on the bombing of Hiroshima in the *New Yorker* rather than a Time Inc. title, earning him Luce's eternal disdain.

9. Lofaro and Davis discuss the manuscript's path from Time Inc. to Houghton Mifflin at greater length (144).

10. Spiegel provides a breakdown of appropriations of Agee. Spiegel's text shows that even the compilation of Agee's affiliations can now be considered a scholarly task. Reed calls Agee's aesthetic "postmodern realism," demonstrating that each kind of appropriation also has a combinatorial power that, in theory, would allow Agee arcana to proliferate infinitely, which in some ways fulfills the original goal of *Famous Men*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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