

Abstract

This thesis uses James Agee's 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to examine the role of so-called *fictocriticism* in emphasizing the immutability of an author from within a text. The thesis argues that the fictocritical text accounts for the impossibility of extricating the author from writing. Although its precursors date back several centuries—perhaps most notably to Michel de Montaigne—the term *fictocriticism* was coined in the mid- to late twentieth century to describe texts existing at the interstices of ostensibly fictional and factual genres of writing. Agee's text, borne out of a journalistic assignment for *Fortune* magazine, blends elements of long-form magazine journalism with lyric poetry with the author's famous sprawling, diaryesque prose, calling the reader to question which elements of the text are rooted in fact and which are simply the author's fabrications or, indeed, whether such a distinction can be drawn. The term can be applied only anachronistically to the 1941 book, yet as defined in these pages it is a befitting description of Agee's otherwise unclassifiable text.

Fictocriticism lacks a singular definition, so the examination of Agee's *Famous Men* as a fictocritical work rests on a thorough revision of the term's history and its lexical implications, both of which this thesis attempts in its first chapter. Crucial to the concept of fictocriticism explored in the thesis are two major theoretical texts: Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" and Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If."* The second chapter undertakes a survey of various theories of authorship, focusing on those that posit answers to whether, to use Roland Barthes' phrasing, the author's death indeed occurs at the moment writing begins. Barthes' "The Death of the Author" lies at the heart of this chapter, as well as Michel Foucault and his response, "What Is an Author?" The second half of the thesis examines the genre of fictocriticism in conversation with two

“nonfiction” genres of writing echoed in Agee’s book in order to analyze the effects of their Derridian cross-contamination on Agee’s presence in *Famous Men*. First, a reading of the text as journalism emphasizes fictocriticism’s functionality in preserving the humanity of the subjects of Agee’s four-week investigation, tenant cotton farmers and their families in Depression-era Alabama. Second, an examination of the book as a work of ethnography argues that fictocriticism offers a means of bridging the gulf between the anthropologist and his subject (observer and observed). Finally, the conclusion of the thesis revisits the theoretical foundations at its basis and comments upon the irony of writing about Agee’s fictocritical text from a position of implied authority.