

David Vichnar, PhD
OPPONENT'S REPORT:

re "*Authority and Authorship:*
"*James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men as a Work of Fictocriticism*"
by Morgan Childs
(MA dissertation, 2014)

Separated into two halves, Ms Childs' thesis aims to apply the term *fictocriticism* (comprising "cultural artifacts that exhibit the features of multiple genres; fiction masquerading as nonfiction and nonfiction masquerading as fiction; works of criticism or commentary that are literary in quality [3]) to a text significantly predating the critical label – James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. As such, this endeavour also shows the limitations of this application – in fact, Ms Childs engages in a broad reflexion on the very notion of genre or author, as well as the two terms packed into the portmanteau: fiction and criticism. The overriding motivation for this application remains an ethical one, the thesis' central contention being that Agee uses *fictocriticism* as "a tool for preserving the vulnerable human subjects of [his] journalistic and ethnographic study" (5). That said, two other areas come into play on the broad ground of Ms Childs' thesis: (new) journalism and ethnography. It is to her credit that Ms Childs' forays into the works of Derrida, De Man, Barthes, Foucault, Vaihinger, Malinowski et al. remains rigorous and sound throughout, never losing sight of its main goals while creatively using and re-using these (and other) thinkers' notions.

The language and style of the thesis are sophisticated and lucid throughout, and enough attention has been paid to editing and proofreading – the thesis makes for an enjoyable and smooth read (misspellings such as "*Finnegan's Wake*" [7], "Frederic Jameson" [8] are almost as rare as factual errors, e.g. when Flaubert is misidentified as the author of *In Search of Lost Time* [37]). The opponent's only major objection: with reference to Wayne Booth, the thesis' academic style suffers from too much "telling" as opposed to plain "showing." The thesis refers to itself (in phrases such as "this thesis argues...", "the second half of thesis will show...", "the following section will consider," etc.) in no fewer than 18 different places within the space of the first 40-odd pages that make up the first section – an unnecessary and somewhat tedious overdose.

Two minor points: in several important places, the reader is left with Ms Childs' paraphrase where a direct quote or example are needed (an admission, on Agee's part, that "certain elements of his description are entirely fabricated" [51] is of such a far-reaching import that it needs to be quoted, not merely reported in Ms. Childs' own words). The "anticipatory" mode of structuring the argument is to blame for the thesis' unfortunate omission of a discussion of Lionel Trilling's intriguing critique of Agee's project (the promise of "discussing the reasons for Trilling's critical evaluation of the book" on p. 52 remains unfulfilled).

Apart from these minor formal insufficiencies, three sets of thematic concerns arise, for further consideration by Ms. Childs for the defence and also hopefully her further work on the manuscript:

1. PUBLICATION HISTORY / BIOGRAPHY: The thesis is content to merely mention that Agee's book was published twice and in two different versions (and occasionally, the thesis confusedly refers to both 1939 and 1941 as the dates of publications, without drawing distinctions) – although a minor point, this could be examined further: what did the 1941 "expansion" entail and what were the reasons behind it? Is there anything the later version suppresses from the 1939 one? Lastly, is it merely a coincidence Agee worked for *Fortune* only until 1939, the year of his Alabama assignment? These are biographical trivia, of course, but in the context of the thesis' ethical thrust focused on "the humanitarian function" of Agee's writing, they seem worth investigating.

2. PHOTOGRAPHY & WRITING: Early in the thesis comes the following admission: “A more thorough examination of fictocriticism in *Famous Men*, for example, would investigate the role of Evans’ photographs in the book: both as a record and as a mode of commentary” (12). One is left to wonder: Why hasn’t this examination been carried out (or at least attempted) in a thesis purportedly repositioning Agee as the founding father of this non- or anti-genre? Especially so if later on, a passing mention is made of photography being “the art Agee may have admired most” (36) – and the conditional is rather nebulous here, for ten pages later, Agee is said to have “admired and envied the medium of photography, which he believed to be ‘incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth,’” a sentiment put in stark contrast with the author’s skepticism “of the capacity of language to convey a truthful account of the lives of real people.” Then comes the startling conjecture: “Had Agee held language in esteem as a truthful means of recording, the author may not have felt compelled to adopt the book’s fictocritical form” (46). Why, then, choose to omit all critical engagement with photography if Agee’s attitude toward it (and toward writing) turns out possibly his underlying motivation for the method and style of his chef d’oeuvre? What, also, are we to make of Agee’s naiveté regarding photography’s “truthfulness,” given that most of Evans’ pictures for the book, commentators agree, were posed?

3. AUTHOR / FICTION / GENRE: The final set of questions relates to the section “separation” outlined above. A broader question: What can the neat incorporation of the aesthetics of fictocriticism as practiced by Agee in the 30s&40s into the (mostly French) theory of the 60s&70s be seen as symptomatic of? That is, beyond the traditional grand narrative of theory meeting its own belated avant-garde by conjuring up the forgotten ghosts of the past? More importantly perhaps (and relating to the thesis), what is the point of dwelling with David Lodge’s ruminations about “the novel” (pp. 40-1) or adumbrating the genealogy of the New Journalism genre (beginning on p. 52) – other than demonstrating their incompatibility with Agee’s project, or indeed with the thesis’ theoretical starting point, Derrida’s deconstruction of the very notion of the genre? If fictocriticism is really meant to function as “a descriptor of writing situated on the border of multiple genres” (12) in the theoretical half of the thesis, what are the gains of reclaiming it for the various established -isms in its “practical” half?

At last, an afterthought: It may have been more strategic to actually reverse the order of the sections, presenting Agee’s project on its own terms, as it were, and showing how his experimental practice anticipates the later theorisations of fiction/genre/author-function in the work of e.g. Foucault, Derrida or Barthes. As the sections stand now, one has the feeling the terms of the discussion are established beforehand and Agee’s text merely fits the critical-theoretical bills.

The somewhat harsh tone of the misgivings voiced/issues raised above are meant as incentives for Ms Childs’ further elaboration of her manuscript (should it—and it should—appear in publication) and by no means ought it to detract from the fact that Ms. Childs’ thesis is an accomplished work of paying critical due (long overdue) to a highly relevant if somewhat marginalised figure and field of study. The opponent recommends that the thesis be graded *excellent*, depending on the course and outcome of the candidate’s defence.