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Reclaiming Southern Pathology: James Agee and the Biological Thought of Georges Canguilhem

Abstract: James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a documentary account of three cotton tenant families in Depression Alabama, centres on the image of the wound in its representations of tenant poverty. But Agee also transposes this image into more biological terms so that the tenants are seen as damaged cells or embryos. This transposition can be framed as a 1930s eugenic concern with pathological bodies. But this article argues, through a comparison to Georges Canguilhem's "The Normal and the Pathological" (1943), that Agee redefines pathology to mean the intrinsic tendency to error (or aleatory possibility) of the organism. This allows him to propose a leftist counter-discourse of resistance that is different from the finalistic Marxist or New Deal solutions to poverty in the 1930s.

Keywords: cotton tenants, the American South, wounds, organism, pathology, error

James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a poetic-documentary account of the lives of three cotton tenant families in Alabama, has been called by many critics the most powerful American literary work of the Great Depression.¹ It describes a trip undertaken by Agee, then a writer on the New York business magazine *Fortune*, to investigate the lives of three Alabama cotton tenant families during the summer of 1936. Agee's near-Communist radicalism was ill-matched with *Fortune*'s ideology of "corporate liberalism" and it was no surprise that they rejected his article. It was only published in expanded form in a book five years later.²

Agee selected three white families as representatives of southern cotton tenantry and gave them the pseudonyms of the Gudgers, the Woods and the Ricketts. Each family had its own profile. The young George Gudger and his wife Annie Mae, the poorest couple, lived on the edge of subsistence, but did so with an elegant

1. See, for example, Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 100; Hugh Davis, *The Making of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 105.

2. For *Fortune*'s corporate liberalism, see Michael Augspurger, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty: Fortune Magazine and Depression America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2–3.

stoicism; Bud Woods was a resilient elderly farmer of sardonic intelligence with a younger second wife; and Fred Ricketts was a luckless, dismayed figure whose family was the largest of the three (he had five daughters and two sons). Agee's chief technique in making known these examples of "unimagined existence" was to describe the whole material order of the families' lives: their homes, possessions, food, clothes, animals, and work practices.³

The book's double structure of northern narrator-outsider and southern abjection makes it a voyage into what Leigh Anne Duck calls the "nation's region." During the 1930s, Duck explains, the poverty, tenantry agriculture, and the segregation of the South situated the region as an anachronistic enclave within the national narrative of U.S. liberal modernity. Duck shows how southern modernists such as William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston and Erskine Caldwell were concerned in their experimental fictions with "the social and characterological effects of uneven development—the radical geographic divergences within the process of U.S. modernization." Such uneven "effects" were mediated by these authors through the temporal forms of Anglo-American aesthetic modernism: for example, through offsetting a southern, regional time of circularity or a "gothic," spasmodic time of traumatization against an "idealized national temporality" of liberal progress.⁴

This article would like to consider a different way that the Depression South differentiated itself from the narrative of liberal modernity, namely through an emphasis on biological being and through a concern with the wound. Agee's is a particularly sophisticated version of this biologism of region. Although he traces the tenants uncompromisingly to "one root" in the biomass, he also brings out the aleatory, diversifying and individuating nature of this root-source.⁵ For this reason, this article will compare Agee's complex biological imagination with the medical thought of the French philosopher, Georges Canguilhem (1904–1995).

3. James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, A Death in the Family, Shorter Fiction*, ed. Michael Sragow (New York: Library of America, 2005), 8.

4. Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 86, 87. Duck also briefly argues that Agee articulates temporal differences between himself and the archaic "stasis" of the tenants, a discontinuity that prevents a proper communication with them and puts the narrator's awkward, privileged self at the centre of the text (highlighting the literary and moral problem of how to represent poverty in a non-voyeuristic way) (200–204). In another critical work, Duck demonstrates Agee's use of Georges Bataille's *informe*, a transgressive attempt to capture the basely material dimension of the tenants' lives that undermines the abstract teleology of U.S. liberal progress. See Leigh Anne Duck, "Arts of Abjection in James Agee, Walker Evans, and Luis Buñuel," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Literature of the U.S. South*, ed. Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 290–309.

5. Agee, *Let*, 63.

Canguilhem's main work *The Normal and the Pathological* (1943), which appeared at nearly the same time as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is a critique of the positivistic conceptions of disease that were then prevalent in French medicine. For Canguilhem, the organism was a self-regulating form that interpreted its milieu and created its own normativity in the process. This activity was its life: the organism was a hermeneutical entity and not a vitalistic one in the sense of *Lebensphilosophie*.

Agee's biologism could tap into a long association between lower-class southerners and the raw body. From the "lubbers" of William Byrd II to the clay-eaters of antebellum southwestern humour the bodies of poor whites have historically been depicted as fleshly, hyper-materialized and susceptible to wounds (for example, eye-gouging). But biomedical thinking – the thinking that arose in the early nineteenth century out of what Michel Foucault calls the *épistémè* of "life" – allowed this primary association to be significantly deepened.⁶ Agee follows biomedical thinking in his unusually extensive depictions of the tenants as cells, organisms, foetuses, germ plasma, and primordial ocean life. An identity of the southern tenant and the cell is already established in preliminary notes for his project where, on a train trip to the region, Agee compares the South to "a huge, globular, amorphous, only faintly realized female cell towards which [...] this sperm-shaped, strong-headed, infinitesimal train was travelling to pierce."⁷ The intellectual context for Agee's biologism and his accounts of tenant embryo life is post-Darwinian: it implicitly refers to August Weismann's germ cell concept, to Ernst Haeckel's embryology, and to the eugenic studies of poor white families such as the Kallikaks that appeared between the 1880s and 1920s. But Agee is not only concerned with the cellular organism: he is also concerned with the cellular organism as wounded. He wants to show that the tenant body is damaged right down to its biological base and uses biomedical theory to reconceptualize the wound as taint or deformation.⁸ This preoccupation with the wound casts Duck's

6. According to Foucault, "life" emerges as a value in the nineteenth century as "the most general law of beings"; together with the *épistémè* of labour and that of language it defines the order of modernity. See *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 303.

7. James Agee, *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 5.

8. Perhaps Agee, despite his best efforts, still implies that poverty and biological damage to poor whites is a deviation from a social norm. Many of the descendants of the three families and their neighbours still find the book offensive for this reason. See Lawrence Downes, "Of Poor Farmers and 'Famous Men,'" *The New York Times*, November 26, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/opinion/sunday/of-poor-farmers-and-famous-men.html> (20.10.2022).

differential model of national and regional as one of the relation of mutilated tissue to the body mass of the republic.

It is hard to overemphasize the degree to which Agee was driven by a passion to demonstrate that tenant life was wounded. He even says he wants to short-circuit the act of writing in the book and simply display a “piece of the body torn out by the roots.”⁹ Indeed *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* could be described as a record of the interwar South as what Mark Seltzer calls a “wound culture.”¹⁰ Agee says, for example, that each tenant family is a sphere that encloses the “ultimately mortal wound which is living” and that the conception of a family member in the fallopian tube is “a crucifixion of cell and whiplashed sperm.” The shallow grave mound that seals the final meaning of their lives is a “ritual scar” on the skin of the earth.¹¹ Critics have frequently seen in Agee’s visceral preoccupation with the wound the product of a strangely empathetic and perhaps masochistic sensibility. His wound-talk could be interpreted in psychoanalytical terms as a type of intrauterine fantasy or, more biographically, as a product of his tormented High Anglican upbringing and of the iconography of crucifixion that went with it (an upbringing described in his autobiographical novel *The Morning Watch* [1951]).¹² It is evident that Agee projects his own wounded sensibility onto the tenants and distorts their more objective representation through the needs of his obtrusive self. Critics have, perhaps understandably, censured Agee for this obtrusion. Duck, for example, calls this projection a “bourgeois egotism” and Gavin Jones says that Agee’s “very art is a form of damaging,” even a discovery of aesthetic pleasure in the very representation of poverty.¹³ But such readings perhaps do not take sufficiently into account the historical and public meaning of the wound. According to Georges Canguilhem, the mentor of Foucault who provided him with the concept of “life,” the relation of the organism to that of the milieu that sustains it is one of pathos: that is, a relation of inconstancy, sickness, and vulnerability. This “pathic dimension,” Thomas Osborne observes, is “the real originality of Canguilhem’s vitalism.”¹⁴ To emphasize “life,” the central épistémè of modernity, is to emphasize this “pathic dimension.” Agee makes

9. Agee, *Let*, 28.

10. Mark Seltzer defines wound culture as “public fascination” with torn bodies, “a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound,” “Wound Culture in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 3.

11. Agee, *Let*, 202, 100, 25.

12. Or as a synthesis of the two. One passage about the wounds of Christ in Agee’s autobiographical *The Morning Watch*, a novel which describes his adolescent religious fervour at boarding school, would suggest such a synthesis (Agee, *Let*, 418).

13. Duck, “Arts,” 301; Jones, *American*, 127.

14. Thomas Osborne, “Vitalism as Pathos,” *Biosemiotics* 9 (2016): 194.

this emphasis in a profligate way, setting up intensifying stylistic loops as the pathos of the tenants feeds into that of his private sensibility. But if Foucault's "life" is a historicization of Canguilhem's concept then this means that pathos is a historical form and one that goes beyond the individual desires of the author.

The institutionalization and expansion of the life concept as a central element of modernity underlies much of Agee's biologicistic imagination and the oozy susceptibility to pathos that leaks from it. In "Society Must Be Defended," Foucault argues that the épistémè of "life" was harnessed in the post-Enlightenment period by "governmentality," a non-disciplinary form of power particularly evident in the growth of hospitals, clinics, asylums, barracks, schools and other institutions. Foucault claimed this type of government shifted from seeing "man-as-living-being" to "man-as-species." The population is configured by governmentality as "a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on."¹⁵ Although Foucault's model has been criticized for its historical indefiniteness (for example, by David Macey), it does seem applicable to the Progressivist policies of Democrat administrations in southern states between 1900 and 1930, such as those of James Vardaman in Mississippi and Huey Long in Louisiana.¹⁶ These administrations wanted to foster "life" – life as a positive biomedical value – within their white working-class electorates, partly through a building of institutions such as hospitals and partly through sterilization programmes that were supposed to eliminate dysgenic genes. Southern modernist writers intuitively grasped this connection between Southern progressivist measures (including their continuation in Southern Democrat support for the New Deal state) and the biomedical body as a site of intervention. In Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946), for example, Governor Stark's welfarist platform in Louisiana, particularly that of building a new hospital, has a metaphorical parallel in the lobotomy operations on schizophrenics undertaken by his chief medical officer, Adam Stanton.

15. Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 242–243.

16. David Macey, "Rethinking Biopolitics, Race and Power in the Wake of Foucault," *Theory Culture Society* 26, no. 6 (2009): 188. For a broad description of Progressive measures in the South, see Dewey W. Grantham, "The Contours of Southern Progressivism," *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 5 (1981): 1035–1059. See also on Southern Progressive reforms David W. Southern, *The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900–1917* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005), 88–91. Southern points out that the reform policies of Vardaman and others were predicated on a supremacist populism. This made a biopolitical cut between whites and African Americans, deeming the latter not entitled to social amelioration. Foucault argues that the new biological racism of the modern state made exactly this cut between races so as, supposedly, to make "life" "healthier and purer" for privileged ethnic groups ("Society," 255).

But Agee's biological modernism is usually more labile in its literary understanding of the regional *épistémè* of "life" than Warren's figurative analogy. Agee enters into this *épistémè* in expressive ways that extend the modernist literary idiom. Firstly, in a manner that befits Foucault's description of the "massifying" appropriate to "man-as-species," Agee represents the tenants as global, biological subjects (in addition to their singular individualities).¹⁷ Agee creates collective figures – such as that of the globe in "A Country Letter III" – that provide an appropriately comprehensive geographical and anthropological horizon for such subjects. As a result, he makes the tenants subject to the universalized life processes of "work," "shelter," eating and sleep that sweep across this globe (sleep, he says, makes the families "companionate among the whole enchanted swarm of the living"). Secondly, the biological foundation of the tenants' lives also informs the innovatory nature of Agee's avant-garde aesthetics (Agee was intrigued by surrealism and automatic writing). He tries in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to introduce a radical speech of the unconscious that can tap into the "id" of the "lower American continent."¹⁸ It is in "Colon," a section partly devoted to plotting out the life of the tenant in the womb, that Agee speaks of searching for a modernist or synchronic mode of expression that can catch up "all in one sentence and spread suspension" the "interrelations and interenchantments" of tenant bodies (which is why he says of the section "This is all one colon:").¹⁹ Such forms of biological modernism are probably what Agee meant when he said in "Plans for Work: October 1937" that he wanted "to get 'art' back on a plane of organic human necessity."²⁰

This biological dimension in Agee's modernism gives rise to a tropology of health and pathology, wholeness and wound. Agee's tendency to see only saintliness in the tenants, noticed by Lionel Trilling in an early review, could be re-cast as a presumption of the deep biological innocence of the organism, of the "health" that Canguilhem calls "life in the silence of the organs."²¹ In "Colon" Agee says that the newborn individual is "in its beginning capable [...] of health, which is perfection, which is holiness, which is simple and salted, blooded functioning of each animal in its own best" (here "holiness," usually associated with an unusual effort of will, is casually equated with animal "functioning"). Each embryo

17. Foucault, *Society*, 242.

18. Agee, *Let*, 34, 53.

19. Agee, *Let*, 106–107.

20. James Agee, *Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 132.

21. Lionel Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault in It," *The Kenyon Review* 4, no. 1 (1942): 102; Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 101.

encapsulates “royalty,” “miraculousness” and “great potentiality.”²² However, the discourse of “life” in the 1930s South, from which such remarks derive, was not only a beneficent, health-productive one. There was also an obverse side to this valuation of health in southern progressivism: its tendency to find features of genetic deterioration in poor whites. This group provided a justification for the introduction of medical sterilization of the “feeble-minded” in many southern states, starting with Virginia in 1924. The pathologization of this underclass showed that there was in the Jim Crow South not only a biopolitical caesura or cut between black and white races, but also another cut within the category of whiteness itself, which separated out potentially degenerate whites within that category.²³ Part of the fragility and phantasmal quality of the southern racial category of whiteness is that it is internally split and generates a vigilant policing of its “genuine” forms. A regress to these caesurae seems to underlie Agee’s strategic decision firstly to write only about white tenants and then to be frequently diverted into the biological damage inherent to this separated group (although one would have to add that Agee was, in his conscious political thinking, utterly non-bigoted, as is evident in sections of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* such as “Late Sunday Morning” and “Near a Church”).²⁴

As many critics have observed, southern writers of the interwar period also imagined poor whites through eugenic typologies and in this they often followed the family studies that were written in the Progressive era. There are, for example, the Snopes of Faulkner (in *Father Abraham*, “Barn Burning” and *The Hamlet*) and the Lesters of Erskine Caldwell (in *Tobacco Road*).²⁵ Agee also sometimes falls back on this kind of eugenic shorthand in which he re-conceptualizes the wound

22. Agee, *Let*, 99.

23. It is noticeable that most of the southern outcry about degeneration was attached to lower-class white families (such as the Virginian Carrie Buck in the Buck vs Bell case of 1927). Although African Americans were subject to eugenic measures, such as the Virginia legislation of 1930 that defined as “colored” any person who had “one drop” of black ancestry, the model of genetic degeneration was applied mainly to poor whites.

24. In an appendix to his initial article for *Fortune*, Agee says that “in the interests of keeping the subject as clear as possible the main body of this article is devoted to a study of cotton tenancy in terms of white families only” (James Agee and Walker Evans, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, ed. John Summers [New York: Melville House, 2013], 205). This dividing line is retained in the final book and means Agee’s representation of southern agricultural poverty is incomplete because it neglects the one third of tenant families who were African American.

25. See, for example, Karen A. Keely, “Poverty, Sterilization, and Eugenics in Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*,” *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (April, 2002), 23–42. On Faulkner’s complex use of eugenics, see Jay Watson, *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 181–183, 185.

as a hereditary taint. He even has unsettling notes of a white racist narrative when says that the embryo of the white tenant of “Colon” is an embodiment of ‘pure’ racial origin: he calls this embryo the “true-mythic natural man of racial dream” – a temporary overlap with a racial thinker such as Arthur de Gobineau, the nineteenth-century founder of Aryanism (Agee had read this author).²⁶ Agee also – although in a more subdued way than Caldwell’s knockabout, Dadaist humour of the poor white – echoes the family studies when he considers the condition into which this “natural man” eventually deteriorates. Ivy Prichert, for example, comes close to the stereotypical “bad” mother of these studies because she had two children by another man “back in the woods” before marrying the tenant farmer Bud Woods. Some of the children of the Gudger family are stricken with an inexplicable hereditary enervation that suggests that poor white children inherit an indefinite degeneration from their forbears: four-year-old Burt is “milky and strengthless” while the infant Squincy is “shriveled and hopeless” (they are also called “feeble-minded,” the vague term used in many of the family studies for dysgenic offspring).²⁷ The “piteously insecure” Fred Ricketts hobbles around because of nervous blisters on his feet and his home has “insane” levels of dirt.²⁸ Most pertinent to Agee’s genetic focus is his observation that “the germens” the tenants “carry at their groins [are] strained, cracked, split, tainted, vitiate to begin with, a wallet of cheated coinage.”²⁹ Agee alludes to August Weismann’s late-nineteenth century thesis that it was solely the “germ-plasm” or “germens” in the sperm and egg that passed on characteristics to the next generation and not the “soma” in the rest of the body, that is to say the cells that could be influenced by environmental factors.³⁰ This anti-Lamarckian thesis served to essentialize degeneration. The bodily damage evident in the three tenant families sometimes reflects this essentialization rather than being attributed to environmental influences.³¹ In relation to Agee’s tropology of the wound these cracked germ

26. Agee, *Let*, 22. For Agee’s reading of de Gobineau, see James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 73. Here Agee speaks caustically of “the Nordic-supremacy tripe” found in the author, but refers knowledgeably to one of de Gobineau’s novels, *Les Pléiades* (1874).

27. Agee, *Let*, 81, 64, 80.

28. Agee, *Let*, 236, 175.

29. Agee, *Let*, 100.

30. August Weismann, “The Continuity of the Germ-Plasm as the Foundation of a Theory of Heredity,” in *Essays upon Heredity and Kindred Biological Problems*, ed. Edward B. Poulton, Selmar Schönland, and Arthur E. Shipley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 163–256.

31. For the recourse to the “germ plasm” by scientific experts in southern legislative and eugenic contexts, see Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 4, 8. The term “germ plasm” was often associated with the inheritance of “degeneration” in poor white family lines. Nicole Rafter

cells demonstrate damage done to the germinative plasma, the supra-individual component of tenant identity.

The “At the Forks” section, set early in the narrative before Agee meets the three families, effectively bifurcates Agee’s division of whiteness into its healthy and dysgenic domains. As Agee approaches a run-down farm to ask for directions a couple watch him with hostility from the porch. The couple have the unexpected aura of “legendary” Greek warriors. The man has “the scornfully ornate nostrils and lips of an aegean exquisite” while the woman’s body is made of “brass or bitter gold.” These descriptions invoke the palingenetic type of the “aegean” man, the man of “racial dream.” But there also appears a dysgenic adult relative: he drools, iterates “Awnk, awnk” continually, and his face is described as being “short as a fetus.”³² In trying to make contact with the rawness of damage in this trio Agee is also entering, perhaps unconsciously, into pre-formed divisions within the southern *épistémè* of “life”: on the one hand, its transcendent value as health, and, on the other, its potentiality for biological degeneration. But then, one would have to add, Agee’s constant self-questioning does not stay put in these eugenic typologies. Shortly, in another context, he reveals such eugenic fantasies as a form of mythic speech. He parodies the concept of white blood-lines in the appearance of “a scarred yet pure white mule” at a lumber camp where one tenant, George Gudger, supplements his income and where most of the workers are African Americans. But this hyper-white produce of animal husbandry, “an enslaved unicorn,” is a mule and incapable of having offspring.³³

One of the most sustained examples of Agee’s “organic” or biological experimental writing in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is in “Colon,” where Agee portrays the life of his tenant subjects as an embryo (it is one of the few embryo biographies in high modernist literature – this genre was usually found in more popularizing, quasi-scientific versions such as Armenouhie Lamson’s *My Birth: The Autobiography of an Unborn Infant* [1916]). Agee draws upon the recent science of embryology, a science that created “embryological origin stories” in which the stages of embryonic development became a secular creation narrative (modern embryology started in Germany the 1870s, but was taken up in the United States in the 1880s).³⁴ In describing the growth of the embryo, Agee repeats the thesis of Ernst Haeckel that ontogeny in the womb – the unfolding of an individual life – recapitulates phylogeny – the evolution of all animal life from its aquatic origins.

mentions the influence of Weismann’s germ plasm theory on the family studies in *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877–1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 22 and n.

32. Agee, *Let*, 43–45.

33. Agee, *Let*, 93.

34. Lynn M. Morgan, *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 13.

He says that the embryo rises up “from the blind bottom of the human sea” or “the floor of creation,” “climbs the steep ladder,” and, in being born, “is broken forth upon the air” (the sea surface). The embryo at the “center” of this process is effectively “globed around”: firstly, by the mother’s womb and, secondly, by this womb as a condensation of the global space of phylogenetic development.³⁵

But, at the same time, this global phylogenetic space is also the global space of recent history. It is important to stress that Agee is not writing some variant of sociobiology (which might have conservative implications). What he was trying to do was to construct a discourse that would see the deeply buried historicity implicit in the biological processes of the body. For example, there is the posture of the fetus in the womb, the “feet drawn tight as if he were receiving the blow of a bayonet in his solar plexus,” a posture which repeats that of the soldier in the trenches during the First World War. It is as if the southern Alabamian tenant becomes not merely a regional but a transatlantic subject, a bare life in the age of world war and world depression.³⁶

Agee’s wound-talk intensifies in “Colon” in recounting the life of the child after it is born. Each sense-impression impacting upon the new-born “cuts its little mark” and “with each iteration the little cut is cut a little distincter.” At the age of five or six the child “stands at the center of his enormous little globe a cripple.”³⁷ Agee, of course, is not being literal about these cuts. The wound here refers symbolically to such economic burdens as the debt that tenant families have to ratchet up in raising cotton: because tenants pay a large crop share to the landlord and have to borrow such essentials as mule or seed from the landlord or merchants they often cannot break even after the harvest.³⁸ Agee converts these economic structures into a primordial debt of the body, a wound that is imprinted in the germinative plasma and which undercuts the free contingency of living.³⁹ The reader might feel, as they near the end of “Colon,” that the primordial burden of the tenants is too heavy to be lifted. Indeed, Agee says that the condition of the tenants is “against hope, possibility, cure.”⁴⁰ But then, at the end of this section, Agee briefly counteracts this negative assessment when he says that he will in subsequent

35. Agee, *Let*, 99–102.

36. Agee, *Let*, 100.

37. Agee, *Let*, 102,105.

38. See the excruciating economic dependencies set out in Agee, *Let*, 111–114.

39. For primordial debt theory, see David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 55–58. This theory sees human existence as itself a form of debt, an unpayable obligation to the society that creates the citizen and one that the state monetarizes by turning this obligation into a financial one. Friedrich Nietzsche connected debt and wound when he identified the original scene of primordial debt with the creditor’s power to mutilate the debtor (77).

40. Agee, *Let*, 103.

sections reveal how each tenant is “a shapener,” how each is “a life, a full universe.”⁴¹ In these further sections, such as “On the Porch 2,” Agee proposes ways of resisting this damage and of rethinking pathology; he tries to imagine how to get round the primordial burden.

Here it is worth going to what is the intellectual source of Foucault’s concept of “life,” Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological*, to try to understand Agee’s imaginative play with this concept. For Canguilhem, the “life” of the organism is the result of it trying to impose its own norms – its own “terms of stability, fecundity, variability of life” – on the changing situation of that organism’s milieu. The pathological results from an attempt that is a less successful adaptation than the healthy response. Canguilhem writes, “The pathological is not the absence of a biological norm: it is another norm but one which is, comparatively speaking, pushed aside by life.”⁴² For Agee, if the wound expresses the “pathological” relationship of the organism or the body to its environment, then the “scab” or “scar” is the adaptive response to the wound, an attempt to re-establish its normativity. The scar is, says Agee, a “re-registration” of the wound, “a shaping of a substance which might have taken other shape.”⁴³ So thorough is Agee’s scab figure that in “On the Porch: 2” he extends the meaning of the scab beyond its strict epidermal reference to include objects in the tenants’ world that are used as a “shelter” “against [their] hostile surroundings.”⁴⁴ The tenants’ “fields” and “houses” are scabs that express themselves upon “the grieved membrane of the earth in the symmetry of a disease”; even the skull can be seen as a scab upon the “brain” (“the skull that scabs a brain”).⁴⁵ Indeed, Agee says, “the symmetry and the disease were identical.”⁴⁶ He speculates that one stage of this “symmetry” or this “disease” on the membrane of the earth is “life” and that a “malignant variant” of this “life” is “human consciousness.”⁴⁷ This means that the pathology, as it were, comes first in the category of “life,” the healthy norm second. As Canguilhem puts it, “the abnormal, while logically second, is existentially first.”⁴⁸ In other words, clinical pathology – and its scientific variant that locates a eugenic stain in disadvantaged peoples – needs to be re-understood and de-pathologized so that it appears as the more fundamental category of error. In his preface to Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault says that “[i]n the extreme, life is what is capable

41. Agee, *Let*, 106.

42. Canguilhem, *Normal*, 144.

43. Agee, *Let*, 102.

44. Agee, *Let*, 202.

45. Agee, *Let*, 202.

46. Agee, *Let*, 203.

47. Agee, *Let*, 202.

48. Canguilhem, *Normal*, 243.

of error [...] Error for Canguilhem is the permanent chance around which the history of life and that of men develops.”⁴⁹ One could say that what is regarded as true is, in Canguilhem’s post-Nietzschean model, the “most recent error” in a chronological development.⁵⁰ Agee has similar intuitions about the priority of “error” when he writes that the different varieties of “scab” draw “life” or mutational error through the “skin” of the earth. This scab shows that “[a] falsehood is entirely true to those derangements which produced it and which made it impossible that it should emerge in truth; and an examination of it may reveal more of the ‘true’ truth’ than any more direct attempt upon the ‘true’ truth’ itself.”⁵¹

Pathology in Agee’s perspective, in other words, can be seen as an aleatory force that is intrinsic to the upwelling of life itself from the earth. The productive role of errancy can be seen in the unschooled construction of the wooden buildings of the Gudger family, which is detailed in the section on “Shelter” (such architecture is one kind of reactive “scab” upon the earth). While Agee stresses the elegant minimalism and classic propriety of this architecture – it has “a bareness, cleanliness, and sobriety which only Doric architecture [...] can hope to approach” – he makes it plain that this clarity of line comes not out of an aesthetic sense of pure form but as a living response to their milieu. The elegance of this architecture incorporates and sublimates irregularities: for example, there is a corner that is not vertical or a window frame that is not quite square. These “slight failures [...] set up intensities of relationship far more powerful than full symmetry.”⁵² In addition, the eddying grain in the wood expresses in a visual way this primary irregularity as a force; it depicts the wellspring of pure difference that flows up from the “skin” of the earth. Sometimes the flow of the grain breaks out into “wild fugues and floods.”⁵³ The hereditarian biologism of this wild wood grain needs stressing: it has parallels with a “creative” or mutational drive of evolution that goes back in French thought from Canguilhem to Henri Bergson and whose more recent exponent is Gilles Deleuze. According to Arnaud François, who presents a Deleuzian interpretation of Weismann’s germ-plasm theory, this “heredity of deviation,” this pure difference, lies in the “germen” as distinct from the more static “heredity of character” that is carried in the “soma.”⁵⁴ In other words,

49. Foucault, “Introduction” to Canguilhem, *Normal*, 22, 23.

50. Foucault, “Introduction” to Canguilhem, *Normal*, 22.

51. Agee, *Let*, 202.

52. Agee, *Let*, 135.

53. Agee, *Let*, 136.

54. Arnaud François, “Zola, Heredity of Character and Heredity of Deviation: After a Remark by Bergson in *L’Évolution Créatrice*,” in *Biological Time, Historical Time: Transfers and Transformations in 19th Century Literature*, edited by Niklas Bender and Gisèle Séginger (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 123–139.

the “germens” of the tenants do not only carry biological defects (as Agee tends to suggest in “Colon”) but also a variability of mutation, a variability that results in “life” based on error.

The inclusion of the “off-true” as a component of “symmetry” recategorizes the deviant as the aleatory and, as aesthetic ideal, seeks “a symmetry sensitive to so many syncopations of chance.”⁵⁵ In his avant-garde and surrealist methods Agee also wants to incorporate these “syncopations of chance” as an aleatory source of his art. It is as though the biological stratum of the tenants’ lives authorizes his experiments with automatic writing and with ethnographic surrealism (the latter presents objects in their living, anti-aesthetic, and irreplaceable use-value: in Agee’s case in descriptions of buttons, chairs, or walls plastered with newspapers).⁵⁶ Additionally the aleatory has, for Agee, a revolutionary potential; it can also be described as a Blakean or a Bataillian solar energy.⁵⁷ Part of Agee’s conception of the tenants is as a native source of this energy. The quintessential tableau of eugenic damage, the infant Ellen Woods sprawled sleeping on the floor, can suddenly show “a snoring silence of flame” forming around the belly button.⁵⁸ Binding this solar flame to the umbilical cord is a more liberating possibility than that of the cord as a hereditary conduit of degeneration.

This aleatory dimension is consistent with Canguilhem’s original concept of life. According to Maria Muhle, in this concept the organism has a “self-transgressive” as well as a “self-preservative” dynamic which acts to create new norms within its milieu. Muhle argues that in Foucault’s model of governmentality or non-sovereign power “the forms of biopower imitate or mimitize” this “proper dynamics of life.”⁵⁹ They imitate, that is to say, the organism’s capacity for deviant variation as well as its self-regulation (this capacity for error is the ‘liberality’ of this soft power of governmentality). Institutionalized imitations of the concept of life can be seen in the governmentality of the Southern Democrat administrations and their emphasis on the health of the populace. Agee inherits and works within this regional épistémè of life, accepting that there is no ‘outside’ to power, no Marxist solution that can dissolve away the conditions of poverty.

55. Agee, *Let*, 203.

56. For Georges Bataille’s ethnographic surrealism, see Dennis Hollier, “The Use-Value of the Impossible,” *October* 60 (Spring 1992): 9, 11–12.

57. Agee’s admiration of Blake is evident in his long extracts in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793). See *Let*, 388–389.

58. Agee, *Let*, 374.

59. Maria Muhle, “A Genealogy of Biopolitics: The Notion of Life in Canguilhem and Foucault,” in *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism*, edited by Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter. Fordham Scholarship Online, September 2014: www.fordham.universitypressscholarship.com, 77–97; 85, 86 (28.12.2021).

His resistance to southern poverty has to take the form of working within power and developing what Muhle calls a “counter-practice” or “counter-discourse” within its dynamic. The aleatory dimension of the tenants’ lives goes with the grain of this “counter-practice.”⁶⁰

A final parallel between Agee and Canguilhem would situate both at a point where a leftist agrarianism of the 1930s and a philosophy of the organism converge. In 1935, Canguilhem wrote an anonymous pamphlet, “Fascism and Peasants” for the Vigilance Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals in response to the attempt of the French Fascists to recruit the peasantry. For Canguilhem, the peasantry contained the seeds of resistance to Fascism because, far from being a reactionary class, they had an individual world-view that grew out a milieu, out of a “human geography” and its “possibilism.”⁶¹ Canguilhem went on to join the French resistance in the war and his stand against totalitarianism undoubtedly stems from the same starting point as his philosophy of the organism. Agee had the same preference for the variability of the organism over the programmatic recipes of political ideologies and eugenic theory.

Agee used the science of heredity not only to illustrate damage in the southern poor families, but also to see these lives as a well-spring of an aleatory vitalism. The non-determinism and chanciness of the organism allowed Agee to skirt deftly the cures that were put forward in the 1930s to the problem of southern poverty. These included the finalistic programmes of Marxism or of the New Deal, solutions that would convert the pathos of the organism to the ethos of the organization. For a radical leftist thinker such as Agee an emphasis on the aleatory allowed him to chart out a non-finalistic, self-transcending pathway for the human organism and for imagining a counter-discourse within the southern *épistémè* of life. The wounds of the tenant, instead of just being bloody signs of pathology, could become the site of “angelic possibility.”⁶²

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60. Muhle, “Genealogy,” 96.

61. The quotations and discussion of the pamphlet are taken from Samuel Talcott, *Georges Canguilhem and the Problem of Error* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 64.

62. Agee, *Let*, 105.

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