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Abstract\_Title:

“The First Full Loss of Form”: Agee After Cavell

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This paper interrogates certain Cavellian notions about modernity’s relative secularity and the desirable posture of romantic passivity (or openness to the everyday). It proceeds literarily by way of an exploration of decisive moments in James Agee and Walker Evan’s classic modernist text *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).

Agee links the “first full loss of form” to a certain desirably “fallen” condition and to what he imagines as a positive patience “to the source of being.” Agee’s rhetoric reiterates familiar tropes of romantic self-consciousness and “natural supernaturalism.” In his text, momentary lyrical reveries of “complete peace” spiral outward into the world in the form of an agonizing moral paralysis about whether and how to “help” or “improve” the Alabama sharecroppers he is visiting but can never “know.” Agee can never “know” them just as they can never know fully appreciate the beautiful “first full loss of form” he imagines in their clothing. As a moral and aesthetic aporia, the predicament recalls certain literary and philosophical passages discussed by Cavell.

Through its literary critical lens, this paper interrogates the theorization of positive and negative passivity in relation to a vision of secular modernity (regarding the death of God and the fall of kings, in Cavell’s picture) and to the role of “folk culture” and non-modern others (the presumably static worlds of the “ancient” and the “veteran”) within Cavell’s philosophical picture of modern life—or within a critically revised Cavellian picture.