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Authority and Authorship:  
James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*  
as a Work of Fictocriticism

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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V Praze dne .....

Morgan Childs

## Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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## Keywords:

James Agee, fictocriticism, genre, fiction, authorship, journalism, ethnography, Derrida, Vaihinger, Barthes, Foucault

## Klíčová slova:

James Agee, fiktokriticismus, žánr, beletrie, autorství, žurnalistika, etnografie, Derrida, Vaihinger, Barthes, Foucault

## Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá knihou Jamese Ageeho *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* z roku 1939, v níž se pokouší zhodnotit úlohu tzv. *fiktokriticizmu* pomocí důrazu na nemožnost vypuštění autora z textu. Hlavním argumentem práce je, že fiktokritický text neumožňuje autorovi se z textu vymanit. Přesto, že za předchůdce fiktokriticizmu lze považovat mnohé autory z dob před 20. stoletím až po Michela de Montaigne, termín fiktokriticismus vznikl až v druhé polovině 20. stoletím za účelem popisu textů, které se nachází na předělu mezi žánry beletrie a literatury faktu. Ageeho text, jenž se vyvinul z reportáže pro časopis *Fortune* v sobě mísí prvky delších žurnalistických útvarů s lyrickou poezií a jeho příznačnou, stále se rozvíjející, deníkově laděnou prózou. Takto vyzývá čtenáře k zamyšlení nad tím, které prvky textu mají základ ve skutečnosti a které jsou jednoduše jeho výtvoři, či zdali je vůbec možné takové rozlišení učinit. Termín fiktokriticismus lze sice pro účely kritiky Ageeho knihy z roku 1939 použít jen anachronisticky, avšak z perspektivy této práce je jeho těžko klasifikovatelný text pro fiktokriticismus tím ideálním exemplářem.

Fiktokriticismus postrádá jednotnou definici, a tudíž analýza Ageeho knihy jako fiktokritického díla závisí na důkladném prostudování historie a lexikálních implikací tohoto termínu, o což se tato práce pokouší v první kapitole. Při vymezení konceptu fiktokriticizmu tato práce vychází ze dvou zásadních teoretických textů: „Zákon žánru“ Jacqua Derridy a *Filozofie jakoby* Hanse Veiingera. Druhá kapitola zkoumá různé teorie autorství a zaměřuje se zejména na ty nabízející odpověď na otázku, zdali, slovy Rolanda Bartha, autorova smrt skutečně nastává ve chvíli, kdy je započato psaní. Barthova esej „Smrt autora“ a esej Michela Foucaulta „Co je autor?“, která na ní reaguje tvoří hlavní oporu této kapitoly. Druhá polovina práce zkoumá fiktokriticismus ve snaze analyzovat dopady Derridovské vzájemné kontaminace žánrů na Ageeho roli autora a na jeho

přítomnost v textu. Fiktokriticismus tudíž nazírá jako žánr v dialogu s dvěma žánry literatury faktu, které se opakovaně objevují v Ageeho próze. První z nich, čtení textu jako žurnalistického útvaru, zdůrazňuje, jak fiktokriticismus funguje jako prostředek k uchování lidskosti nájemních farmářů bavlny a jejich rodin v období po hospodářské krize v Alabamě, jež byli předmětem Ageeho čtyřtýdenního zkoumání. Druhý, nazírající knihu jako dílo etnografie je založen na myšlence, že fiktokriticismus nabízí prostředek k přehrazení propasti mezi antropologem a jeho předmětem zkoumání (pozorujícím a pozorovaným). Závěr práce se poté vrací k jejím teoretickým základům a vyjadřuje se k ironickému literárnímu stylu Ageeho fiktokritického textu z pozice skryté autority.

## 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.

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## 1: The Inexorable Author

*The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word. The governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.*

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* xvii

### 1.1 Introduction

In his foreword to the 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the writer James Agee notes that the work reflects an effort “to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense.”<sup>1</sup> Though it resembles no other work of journalism, *Famous Men* was borne out of an assignment for *Fortune* magazine, which dispatched the writer to Alabama along with the photographer Walker Evans to live with and observe the families of tenant farmers, expecting the men to return with a work of traditional reportage. Agee, however, swollen with concern for the subjects of his study and with his own creative (and to a large degree emotional) energy, produced a work too grand in scale and experimental in form to appear in the magazine’s pages. What results is a scrapbook of sorts: a collection of writings—at turns poetic and lyrical, at others taking their cue from traditional journalism and ethnography—prefaced with a series of Evans’ photographs, the sum of which amounts to a sympathetic portrait of the lives of tenant farmers and their families in the 1930s American South, that is ostensibly, if not entirely (or at least technically), factual. Ill-defined by genre, the book balances on a tightrope between fiction and

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<sup>1</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941 (London: Penguin Books, 2006) xviii.

nonfiction; it is a work of reportage, an ethnographic record, that reveals as much about its creators as its subjects.

Agee's preface to the book begins unassumingly enough, with a description of the assignment the author and Evans received from *Fortune*, but within pages he assumes the polemical anger to which he returns throughout the book to justify his use of fictions, the rambling lyricism that has become deeply entangled with his name, and a series of epigraphs and fragments of poetry, including excerpts from texts by Karl Marx and William Shakespeare. His sustained reportage, if it may be so called, begins with two unpunctuated lines, set far apart on an otherwise empty page:

The house had now descended

All over Alabama the lamps are out<sup>2</sup>

These lines usher in the sense of estrangement the author maintains throughout *Famous Men*, with its dreamlike descriptions, breathless, sprawling sentences leaden with polysyndeton lists, passages inexplicably set off in parentheses, and many, many colons (used in some places to the exclusion of all other modes of punctuation). The text—it need hardly be said—resembled nothing of the journalism *Fortune* had and would run in its pages, and it in fact fell into no greater favor as a work of literature upon its initial publication (in a condensed form) in 1939—the same year Faber and Faber published James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in its entirety. Neither book enjoyed critical, much less commercial, success in the years following its publication. While critics such as Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling admired Agee's book, it was generally regarded as a self-indulgent, undisciplined failure. In a sense, the self-indulgence of Agee's text lies at the heart of this study. Trilling wrote in *The Kenyon Review* about *Famous Men*, "For one

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<sup>2</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 15.

thing, too much of our attention is taken with subtracting Agee from his record, even though we respect both the invitation to subtract and the personality we are asked to deduct.”<sup>3</sup> Why should a reader make an effort to extract Agee from *Famous Men*, one is left to wonder from Trilling’s review, when in fact his experience and perceptions are the lens through which his reportage (fieldwork) was necessarily filtered?

Although Agee wrote *Famous Men* long before the term was coined, the book is an example of *fictocriticism*, an intermingling of distinct, incompatible forms and genres straddling the boundary between ostensibly factual and fictional writing. As the term is slowly adopted in select academic circles—particularly in the fields of literary and cultural studies and in anthropology, with particular interest in the Commonwealth countries of Australia and Canada—it may be applied retroactively to writings as disparate as the essays of Montaigne and the journals of Malinowski, from “nonfiction novels” such as *In Cold Blood* or Agee’s own *A Death in the Family*, to Oscar Wilde’s “creative criticism” and the literary-theoretical writings of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, extending even beyond the page to the theatre, film, and television existing at Derrida’s “floodgate” of genre, “exclud[ing] itself in what it includes.”<sup>4,5</sup> *Fictocriticism* describes 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. Each definition of fictocriticism in academia or in popular writing reflects an (unlikely) marriage of divergent and, arguably, opposing forms: the first a feature of literary fiction—narrative, abstraction, fabrication, play—and the second of criticism (broadly defined as encompassing modes of theoretical discourse

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<sup>3</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Greatness with One Fault in It,” *The Kenyon Review* 4.1 (1942): 102.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Flavell, “Writing-Between: Australian and Canadian Fictocriticism,” Murdoch University, 2004: 4, <<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/53/2/02Whole.pdf>>, 8 August 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 65, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343176>>, 8 August 2014.

as well as those purely of reflection)—essay, examination, biography, commentary, critique, *inter alia*.

Using *Famous Men* as a case study, the thesis will argue that, taken as a whole, the fictocritical text—be it primarily critical, academic, anthropological, novelistic, poetic, or otherwise—accounts for the immutability of the author within a text. Agee’s fictocriticism engages and manipulates the text’s literary quality in order to keep the author, with all his abilities and impotencies, at the foreground of the reader’s awareness. Like literature, criticism as a species resists satisfactory definition and appears in a multitude of forms, yet amongst the analyses, critiques, commentaries, and investigations subsumed by its heading, the implicit authority of the writer surfaces as criticism’s only commonality. This thesis proceeds from the notion that fictocriticism accounts for the subjectivity of the author behind these ostensibly or partially nonfictional texts. With the support of various theories of genre and authorship, most notably those of Derrida, Hans Vaihinger, Barthes, and Michel Foucault, the thesis will examine the role of the author in literature and function of fictocritical writing in honoring his or her omnipresence in the text, including his or her immutable limitations.

In the first of two major sections, the thesis will probe the most valuable theoretical writings addressing the role of the author in literature and posing speculative answers to Barthes’ question “Who is speaking thus?”, beginning with Barthes’ own essay “The Death of the Author” and a brief discussion of the author’s entanglement with and the limitations imposed by the genre in which he or she writes. The second portion of the thesis applies the concept of fictocriticism as a mode of writing that calls into question the author’s sovereignty in two genres of writing in which his authority is assumed, and which brings the author’s presence to the forefront of the reader’s attention where a degree of “critical distance” is often maintained. In so doing, the fictocritical

form is revealed as a tool for preserving the vulnerable human subjects of Agee's journalistic and ethnographic study. While in many instances in *Famous Men* Agee borrows from and leans upon conventions of narrative and character development associated with the novel, these two major genres of nonfiction writing (journalism and ethnography) guide his use of the personal "I" and his broad definition of fiction in the book. Thus, the thesis will examine the intercontamination of the genres of fictocriticism and journalism and ethnography. First, as a writer for *Fortune*, Agee lived and engaged with the three farmers' families from the position of journalist (in his *dramatis personae*, Agee gives himself the self-deprecatory title of "a spy, traveling as a journalist"); while perhaps *Famous Men* abandons the conventions of even long-form magazine journalism, the author's position as journalist influenced his experience in Alabama and his relationship with the recording of ostensible facts in the book.<sup>6</sup> This section of the thesis will also investigate the motivations of the New Journalists—themselves aligned with the concept of fictocriticism—who wrote and about whom a great deal has been written regarding the motivations behind inter-genre journalism and nonfiction. Secondly, the thesis will examine Agee's book as a fictocritical ethnography, paying tribute to the particular popularity of the term *fictocriticism* in contemporary anthropology. The relationship between the anthropologist and his or her subject (observer and observed) has, of course, long been a point of contention and debate in the field of anthropology, and this section suggests that the fictocritical ethnography offers—though by no means a solution—certainly a mode of ethnographic recording by which to come to terms with the gulf between the two. Agee appears to embrace Derrida's "parasitical economy" of contamination, borrowing from and allowing the fictocritical contamination of these two genres of nonfiction writing, journalism and anthropology, in order to account for the

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<sup>6</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xxiv.

complications of his presence in research (as an investigative reporter/fieldworker) and in the text.<sup>7</sup>

Agee's preface and remarkable "preamble" themselves provide an invaluable introduction to the questions its unconventional form raises. Faced with the task of translating his fieldwork into an account of human lives, the author confesses to considerable unease, noting that he adopted the book's unique form in order to meet the demands of its subject. "If complications arise," Agee writes, "that is because [the authors] are trying to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously."<sup>8</sup> In a novel, Agee notes in the preamble, "a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer," yet the persons portrayed in *Famous Men* have "much huger" meaning, which is to say that they are possessors of their own rich subjectivities, perceptions, and languages. Still, the author notes with some dismay, "I can tell you only what I saw, only so accurately as in my terms I know how."<sup>9</sup> In 1960, Evans attached his own preface to the volume, a character study of Agee himself; Evans' portrait of the author reveals a deeply empathetic man "induced" by what he witnessed in Alabama into the writing of a text that reflected "one resolute, private rebellion."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, frustrated by the limitations of his own experience, subjectivity, and language, Agee embarks on a grand experiment in *Famous Men* to describe and to capture the indescribable from the book's very first pages. His dissatisfaction, restlessness, angst—evidence of the formidable guilt so famous to his character as a writer and person—reveals the thanklessness of the task of maintaining the reader's awareness of the humanity of the text's subjects *and in the same moment of* Agee's inability to convey the consciousness of other individuals.

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, "The Law of Genre" 59.

<sup>8</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xix.

<sup>9</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 9.

<sup>10</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xv.

Helen Flavell notes in “Writing-Between: Australian and Canadian Fictocriticism” that while one can argue that genre is “anachronistic and inappropriate” in describing forms of writing that by and large resist their conventions—genre, as will shortly be discussed, being a concept of simultaneous restriction and contamination—“little appears to have shifted in terms of how we really think and demonstrate our understanding.”<sup>11</sup> Agee’s manipulation of generic conventions was derided among literary critics upon *Famous Men*’s publication in 1941; today, his shifting back and forth among novelistic lyricism, participant ethnography, and “New” or first-person journalism no longer in and of itself strikes the reader as an act of great rebellion or of revolutionary import. The near-simultaneous publication of *Famous Men* and *Finnegan’s Wake* suggests that the book’s disfavor upon its initial publication was less a consequence of Agee’s self-indulgence than of his timing; poised on the cusp of the wave of American modernism, *Famous Men* did not yet subscribe to the literary fashion that would shortly follow. Agee’s critical engagement with his own generic experimentation, however, offers a convincing rebuttal to Flavell’s statement: To read Agee’s text as a thinking-aloud of the role of the author and the author’s relationship with his own subjectivity not only challenges the reader to engage consciously with his own preconceptions of textual genre, but also with the author’s degree of acceptance or refusal of the conventions of the genres in which he writes. While certainly Agee indulged in literary experimentation and play in the writing of *Famous Men*, the fictocritical genre he employs for the task has, as the thesis will show, something of a functional nature; the modernism of the book can be read as a rhetorical rather than aesthetic feature, speaking directly to the reader’s awareness of Agee’s inextricable presence.

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<sup>11</sup> Flavell, *Writing-Between* 2.

## 1.1 Genre of Fiction, Genre of Criticism

### *What Is Fictocriticism?*

Neither an authoritative text nor a categorical definition guides this or any other examination of the notion of fictocriticism, requiring those inclined to examine the origins of the term to embark on something of a paper chase. The origins of the term *fictocriticism* date back at least to the late 1980s; its first widely known use in print appeared in the 1991 *Australian Book Review* essay “On Ficto-Criticism,” penned by Stephen Muecke and quoting heavily from an essay by Noel King on the same subject. Muecke, himself a literary critic and prominent practitioner of fictocritical ethnographic writing, and King, a critical and cultural theorist, cite a use of the term that appeared over a decade prior in an interview with Frederic Jameson. As Flavell notes in her analysis of fictocriticism’s origins, it was the interviewer, not Jameson, who introduced the term in a question in the *Impulse* magazine interview, a young academic from the Ontario Centre for Arts (OCA) named Andrea Ward.<sup>12</sup> Jameson, in response, provided a working definition<sup>13</sup>:

It is very clear that there has been a flowing together of theory and criticism. It seems that theory can’t exist without telling little narrative stories and then, at this point of criticism, criticism seems very close to simply telling stories. It is an advanced and energetic form of conceptual criticism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ward, who currently works as a visual artist in Canada, does not appear to have written on the subject of fictocriticism and could unfortunately not be reached for an interview for this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> Helen Flavell, “Who Killed Jeanne Randolph?”, *Outskirts Online Journal* 20 (2009), <<http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-20/flavell>> 8 August 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Muecke and Noel King, “On Ficto-Criticism,” *Australian Book Review* 135 (1991): 1.

As Flavell argues, the likelihood is high that Wark learned the term *fictocriticism* from Jeanne Randolph, a professor at OCA who experimented with mixed-genre modes of academic writing as early as the 1970s. Randolph writes:

My entire writing production has been to argue against the rhetoric propelled by setting up dualities (binary thinking) in which topics being explored are analysed by perpetuating categories explicitly or implicitly, such as ‘bad’ vs ‘good,’ ‘authentic’ vs ‘phoney,’ indeed ‘nature’ vs ‘culture.’<sup>15</sup>

The pairing of binary oppositions, mirrored in the portmanteau construction of the term, recurs throughout self-described *fictocritics*’ definitions of this mode of writing and opens the way for Post-Structuralist and Deconstructionist commentary later in this thesis. By all definitions, *fictocriticism* is a mode of writing that exists at the interstices of traditionally fact-based techniques of writing—academic essay or criticism, journalism, ethnography, diary, biography—and “creative” writing—the novel, poem, play script or screenplay, and so forth. The mode of writing classified under this particular term is a product or function of deconstruction in literature, of postmodernity, and of the influence of cultural and transdisciplinary studies in the academy, though its boundaries are too far-reaching to identify only a handful of sources and its precursors in literature and theory too numerous to count. While “ficto” implies a straying from objective, demonstrable facts, the prefix’s function indicates the writing’s experimentation and play more than its fictive or untruthful character. It is particularly worthy to note that the work indicated by the term *fictocriticism* falls under only the broadest definition of *criticism*. It’s perhaps here that the term is most misleading; in practice, the “criticism” of *fictocriticism* serves as a stand-in for nonfiction in all of its forms. The misconception that *fictocriticism* indicates only academic criticism, or theory, that “reads like” fiction distracts from nature of the work that assumes this classification in actuality.

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<sup>15</sup> Flavell, “Who Killed Jeanne Randolph?”

Of the writers who have adopted the term to describe their work the most well known belong to the field of anthropology, and in this case, “-criticism” refers simply to ethnography; in other words, the most famous self-described fictocritics are authors of ethnography that “reads like” fiction. Despite their literary (“ficto-“) embellishments, these texts are critical only secondarily in their embrace of fictionalization and literary play. Particularly in the field of anthropology, fictocritics describe the mode of writing as something more revolutionary than either Jameson or Randolph do here. Muecke is one such fictocritic. Part ethnography, part treatise, Muecke’s book *No Road (Bitumen All the Way)* reads in many moments like a manifesto for the fictocritical form. In its first pages, Muecke describes the same convergence of attitudes in the field of anthropology Jameson alludes to in his *Impulse* interview. The following excerpt depicts the situation in critical theory, postcolonial studies, and anthropology—particularly in Muecke’s native Australia—that set the scene for a new mode of critical writing. Muecke describes a moment in the “Culture Wars” of the 1980s that primed departments of anthropology such as his own to adopt a polemical, reactionary mode of writing both essays concerning the field of anthropology and ethnographic texts:

In the cities the Theory Wars were raging, writers and academics were slugging it out. Writers, untroubled by the Death of the Author, continued to cash their royalty cheques and complain that the poststructuralists didn’t believe in reality. Unfazed, the theorists re-invented the fragmentary text, multiple speaking positions and the fluid subject. From the flank, postcolonial critics made sure they too were on the side of justice (because they made sure they too were ‘on the margins’), attacked their colleagues, while indigenous people seemed indifferent to the small steps being made on their behalf to free the world of Bad Ideas.<sup>16</sup>

Once a professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, and now teaching writing at the University of New South Wales, Muecke is perhaps one of the

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Muecke, *No Road (Bitumen All the Way)* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997) 24.

best if not the best-known name affiliated with fictocritical writing. Muecke, who continues to perform anthropological fieldwork of his own, writes both about the practice of fictocriticism and fictocritical ethnography itself using his own familiar, tongue-in-cheek, and oftentimes somewhat opaque style. Muecke's essay "On Ficto-Criticism" weds, perhaps for the first notable time, the notion of "mergings and mutations" Jameson describes above with the motivations of postmodernist art and literature. Muecke confesses that he had once believed fictocriticism to be purely the infiltration of personal objectivity into texts that would otherwise impress upon their readers a sense of subjectivity (in the anthropological context, as the second half of the thesis describes, this explains fieldworkers' particular affinity for the term), yet King's description of the practice emphasizes postmodernity's representation of the crisis in knowledge and knowability. As King writes, "Jameson's description of the crisis in which 'the hermeneutic gesture' now finds itself is an exact description of the problem confronting the relation of literary-cultural studies to an increasing array of postmodern fictions and/or various lines of ficto-critical flight."<sup>17</sup>

The term *fictocriticism* has also been used interchangeably with *paraliterature*, and Muecke and King both lean on paraliterature to assist in describing the aims of fictocriticism, despite the fact that these two terms generally emphasize different features of fictional–nonfictional intergenre texts to which they refer. Rosalind Krauss outlines theoretical and otherwise academic uses of *paraliterature* in her essay "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," drawing upon the later writing of Barthes and Derrida. The essays of these two theorists, Krauss argues, can neither be called criticism nor not-criticism as they occupies "the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation" but not "the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work

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<sup>17</sup> Muecke, "On Ficto-Criticism" 2.

of literature.”<sup>18</sup> Notably, Krauss’s characterization of paraliterature draws attention to the permeation of the fictional into critical texts, but not to criticism in fictional texts, and this emphasis is echoed in Muecke and King’s essay as well. Krauss writes that the collapse of the modernist movement in literature compelled students in the academy to turn to the literary products of postmodernism, exemplified in the creative writings of Derrida and Barthes. Paraliterature, resistant to the notion of grand narratives, denies the existence of a larger “meaning” behind the surface of the text; Krauss writes: “The text is “‘about’ its own strategies of construction, its own linguistic operations, its own revelation of convention, its own surface.”<sup>19</sup>

While among contemporary ethnographers and in certain circles of academic anthropology, fictocriticism may be viewed as a movement, a turn of the tide of ethnographic writing, several factors guide the term’s use in this thesis purely as a descriptor of writing situated on the border of multiple genres. First, this thesis examines fictocriticism as a tool in writing, but it should not distract from the boundless media of art and ideas to which the term may also be applied. 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; Agee believed the camera to be the most truthful tool of recording and the most truthful medium of art, but the necessity of selection and emphasis on the part of the photographer demands that he or she fill the role of critic as well as artist. While on the one hand individuals like Muecke embrace the term’s ability to be used as a label for what has been, at least in the field of contemporary anthropology, a trend in ethnographic writing with its own objectives, *fictocriticism* may also be retroactively applied to writing that appeared long before the name was coined. For Taussig’s undergraduate courses in the Department of

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<sup>18</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Poststructuralism and the ‘Paraliterary.’” *October* 13 (1980): 37.  
<sup>19</sup> Krauss 38.

Anthropology at Columbia University, Muecke himself has contributed a roster of citations of the term extracted from the work of Barthes, Foucault, John Berger, and Salman Rushdie.<sup>20</sup> Each of these writers identified a trend in the intersection between creative writing and criticism, and it can be argued that each was the creator of his own fictocriticisms as well.

The second and primary reason for which to treat fictocriticism as a descriptor and not as a movement—beyond its anachronistic application to *Famous Men* in this thesis—is the implication inherent in the latter category of its being a response to the status quo. Such a unified mode of writing, in academia or in ethnography, simply does not exist. While fictocriticism in ethnographic writing, for example, aims to address a series of questions that have plagued the anthropologist from the advent of anthropology, to argue that fictocriticism responds to a singular mode of ethnographic writing would be to create a straw man as a justification for its use. The question of intercultural sovereignty and authority in anthropology has been well-examined and documented, and ethnographers whose writing reflects this mode of questioning include Malinowski, Gregory Bateson, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, all of whom employ the literary first person, draw the reader's awareness to the limitations of their perception, and display at least some resistance to their presumed mastery and objectivity as authors of ethnographic texts. If fictocriticism is a movement in anthropology, it is one that began not decades, but centuries ago.

Likewise, fictocritics writing academic texts rely on the term as a means of indicating a stylistic break with “heavy theory,” to borrow Muecke's phrasing in “On Ficto-Criticism.” To speak of “traditional ethnography” is no less overreaching a statement than to make reference to “academic writing,” as if such a thing can be generally characterized and immune to the contamination of external influences and other

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Muecke, “Fictocriticism: Some citations, provided by Stephen Muecke,” no date, courtesy of Michael Taussig, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University.

genres of writing. In each of the essays discussed above, Krauss and Muecke (via King) lean on Barthes and Derrida both for aesthetic support, both practitioners of “heavy theory” and both of whose “light” work remains, by and large, theoretically engaged. The difference in the case of many academics writing critical texts in fictionalized forms is the absence of theoretical contextualization in the fictocritical work itself. By the same token, opponents of fictocriticism in the academy frequently cite its proponents’ lackadaisical reference to the theorists and critics to whom they claim inspiration and opposition. One such critic, Bob Hodge of the University of Western Sydney, argues in his essay “Monstrous Knowledge” that the “New Humanities” refuse the systems of disciplinarity that “are restrictive in some respects but also endlessly productive.” Hodge here echoes Foucault: “For a discipline to exist, there must be the possibility of formulating—and doing so *ad infinitum*—fresh propositions.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Foucault is quoted once again: “In short a proposition must fulfill some onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline; pronounced true or false it must be, as Monsieur Canguilhem might say, ‘within the true.’”<sup>22</sup> In an effort to rid their work of implied mastery, Hodge argues, many writers of the New Humanities rid their work of the masters.

The narrative Muecke relates of his own conversion to fictocritical writing, outlined in “On Ficto-Criticism,” may perhaps account for many of the major criticisms of the movement. Muecke writes that he spent much of the 1970s steeped in narratology and semiotics before discovering Barthes’ *Mythologies*. “*Finally*, I thought, *this is writing*,” Muecke recounts. Using Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* as an illustration, Muecke (via King) demonstrates the shared postmodern–fictocritical impulse that characterizes the book’s style: “This practice of heightening intertextuality to the point of

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<sup>21</sup> Bob Hodge, “Monstrous Knowledge: Doing PhDs in the New Humanities,” *Australian Universities’ Review* 2 (1995): 35.

<sup>22</sup> Hodge 36.

its becoming the pre-eminent condition of textuality, in part is said to be the result of new technologies, new capacities for the storage of information and representation.” King notes that these technologies elicit and enable the “mixture of echoes, appropriations, simulations, replicas” that characterize fictocriticism. King here describes the aesthetic tools of the fictocritic, not the theoretical foundation, borrowed from practitioners of Muecke’s “heavy theory.” The distinction serves to remind fictocriticism’s opponents, and perhaps the fictocritics themselves, that its origins date far further back than to the heyday of the “theory wars” in the latter half of the twentieth century—in fact, to centuries prior. While it can be wished that the contemporary writers of fictocritical texts paid greater respect to the theorists thriving in the 1960s and 70s, it can at the same time be argued that these writers owe more to Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Hazlitt, and others.

### *Contamination of Genres*

While fictocriticism attempts to buck the conventions of both the fictional and nonfictional genres it marries, the term itself functions only on the basis of one’s understanding of precisely those conventions it attempts to comingle. What’s more, the possibility of writing on the border between genres necessarily concedes the functionality of those genres; in general, the very effort to disrupt genres proceeds from the synthesis of multiple preestablished generic conventions. As E. D. Hirsch explains in “Validity in Interpretation,” when an author attempts to create a new literary genre he or she tends to combine old generic systems in a new way, thereby extending the existing conditions. That author’s efforts to create something new are lost when the resulting genre structure

is reduced to the component conventions from which it was derived.<sup>23</sup> The application of fictocriticism to established genres of critical, or factual, writing (such as journalism and ethnography) weds familiar generic forms in order to elicit unfamiliar outcomes. Here the term *fictocriticism* can be a useful one: the comingling and manipulation of familiar modes of writing, particularly under a portmanteau denomination, calls the reader's attention to the performance of defamiliarized rhetorical techniques and urges him or her to analyze their effects. Perhaps more importantly, it heightens the natural intermingling of genres described below and draws attention to the very fictionality of genre's taxonomic classification.

This thesis resists the notion of literature that elides generic classification, favoring instead the Derridian conception of genre as a classificatory system in which every text participates. Derrida's "Law of Genre" describes the tenuous (im)balance of a text between belonging and non-belonging: "Every text participates in one or several genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging." While on the one hand Derrida concedes that texts can and in fact must necessarily take part in multiple genres, the "law" that governs them draws rigid boundaries between oppositional forces, stemming from the premise that every subject is coupled with its object, its other, by which genre works to prevent contamination and to determine the meaning of the subordinated text. In other words, genre provides a boundary between subject and object that serves to prevent their intermixing, but by being within and without those genres, so to speak, the boundary creates a space for cross-contamination: the Law of Genre, then, "is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy."<sup>24</sup>

Despite the intermixing of genres along the border, Derrida's "Law" itself concedes, if for the purposes of argumentation, the notion of singularity and taxonomy in

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<sup>23</sup> E.D. Hirsch, "From 'Validity in Interpretation,'" *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 29.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, "The Law of Genre" 59.

genre. In other words, as crucial as the rule of non-belonging is to Derrida's conception of genre, the rule of belonging remains equally intransigent. In journalism and the writing of the human sciences, that rule of belonging to genre establishes the position of authority of the author upon which these genres function. In "Spectres of Sovereignty," Louis Armand transfers Derrida's argument to the relationship between colonized and colonizer; as Derrida writes, that the "one who says 'I'" in the text is the one presumed to be "a competent subject," an "educated" man, the "writer and reader, a creature of 'libraries,' *the* reader of this account."<sup>25</sup> Using James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus as exemplar, Armand illustrates the process of linguistic colonization wrought by Derrida's "monolingualism of the other":

[...] the crisis that arises as a result of linguistic colonization is not simply one of perpetual *dis*-enfranchisement by virtue of being internally 'foreign' or 'other.' Rather, in a very practical sense, it is the determination of foreignness or otherness by the exercise, on the part of the colonizing power, of arbitrary authority over the relationship between the colonial subject and language, and in particular of the right to determine meaning.<sup>26</sup>

Armand's analysis points to the problem of critical authority that plagues the genre of ethnography, but the notion of critical monolingualism he describes here also implies—just as the drawing of a boundary reinforces an opposition—the interposition (Derrida might say *contamination, pollution*) of another monolingualism. The colonizer, in other words, orders meaning on precisely the terms of the colonized. In accepting Derrida's notion of generic delimitation and contamination, the question then naturally arises regarding the implications of combining multiple genres or, in this case, the pairing of the arguably oppositional genres of fiction and criticism. This intermixing is Derrida's counter-law, his *law of the law of genre*, the economy of parasitic interference. In this way, the positioning of two disparate generic modes in conversation with one another is a

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<sup>25</sup> Derrida, "The Law of Genre" 65.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Armand, "Spectres of Sovereignty," *Solicitations* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008) 473.

sort of tautology; the purity of each generic component of fictocriticism is, at least by Derrida's estimation, spoiled from the outset, so their relationship side-by-side in a single text such as Agee's serves only to *heighten* the sense of its contamination. What's more, the conspicuous intermixing of genres draws attention to the construction of genres of nonfiction, whose contamination by techniques of fiction is more evident than its contamination of literature. Journalism and ethnography are, of course, genres in and of themselves, and as apt to sully authorially distant, third-person fiction as is fiction, vice versa.

Thus, the implicit authority of the speaker is one feature of genre to which practitioners of fictocriticism in anthropology attempt to respond and, to some degree, account. In academia, fictocriticism's attempts to unsettle the implicit authority and mastery of writing elucidates its use as a mode of written political rhetoric. Particularly as fictocriticism gains increasing numbers of practitioners, the mode of writing between genres represents an upset to the status quo; as Flavell writes, some academics "resent the incursion of theory into poetic works and the loss of rigor implied by the incorporation of the poetic into theoretical or academic writing."<sup>27</sup> A troublesome series of questions emerges with the use of fictocritical writing by academics representing marginalized literatures and political or social groups; in this case, fictocriticism is employed in order to upset and negate structures of hierarchy, despite their inadvertent affirmation of those structures. By the same token, however, Flavell notes that writers of fictocriticism who refuse to name their practice reinforce "the political ethos of ficto-criticism by refusing the mastery of academic discourse that has the potential to reduce and contain a highly

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<sup>27</sup> Flavell, "Who Killed Jeanne Randolph?"

experimental form.”<sup>28</sup> The second part of this thesis directly addresses the concerns of “mastery”

As a genre in and of itself, *fictocriticism* is defined in this thesis as a mode of writing, belonging to without fully being a part of multiple established genres of writing. By belonging on the border between genres it necessarily takes part in each, and so eliding generic classification remains an impossibility. It does, however, rise to address the concerns articulated by Muecke, Randolph, and others regarding the delimitation of oppositions and attempts to draw attention to the structures of authority at play precisely along the boundary between those oppositions. Thus, an exhaustive examination of *Famous Men* as a specimen of fictocritical writing demands an examination of the two broad genres of writing within and on the border between which Agee plays: fiction—particularly in the form of the novel—and criticism (though it has already been noted that, in many instances of fictocritical writing, the catch-all *criticism* is meant to imply a range of forms of non-reflective nonfiction as well). The following section examines both, as well as the methods by which fictocritical writing upsets and recasts a reader’s conceptions of a text.

### *Fiction: Making versus Making Up*

In order to establish a working definition of *fiction* to assist in the analysis of *Famous Men* as a fictocritical text, it is crucial, first, to examine Agee’s understanding of truth, a theme to which he continually returns throughout the book. In the labyrinthine interlude “On the Porch: 2,” Agee writes:

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<sup>28</sup> Flavell, “Who Killed Jeanne Randolph?”

[...] in every thing within and probably in anything outside human conception; and in every combination and mutation of these things: and in a certain important sense let it be remembered that in these terms, in terms, that is to say, of the manifestations of being, taken as such, which are always strict and perfect, nothing can be held untrue. 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.<sup>29</sup>

Agee thus lays the groundwork for his use of fictocriticism in writing of real people and actual events. While several supplementary theories of fiction are discussed in the section below, it is Vaihinger's work, particularly the *Philosophy of 'As If'*, that most lends itself to Agee's oppositional understanding of falsehoods, masquerading as truths, and of so-called "true truths," which the writer takes pains to capture in fiction.

Although widely criticized, Vaihinger's neo-Kantian *Philosophy of 'As If'* frames the relationship between the fictional and the real such that it assists in unraveling the implications of pairing fictions with facts. Vaihinger is perhaps best known for his principle of Fictionalism, which he outlines in the preface to the English edition of *The Philosophy of 'As If'* as "an idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that reason practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance."<sup>30</sup> The notion of practicality in fiction—or, rather, fictions—lies at the heart of the *Philosophy of 'As If'*; the practical, writes Vaihinger, "reigns supreme."<sup>31</sup> All knowledge is acquired out of the comparison or reduction of the unknown to the known. We come to an understanding of the world by applying that knowledge and doing its work, not by pondering its problems, Vaihinger writes.<sup>32</sup> Fiction, therefore, is a highly applicable mode of understanding the real world, a necessary, practical instrument for doing its work.

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<sup>29</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 203.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If"* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924) viii.

<sup>31</sup> Vaihinger xlv.

<sup>32</sup> Vaihinger xlv.

Fiction is also, as a tool, readily available; its boundaries as Vaihinger asserts them are nearly limitless. Perhaps counterintuitively, Vaihinger argues for the reality of emotion and sensory experience and claims, “Whatever objective reality may be, one thing can be stated with certainty—it does *not* consist of logical functions.” Vaihinger’s dismissal of logic and concrete reality in favor of lived, sensory experience reads like a page out of the participant ethnographer’s notebook. Like Agee, he provides a working definition of fictions in the fullest sense of the phrase: fictions are the necessary, functional constituents of understanding. Given the ubiquity of fictions, Agee’s unconventional approach to journalism or ethnography can be understood more clearly on the author’s terms: writing about fictions in the mode of fiction (fictocriticism), the author more closely approximates the truth than by writing about fictions falsely, in the guise of nonfiction. Like Vaihinger, Agee makes explicit his favoring of perceptions over science and art—which he deems incompatible—a distinction at the basis of his concept of “true truths” and which he articulates in the “Preamble” of the book:

In the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands.<sup>33</sup>

Agee repeats his notion of true fictions, so to speak, throughout the text, and it is one to which this thesis will also return. Several other theoretical conceptions of fiction also lend themselves to a fuller understanding of Agee’s use of fictions and, by extension, of the applications of fictocriticism itself. Northrop Frye’s rigidly taxonomical view of genre is largely too inflexible for our discussion of fictocriticism, a mode of writing that exists at the interstices of multiple genres, but Frye’s belief that criticism of prose fiction is disproportionately novel-centric certainly lends itself to the analysis of *Famous Men*,

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<sup>33</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 9.

itself a work of fiction that cannot be said to abide by the conventions of the novel. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye argues, “Surely the word fiction, which, like poetry, means etymologically something made for its own sake, could be applied in criticism to any work of literary art in a radically continuous form, which almost always means a work of art in prose.” Here Frye draws attention to a crucial element in our definition and understanding of fiction: its etymological roots in the Latin past participle *fingere* and later in the thirteenth-century French *fiction*. *Fingere* denotes the process of devising and shaping; the word also lies at the etymological basis of the verb “to feign.” *Fiction* roughly translates to the nouns *rouse* or *invention*, which more closely denote the English *fiction*’s common usage. Both words, however, carry with them the connotation of manipulation and play, and *fingere* suggests a fashioning or creating that hardly comes into conflict even with the popular understanding of the term *nonfiction*. Bearing in mind the term’s etymology, one might more easily comprehend *fiction* as something made or fashioned, rather than as something merely *made up*.

Frye’s argument also raises a crucial question: particularly given a wider, more flexible definition of *fiction*, can indeed any work of prose art be read or understood as fiction? This thesis stems the assumption that indeed it can. The following sections of the thesis consider fictocriticism as an exercise employed in order to call attention to the *fingere*, the shaping and devising, native to the writing of journalistic and ethnographic texts. Put another way, by encouraging the reader to regard factual (nonfiction) texts as works of fiction, fictocriticism provides a mode through which to comprehend their subjective unreliability. The reunion of the noun *fiction* with its etymological grandparent, the past participle *fingere*, leads one to consider fiction as a mode of writing elected and performed by a writer; that is to say, it offers fiction for our consideration as not only a quality or character of a text, but as an author’s means of action. A footnote in

“On the Porch: 2” reveals that Agee constructed the polemical–theoretical interlude to serve as the “center of action” for the text, to which all other points of the book are to be read in reference.<sup>34</sup> If this is this case, the “fiction” of *Famous Men* is the rhetorical stratagem by which the author creates and performs a theoretical exercise.

Finally, it must be said that the notion that any prose may be read as fiction is one that has been widely contested in literary theory. Jonathan Culler illustrates the arbitrariness, and often the absurdity, of generic boundaries in his essay “Toward a Theory of Non-Genre Literature,” which he begins by breaking a fragment of journalistic prose into the lines of a lyric poem:

Yesterday on Route Seven  
A car  
Traveling at sixty miles per hour rammed  
a sycamore  
Its four occupants were  
Killed.<sup>35</sup>

Culler’s (albeit somewhat droll) exercise illustrates a text’s deft transposition from one genre to another, assisted only by a shift in the reader’s expectations. Once the reader conceives of this piece, originally written as journalism, as belonging to another genre entirely—here the work is done by the insertion of line breaks—he or she is able to “read into” the text an entirely different string of meanings. As Culler writes, one’s understanding of the “exemplary tragedy” the news text becomes is guided by a set of expectations for lyric poetry: that is, that each work of poetry is atemporal, symbolic, self-contained, and expressing its own attitude. Generic conventions guide our understanding of a text, but they are not the only “rules” by which a game can be played.

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<sup>34</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 217.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Toward a Theory of Non-Genre Literature,” *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 51.

Hirsch provides a metaphor which can be used to enrich Culler's conception of genres as arbitrary taxonomies:

A genre is less like a game than like a code of social behavior, which provides rules of thumb such as, do not drink a toast to your hostess at a Scandinavian dinner party. That is not a strict rule (since under certain circumstances it would be permissible to drink the toast) but rather a propriety which is, on the whole, socially considerate to observe.<sup>36</sup>

Hirsch's metaphor points to the contractuality of genre: if, on the one hand, a writer assumes the conventions of one genre, the reader's "understanding" of a text—that is, in Hirsch's definition, the ability to make interpretations—is contingent upon the continued adherence of the author to those conventions. On the other hand, if a writer assumes a text to be written in accordance with the conventions of one genre and the writer breaks those conventions or abides by a different set of strictures altogether, the writer's ability to communicate comprehensibly with the reader is impaired if not altogether demolished. Thus the reader will no longer be able to interpret the text at hand. Hirsch argues that a reader's preliminary conception of the genre of a text determines his or her understanding of it for as long as the text allows for that conception to be maintained. As soon as the conventions of that genre are broken, however, the reader must reassess his or her understanding and subsequent interpretation of the text in accordance with another, more suitable, set of generic conventions.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the question of whether any text may be read "as fiction" remains unanswerable, and Agee's book is illustrative of its complications. The reader who approaches *Famous Men* as a work of nonfiction journalism will encounter difficulties "understanding" the text—by Hirsch's use of the word—before the conclusion of Agee's circuitous prefaces. Certainly, too, *Famous Men* disrupts the conventions of ethnographic

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<sup>36</sup> Hirsch 27.

<sup>37</sup> Hirsch 15-17.

writing, indulging in not only verbose poetic digressions but also in polemics against the proprieties of journalism and philosophical meditations on the boundary between fact and fiction. While many portions of *Famous Men* can indeed be *read as fiction*, Agee has all but ensured that the reader's understanding of the text as a work of fiction, or as any other established mode of prose writing, is upended from the book's first pages. By virtue of Hirsch's postulate regarding the contingency of the reader's generic conception of a text—that is, that the reader's interpretation precedes from the text's adherence to one previously determined genre or another—Agee does everything in his power to divorce the text from the possibility of interpretation or understanding, in an effort to preserve the dignity of the human lives the book portrays.

### *Criticism and Crisis*

The notion of *criticism* is of course itself contingent upon compliance with certain strictures and assumptions, but the term now is used somewhat loosely to describe a vast range of forms of writing imbued with an im- or explicit first-person speaking subject. As Armand notes in *Solicitations*, the institutional term *critical* “has increasingly become a synonym for ‘reflective.’” Literary criticism, Armand goes on to note, has “suffered in recent years from an apparent lack of a coherent object,” the analytic means of criticism having “been extended to implicate an increasingly broad range of disciplinary interests.”<sup>38</sup>

The notion of a *fictoncriticism*, then—a criticism performing itself in the form of fiction—entrap itself in a spiral of false starts. In “Criticism and Crisis,” de Man describes the expansion of literary studies into the social sciences and illuminates an

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<sup>38</sup> Louis Armand, “Aftermaths,” *Solicitations* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008. 1–9) 5, 10.

unintended problematization of the field of literature by the imposition of techniques of criticism. De Man writes of literature as characterized by “the presence of a nothingness” that is fiction. Readers “degrade the fiction” by confusing it with reality and imposing upon it, in the name of criticism, social sciences such as anthropology or psychology, which have their own modes of discourse. Instead of demystifying literature, de Man writes, “they are in fact being demystified by it,” and what de Man sees as a crisis in criticism is the separation of literary studies from phenomenology and philosophy:

What they call anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, is nothing but a literature reappearing, like the Hydra’s head, in the very spot where it had supposedly been suppressed. The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing ‘the nothingness of human matters.’<sup>39</sup>

De Man’s assessment poses the question, then, of the implications in imposing literature, with its inherent meaninglessness, on the human sciences. Perhaps fictocriticism—a mode of discourse in which, as was previously discussed—the term “criticism” assumes only the most ethereal and referential form—seeks to identify precisely this “nothingness of human matters” in the modes of discourse upon which it comments or “reflects.” Here, too, the Philosophy of As If provides an interpretation: Reflection upon of the human sciences in terms of literature reveals the former as its own fiction, albeit a highly practical one.

As de Man writes in “Criticism and Crisis,” the evaluation of art in terms of its being “good” or “bad” depends on the work of art’s conformity with, in de Man’s terms, “an implicit notion of what art ought to be.” In other words, “good” art is ultimately *more* art than “bad” art, “barely art at all.”<sup>40</sup> In Hans Vaihinger’s terms, what de Man here describes is a “type fiction,” around which all works of art are held for comparison

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<sup>39</sup> Paul de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 18.

<sup>40</sup> de Man 8.

as deviations from an imaginary “original form.”<sup>41</sup> By recognizing individual instances as fictions, writes Vaihinger, we approach greater understanding and comprehension. “All cognition is the apperception of one thing through another. [...] Anyone acquainted with the mechanism of thought knows that all conception and cognition are based upon analogical apperceptions,” Vaihinger writes. It is not a matter, then, of literature holding a mirror up to the sciences in order to reflect “the nothingness of human matters,” but rather simply of its ability to reflect the fictions upon which their cognition is founded.

## 1.2 On Authorship

In “The Fall: Fictocritical Writing,” Muecke writes that one common effect of fictocriticism is

the collapsing of the ‘detached’ and all-knowing subject *into* the text, so that his (or your) performance as a writer includes dealing with a problem all contemporary writers must face: *how the hell did I get here?*<sup>42</sup>

Here Muecke raises two key motivations of the use of fictocriticism, particularly in anthropology. First, the notion of an “all-knowing subject,” the author of a text in the seat of power, is one to which much fictocritical writing attempts to respond. As Armand notes in “Spectres of Sovereignty,” Heidegger’s comment that “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells,” very much applies here. In the field of anthropology, it is the subject of study who teaches the anthropologist his or her language, yet he or she lacks the authority to do so. Inversely, the anthropologist assumes a position of authority in writing about a culture whose language he or she lacks. Secondly, the notion of the

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<sup>41</sup> Vaihinger 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Muecke, “The Fall: Fictocritical Writing” *Parallax* 8.4 (2002): 108.

writer's performance, or of the writer performing him or herself, is one to which fictocriticism enthusiastically responds. In general, fictocriticism takes into account the impossibility of extracting the author from the text, opting to bring the writer to the forefront of the reader's awareness. However, exceptions, which abound particularly in literary journalism, only prove the rule. Capote is only as much a figure in *In Cold Blood* as a novelist is to a work of realist literature; in a similar fashion, the first-person "I" appears only sparingly in Didion's journalistic prose; Mailer's *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* draws upon first-person experience but is reported in the third person. In these instances, Capote, Didion, and Mailer abide by the conventions of the genre of novelistic fiction, therefore beseeching the reader to enter into a contract in agreement with the generic precepts of prose fiction. Capote embraced the term "nonfiction novel," and the conventions of *In Cold Blood* indeed echo those of the (fictional) novel; Capote's presence as a journalist and investigator is overshadowed by the novelistic cast of the book, the rules of which call the reader to more or less set aside concerns about the partiality and the necessary selecting and filtering, synthesizing and framing, of the author. Each of these writers accounts for the faulty objectivity of their perceptions by seizing upon and heightening the literary quality of their reportage, lending the impression that their journalism ultimately belongs to the realm of fiction. Critics who argue that *In Cold Blood* fails as a work of literature on the basis of Capote's liberty with the facts proceed from an understanding of the book as a work of long-form journalism rather than one of a work of fiction, or of something on the border between the two.

How one *understands* a text is indeed dictated by one's conception of its genre, and indeed a reader's understanding of a text is also deeply entangled with the author's understanding. Here I adopt Hirsch's definition of *understanding*, which indicates the reader's ("interpreter's") fluency with textual details, guided by his or her perception of

the genre of the text. Agee's book, as it were, plays by different rules than *In Cold Blood*: Arguably as much a work of journalism as Capote's text (and arguably more, considering the great number of liberties it has since been revealed that Capote took with the journalistic facts), Agee nevertheless remains at the forefront of the readers' awareness, shattering the conventions of both fictional prose and traditional journalism, adopting the ethnographic first person *in concert with* the lyricism of poetry, the contextual scene-setting and reportage of journalism, and the narrative conventions of the novel, in turn and in tandem. Agee's fictocriticism indeed assumes the conventions of established modes of writing, reaffirming the functionality of each. His fluency with the conventions of each genre provides a jumping-off point for the reader, proffering the sets of rules by which to extract meaning from the (nonetheless opaque, oftentimes seemingly impenetrable) text.

In *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch writes that the "intrinsic genre" of an utterance is the shared system of expectations preceding from the shared generic conception of both author and reader, which guarantees both a text's meaning and its understanding.<sup>43</sup> This means that in order for a reader to "understand" a text, by Hirsch's definition, the author and reader must both play by the same rules. In this way, genre presides over the utterance as well as its interpretation, and an author must take his or her reader into account in writing a text. Hirsch explains as follows:

Even when the meaning which the speaker wishes to convey is unusual (and some aspects of his conveyed meaning will almost always be unique) he knows that in order to convey his meaning he must take into account his interpreter's probable understanding. If his interpreter's system of expectations and associations is to correspond to his own, he must adopt usages which will fulfill not only his own expectations but also those of his interpreter.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Hirsch 19.

<sup>44</sup> Hirsch 19.

Agee conceives of the book as a “cooperation” between author and reader. In a number of belabored passages the author confesses his inadequacies to represent “true truth,” imploring his readers to remain aware of his shortcomings and to provide his subjects with the benefit of the doubt. Agee beseeches the reader’s collaboration in his preface: “I must say to you, this is not a work of art or of entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of the artist or entertainer, but is a human effort which must require human co-operation.”<sup>45</sup> As this thesis will continue to stress, Agee’s transparency with his experimental recombination of generic conventions draws the reader’s attention to the limitations of representing the “true truth” he holds in such esteem.

*“Who Is Speaking Thus?”*

The question of whether an author may be *removed* from the text, or of whether a critic can indeed examine a text independently of its author, demands a brief reappraisal of Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and, to a lesser degree, Michel Foucault’s response “What Is an Author?” Barthes, in particular, favors the position held by Mallarmé, who argued that language itself, rather than the author who pens it, speaks to a reader. Mallarmé’s conception of “poetics” suppresses the author in the interest of writing, which by extension restores the role of the reader. Herein lies the theoretical vantage point from which the classification of Agee’s book as fiction, nonfiction, or something in between informs its reader of how to relate to its author. As a work of nonfiction, *Famous Men* bestows formidable power on the figure of Agee—the “spy” undercover as a journalist, the social scientist constructing his ethnography—whose writing is the evidence of his collected experiences. As a work of fiction, *Famous Men*

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<sup>45</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 98.

strips the author of a great deal of that power, restoring the reader to a position of authority, offering him only language itself with which to contend. Barthes approaches “The Death of the Author” as a critique of the discourse surrounding literature, actualized in the histories, biographies, and interviews concerning literature and literary fiction and of history, biography, and interview *qua* literature. The author who enters into his death in Barthes’ essay is one whose very utterance creates literature. The act of destruction of every point of origin, writing creates a space into which the “identity of the body writing” disappears. This includes the articulation of fact, the transformation of truth into narrative:

As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this connection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, Barthes argues that literature possesses the power to supersede the author who creates it. The author is a modern figure—in “ethnographic societies,” Barthes writes, a mediator or shaman *performs* a story; the performance is admired, but never the genius of the performer.<sup>47</sup> *Writing* functions as a *performative*, in the sense of this term’s use by J. L. Austin: an utterance that can be proven neither true or false but which, by virtue of the utterance itself, performs the promise conscripted in it. In a performative, explains Barthes, “enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered—something like the *declare* of kings or the *sing* of ancient poets.”<sup>48</sup> While positivism has attached inflated importance to the “personhood” of the author,

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<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image Music Text*, Ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) 142.

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 142.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 145-46.

Barthes argues that the act of writing by definition resists the influence of any authorial authority over the text.

This plays a beneficial role for the reader in multiple ways. First, the reader is validated when he or she is no longer compelled to search continuously for a text's hidden, or deeper, meaning. Positivism, which Barthes calls the "epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology," attaches grave importance to the personhood of the author, as we have just discussed. The *explanation* of a work is sought in the person who produced it.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the death of the author at the moment *writing* begins liberates the reader to contend with the text, without necessarily excavating it for meaning. Freedom from interpretation is a particularly crucial element of reading anthropologic texts, as the following section on fictocritical ethnography shall shortly explain; the modern anthropologist resists making interpretations of the cultures he inhabits, and thus ethnographic writing increasingly elects techniques of fiction in order to elide the author's invisible command.

Secondly, and by the same token, the explanation of a text provided by extension of its possessing an author figure imposes limitations on that text. "Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic," Barthes writes, "nor again the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined along with the Author."<sup>50</sup> The text that lends itself to criticism lends itself to explanation, and vice versa. Crucial to consider, too, are several "hypostases" of authorship Barthes here identifies: society, history, psyche, and liberty. In discussing the authorial figure of Agee, we must also acknowledge, and then resist, each of these. Society, history, psyche, and liberty function in the same way Foucault writes that the notion of a single author necessarily speaks to the predecessors and influences that contribute to his or her work: "To say that X's real name is actually Jacques Durand instead of Pierre Dupont is not the

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<sup>49</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 143.

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 147.

same as saying that Stendhal's name was Henri Beyle," Foucault muses.<sup>51</sup> The examinations that follow—Agee as journalist, Agee as ethnographer—seek not only to examine the author of *Famous Men* as a forebear of (post)modern literary techniques but also to liberate him from the chain of stylistic influence. Chronology, too, belongs in Barthes' list of authorial hypostases, often attributing techniques to trends and thereby enumerating the "final signified" that interprets a text. Criticism's positioning of an author in history too often lends to a sort of determinist reading of a text, and thus renders it closed.

Thirdly, Barthes argues that the author's relationship to the text is generally equated with that of a parent to his child. "The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it," writes Barthes.<sup>52</sup> This thesis argues that Agee's use of fictocriticism draws attention to the simultaneous development of both the text and of its author. In the case of *Famous Men*, the author thinks and suffers *for* the book but certainly not *before* it. To the contrary, Agee at many moments in the text appears to be under the command of the book, or at least of the writing of the book, rather than in an authoritative role presiding over it.

### *Foucault and Infallibility*

In "What Is An Author?", Michel Foucault borrows greatly from "The Death of the Author" as well as from Barthes' "Authors and Writers," to build upon the premise that writing—that is, *writing* the intransitive verb—begins at the moment of the author's death. Yet in typically Foucaultian fashion, the theorist evades providing an explicit answer to that question "*What is an author?*", entering, instead, into a circumlocutory

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<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?", *The Essential Foucault*, Ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003) 381.

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 145.

investigation of the author's relation to the text, of the delimitation of the author's *oeuvre*, and of the precise moment at which authorship begins. The notion of authorship Foucault critiques espouses the author as an infallible figure; only on the assumption of the sanctity of the author's words can the history of concepts, literary genres, and schools of philosophy—the tools of the literary critic—lose their efficacy in elucidating a text.

From the first lines of “What Is An Author?” Foucault critiques what he perceives as a phenomenon of authorial valorization even stronger than that to which Barthes alludes. “Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary, and superimposed scansions in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work,” Foucault begins.<sup>53</sup> This is of particular interest to our examination of Agee as writing within a contaminated generic space; Foucault views authorship as an even more direct point of entry to a text than the schools or styles out of which that text might emerge. While on the one hand Foucault's notion of authorship decontextualizes writing, it installs in the place of the history and philosophy surrounding writing an even higher barrier to entry: The author Foucault describes in the essay functions as a mediator between the reader and the text. The system of hierarchies imposed by the author's unerring influence on the text can be likened to that of a church, in which a system of clergymen stands between God and the layperson. As a result, the author assumes a “transcendental anonymity”:

Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character. To admit that writing is, because of the very history that made it possible, subject to the test of oblivion and repression, seems to represent, in transcendental terms, the religious principle of the hidden meaning (which requires

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 377

interpretation) and the critical principle of implicit signification, silent determinations, and obscured contents (which give rise to commentary).<sup>54</sup>

Here Foucault posits the idea that writing's transcendental status establishes and maintains two significant barriers to its approach by a reader: first, interpretation, the making of meaning, and second, demystification, the series of identifying and unraveling significations undertaken by the critic. The transcendental status that keeps these barriers in place is maintained by the author's supposed divinity. Remove this, and suddenly the role of the critic is dramatically altered; all efforts at interpretation are derailed.

Fictocriticism provides a tool by which such an exercise may be conducted.

*Famous Men* rises to confront the notion of the infallible author by fully embracing fiction's troubled—and dependent—relationship with its authors, precisely as Foucault describes it. As this thesis will later discuss in depth, Agee's awareness of the notion of authorial infallibility permeates the pages of *Famous Men*. The author takes pains to deflect the power bestowed upon him, with an unflagging sense of responsibility for and not a little guilt regarding the real-life people at the center of his study. *Famous Men*'s at times painstakingly self-aware prose reveals an author ill at ease with the tool he wields—that is, in fiction as in poetry as in journalism and anthropology—his language. Despite his impassioned, luxuriant prose, the author appears intimidated by the potential for harm latent in his writing. “Words could, I believe, be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit,” writes Agee in the theory-rich *On the Porch: 2*:

That is more than can be said of the instruments of any other art. But it must be added of words that they are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication, and that they come at many of the things which they alone can do by such a Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence...<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 380

<sup>55</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 209.

Agee's confessed unease with the use of language serves to remind the reader of the margin for error inherent in writing; *Famous Men's* lyrical, effusive style and particularly its winding streams of consciousness (Agee was known to write late into the night, and these passages are often said to reflect the sleeplessness and intoxication under which the author often worked) draw particular attention to the multiple potentialities and imprecisions inherent in language.<sup>56</sup> Just as photography, the art Agee may have admired most, is only a truthful means of recording insofar as the photographer selects just the right subject from just the right angle, permitting the correct aperture and length of exposure, so, too, is the act of writing the art of selection. Put another way, language's potentialities are vast; Agee was right, if not to be cautious in making his selections, at least to draw attention to the continual process of decision-making he as the author is obliged to undertake. Bestowing infallible authority upon the author presumes the author deftly and accurately selected each word as the best tool for the job and turns a blind eye to language's variations, significations, and shortcomings.

For Agee, it is the characters of his study, not the author, who are infallible in *Famous Men*. As Agee writes in his Preface, the book is "an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity."<sup>57</sup> Evans, for his part, attests of Agee: "After a while, in a round-about way, you discovered that, to him, human beings were at least possibly immortal and literally sacred souls."<sup>58</sup> The book, then, reflects an attempt to surrender authorial authority to its real-life subjects, of whom Agee was greatly in awe. This idea will be examined more fully in the discussion of *Famous Men* as a journalistic text, which appears in the second half of this thesis.

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<sup>56</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* ix.

<sup>57</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xviii.

<sup>58</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xv.

*The Inexorable Author*

Particularly since Flaubert, a vast subset of literary critics have argued for the superiority of objective, impersonal, dramatic modes of narration over those in which the author's voice can be clearly heard. Wayne Booth describes this discrepancy between an author's visibility and his or her subservience to the text as a question of *telling* versus *showing*. Flaubert, inheriting a tradition set by Honoré de Balzac, sought to achieve mimetic realism by virtue of *style*, which the author understood as the "soul of thought," as opposed to the form of a novel, merely the "body of thought." Style, Flaubert believed, should become the very content of the novel, suggesting that the ability of the novel to provide insight into "the nature of things" was not only entangled with but in fact contingent upon the depth of perception and stylistic craft of the author.<sup>59</sup> Booth perceived Flaubert's mode of "showing" as a shift in favor from earlier modes of narration, in which infallible narrators eschewed realism and subtleties of craft in order to "tell" the reader the "nature of things." Booth points to Homer to illustrate this early mode of narrative; a deeply reliable narrator, Homer explicates the motivations of his characters and the importance of the events unfolding in the narrative in opaque, incontestable terms.

Flaubert, however, is no more absent from *In Search of Lost Time* than Homer from *The Odyssey*. To varying degrees, an author's vision of the "nature of things" is perceptible to the reader who searches for it. As Booth argues, the judgment of the author "is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. Whether its particular forms are harmful or serviceable is always a complex question, a question that

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<sup>59</sup> Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.

cannot be settled by any easy reference to abstract rules.” While the author can, to some extent, choose the disguise he uses, Booth writes, “he can never choose to disappear.”<sup>60</sup>

Agee, of course, elects not to attempt disappearance at all. Booth examines the continued presence of the author in his assessment of the dramatized narrator; even clumsy intrusions, writes Booth, may be forgiven if the author can convince his or her reader that those intrusions are necessary. To illustrate, Booth calls up for examination the Montaigne, or the portrait of Montaigne, who emerges out of the literary *Essays*. Like Agee, Montaigne’s style is rambling, digressive, and replete with the author’s own personality and opinion. As Booth argues, Montaigne’s writing coheres as a consequence of the “consistently inconsistent” character of the author himself. Montaigne “paints himself” in the descriptions of his personality and physical characteristics, yet, more valuably, he also gives the reader “a running account of the writing of the book as it is written, and thus a running portrait of his character as a writer.”<sup>61</sup> That characteristic blending in Montaigne’s work of critical essay, opinion, personal reflection, and literary play points, of course, directly to fictocriticism, of which Montaigne has sometimes been called the grandfather.<sup>62</sup>

Questions of representation and mimesis raised by Flaubert and the realist literary tradition inspire a valuable discussion in regard to Agee’s experimental writing. In his idea-laden interlude “On the Porch: 2,” Agee writes that he owes his fondness for the camera to its literal, scientific inability to record anything but “absolute, dry truth”; the written word, while capable of conveying anything within human conceit, is nonetheless “the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication.”<sup>63</sup>

However, the author states explicitly that his concerns regarding the writer’s (in

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<sup>60</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* 8.

<sup>61</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* 226.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Muecke, “Cultural Studies’ Networking Strategies in the South,” *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008), <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/muecke.html>>.

<sup>63</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 206, 209.

particular, the journalist's) ability to represent truth is not meant to invoke a discussion of naturalism or realism, though, he concedes, "here may be the sharpest and most slippery watershed within this first discussion."<sup>64</sup> In writing of the "straight naturalist," Agee indulges in a passionate digression into his own conceptions of the value and complications in literary representation:

[The naturalist's] work even at best is never much more than documentary. Not that documentary has not great dignity and value; it has and as good 'poetry' can be extracted from it as from living itself: but the documentation is not of itself either poetry or music and it is not, of itself, of any value equivalent to theirs. [...] it is important that your representation of 'reality' does not sag into, or become one with, naturalism; and in so far as it does, you have sinned, that is, you have fallen short even of the relative truth you have perceived and intended.<sup>65</sup>

This is one of several moments in the text in which Agee admits his disinterest in the documentary form; elsewhere, his preoccupation lies solely in making truthful recordings—an occupation often linked to documentary, or nonfiction, writings (ethnographies, field recordings, sometimes journal entries, journalistic dispatches, inter alia, all of which Agee draws upon in writing *Famous Men*). Some moments in the book pay painstaking attention to detail, painting with every last modicum of precision a portrait of these families' lives and living spaces, more painstakingly than any reader of would expect of naturalist literature. For instance, the section "Shelter," which perhaps best resembles a traditional ethnographic text, assiduously describes each room of the Gudger family home, cataloguing their dimensions and materials, each bucket and washbasin, as well as every odor and texture the author senses. "I want to take these four rooms one by one, and give at least a certain rough idea of what is in each of them and of what each is 'like,'" the author writes. Agee's quotational use of the word *like*, however, betrays a sense of skepticism of description largely absent from this chapter but which is

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<sup>64</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 207.

<sup>65</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 210.

echoed with regularity throughout the rest of the text. Elsewhere in “Shelter,” Agee admits in a footnote: “Invention here: I did not make inventory; there was more than I can remember.”<sup>66</sup> In a passage seemingly crafted with scrupulous attention to detail, Agee’s admission here is a surprising one. It serves, however, to remind the reader that the conflict between genres apparent in *Famous Men* is hardly a case of binary opposition; that is to say, “fiction” and “nonfiction” are not so much opposites as they are concepts bleeding into one another.

As David Lodge stresses in *The Language of Fiction*, even the novelist must account for the reader’s conceptions and understanding of reality as he wields the literary tools at his disposal. Unlike the poet, the novelist is bound by contingencies; the success of the novelist is measured by his ability to construct a world “in which every action or utterance contributes to our understanding of any other.” In fact, writes Lodge, the reader of fiction demands even greater consistency and logic than can be expected of the real world.<sup>67</sup> In response to J. M. Cameron’s assertion that “[w]hat is said and how it is said are not distinguishable,” Lodge suggests that the search for mimetic representation of the world in the novel—a world characterized by chance, coincidence, multiplicity and open-endedness—is a futile one. These things can never be duplicated in the novel, in which the author “cannot avoid selection and emphasis, and the aesthetic effects which follow. He must limit the reader’s expectations of documentary provenance for the events described.”<sup>68</sup>

Lodge’s shorthand “these words in this order” tips its hat to Cameron’s valuable argument: “The poetic description has the form of a description; but it exists only as *this* description.”<sup>69</sup> That poetry alone enjoys the equivalence of content and form is precisely

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<sup>66</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 116.

<sup>67</sup> David Lodge, *The Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2002) 34.

<sup>68</sup> Lodge 44.

<sup>69</sup> Lodge 39.

what Lodge pushes against. The medium of writing is language, and the novelist, like the poet, has only language at his disposal. The critic is inclined to regard a writer as someone who *tells* something, not as someone who *makes* something; this inclination is stronger in regards to the novelist than it is to the poet. Yet the writer's use of language is limited by the associations his reader has made before approaching the text. Writes Lodge, "The writer's medium differs from the media of most other arts—pigment, stone, musical notes, etc.—in that it is never virgin; words come to the writer already violated by other men, impressed with meanings derived from the world of common experience."<sup>70</sup>

Agee's unconventional mode of writing attempts to account for all of these: for the inaccuracy of the written word, for the incontingencies of the real world and their unfavorability in literature, for the meanings of language derived outside of— independently from—the text, and by extension, the incommunicability of the unique experience of the author. *Famous Men* is a record of the lived experience of its author, so assuming Barthes' argument to be true, how is the reader to account for Agee's "death" in the text? Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" offers one feasible interpretation, echoed in the intellectual imperative that has brought fictocriticism to the favor of writers (in particular, ethnographers) in the field of anthropology, which we will examine shortly. Like Barthes' conception of the shaman or mediator in "ethnographic societies," the storyteller is deemed successful by virtue of the experiences he provides, rather than by his articulation or accuracy.<sup>71</sup> Benjamin conceives of "storytelling" as the exchanging of experiences, and he argues that the act of storytelling takes the experience of the storyteller and makes it the experience of those who are listening to the story. By

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<sup>70</sup> Lodge 50.

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, "Death of the Author" 142.

contrast, the novelist practices a solitary art, wholly unable to transfer his experiences to his audience. Writes Benjamin:

The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life.

Benjamin shortly adds:

If now and then, in the course of the centuries, efforts have been made [...] to implant instruction in the novel, these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form. The *Bildungsroman*, on the other hand, does not deviate in any way from the basic structure of the novel. *The legitimacy it provides stands in direct opposition to reality.*<sup>72</sup> [Emphasis mine.]

Benjamin's "storyteller" offers two ways of understanding Agee's role as *Famous Men's* flesh-and-blood author-narrator, finding his footing on the border between fiction and nonfiction. First, as a storyteller, rather than as the author of fiction, Agee surrenders his own experience in order for his retelling to become, instead, the experience of the reader. The text of *Famous Men* reflects two sets of entangled experiences: that of living among three farmers' families in rural Depression-era Alabama, alongside fellow outsider Evans, as well as the experience of writing the text (itself a psychologically and intellectually taxing experience). In answering Muecke's question, "How did the author get here?", Agee surrenders his experience as a writer to be experienced by the reader. Second, in storytelling, rather than in fiction, Agee necessarily dodges the contingencies routinely demanded of the authors of fiction. Thus the author elides the reader's expectations for fictional worlds created in fictional texts, drawing his audience's attention, instead, to the

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<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 87-88.

coincidences and circumstances that contribute to the construction of his own experiences.

The following chapters probe the methods by which Agee manipulates literary language and modes of written representation in order to reflect, truthfully, the lives and circumstances of three tenant families, as well as his own experiences living among them. To best examine *Famous Men* as a fictocritical text, these chapters will explore Agee's techniques of "fictionalization" as they are countered by modes of objectivity and critical inquiry. First, the thesis will examine the book as a work of journalism, in which the author elects the techniques of fiction in order to avoid "selling somebody out," to borrow Joan Didion's phrase. Secondly, the thesis will examine *Famous Men* as an ethnographic text, taking a look at fictocriticism's popularity in the field of anthropology, particularly in Australia and Canada, as a means of protection and of surrendering the implied sovereignty of the author of ethnographic texts.

## Part 2: Fictocriticism Applied to Genre

*Is there such a cleavage between the 'scientific' and the 'artistic'? Isn't every human being both a scientist and an artist; and in writing of human experience, isn't there a good deal to be said for recognizing that fact and for using both methods?*

Agee, *Famous Men* 213

### 2.0 Introduction

The second portion of this thesis proceeds from the notion that the author can, in fact, never fully disappear from a text. As Booth argues in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the author's judgment is always present in a text and accessible to the reader who knows how to look for it; *Famous Men* strips away the attempts of journalism and most early-modern ethnography to hide the author and his or her judgment, exposing the devices with which the author transfers that judgment to the text and, by extension, the reader. Fictocriticism serves to take the immutability of the author into account for the sake of the reader, emphasizing the text as a constructed work and the act of writing as a process of construction, in order to raise the reader's conscious awareness of the artifice of the author's total authority.

In order to examine the function of such authority—and the consequences of its surrender—the following section will consider two modes of writing in which the authority of the author is assumed by genre, the conventions of which are appropriated by Agee in *Famous Men*: journalism and ethnographic writing. It will also examine the motivations for and consequences of the surrender of authority in both of these genres.

Primarily, it will emphasize the humanitarian function of fictocritical writing. Given that Agee continually returns to the notion of his book as an effort, as he writes, “to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense,” one cannot consider the text’s generically unconventional style simply as a painstaking attempt to shrug off Agee’s authority, but also to restore it, at least in part, to the subjects of his study.<sup>73</sup>

The limitations of space prevent this thesis from examining *Famous Men* as a history, and certainly Agee would not have wished for it to represent an entire historical moment (speaking only for only an author, two journalists, or three families poses problem enough for the author). However, the discipline of historiography, grappling with many of the same questions as ethnography and journalism, offers a few potential answers. The historian and theorist Hayden White describes the impossible task of “realistic” representation as “*the* problem for modern historiography”; certainly if such a problem were to be solved the practices of anthropological and journalistic writing would look quite different as well.<sup>74</sup> White’s work and, specifically, his influential book *Metahistory*, first published in 1973, provide a lens through which to understand the social sciences as structures of explanation, the means of which are largely imprecise. White defines the historical text as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them.*”<sup>75</sup> White’s work examines the modes of representation by which history is recorded by means of the narrative conventions of historiography, and both White’s *Metahistory* and *The Fiction of Narrative* address the ways in which historiography necessarily employs narrative and

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<sup>73</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xviii.

<sup>74</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 3.

<sup>75</sup> White, *Metahistory* 2.

verbal structures to create explanations rather than allowing for explanations to guide the creation of narratives. A similar problem occurs in the field of anthropology, which this thesis will shortly address in greater. Given that interpretation poses one of the most rigorous challenges to the study of anthropology and the construction of ethnographic texts, the task of the writer of this social science is to create a verbal structure that does not rely upon interpretation, but, rather, offers interpretation only as a consequence.

This, too, is Agee's challenge, expressed it to the reader in no less daunting terms throughout *Famous Men*. "My main hope," Agee states, "is to state the central subject and my ignorance from the start, and to manage to indicate that no one can afford to treat any human subject more glibly or to act on any less would-be central basis."<sup>76</sup> It is perhaps worth reiterating that at the crux of Agee's fictocriticism is the imprecision of the medium of language, which, as was discussed in the previous section of this thesis, was a matter of great import to the author, who of course had been dispatched to Alabama on a journalistic venture. Agee admired and envied the medium of photography, which he believed to be "incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth," and the author was skeptical of the capacity of language to convey a truthful account of the lives of real people.<sup>77</sup> 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. In "On the Porch: 2," Agee describes the four planes on which he comprehends his own experience, the basis for *Famous Men*. Agee lists and describes these as follows:

That of recall; of reception, contemplation, *in media res*: for which I have set up this silence under darkness on this front porch as a sort of fore-stage to which from time to time the action may have occasion to return.

'As it happened': the straight narrative at the prow as from the first to last day it cut unknown water.

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<sup>76</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 105.

<sup>77</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 206.

By recall and memory from the present: which is a part of the experience: and this includes imagination, which in the other planes I swear myself against.

As I try to write it: problems of recording; which, too, are an organic part of the experience as a whole.<sup>78</sup>

A skilled fieldworker, Agee describes these four planes of authorial experience with thoughtful attention to the scope of difficulty facing the writer of “nonfiction.” The author also makes sustained efforts to address each of them throughout the novel, most often by means of its fictocritical form. First, by continually drawing the reader back to the front porch (also the locus of Agee’s speculation and philosophizing), the reader is reminded that the work is by and large a product of memory and hindsight even in his day-to-day experience in the homes and fields of rural Alabama; the reader is left to judge for him or herself the verisimilitude of Agee’s memory. Perhaps Agee also intends to call attention to the memories of the author in the moment of recording, which may have clouded or otherwise altered his perception of the events *in media res*. Third on Agee’s list are problems of recall “in the present,” which points to the author’s difficulty of reconstructing the events as they happened after they happened, in the process of constructing the book. Both of these point to moments of vulnerability in which the objectivity of nonfiction texts is likely to be compromised.

However, certain gaps in Agee’s description of the inherent errata of nonfiction writing must be addressed here as well. As the author himself writes, the items on this list “are, obviously, in strong conflict.”<sup>79</sup> Second of Agee’s planes of experience refers to the events “as [they] happened,” suggesting that certain facts can be neither disputed nor muddled by misunderstanding.<sup>80</sup> These facts are, of course, subject to precisely the errors in recollection Agee references in his first point. Consider, for example, the detailed, seemingly scientific description Agee provides of the interior of the Gudger home; the

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<sup>78</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 215.

<sup>79</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 214-15.

<sup>80</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 215.

author later admits, in footnote, that these descriptions are pure fabrications inspired by his memory of the house.<sup>81</sup> However, *Famous Men* identifies and, ultimately, quite broadly defines its own concept of “truth” in writing (“true truths”), founded upon the unwavering attempt to preserve the humanity of individual lives—something indeed quite difficult to represent in writing.

Finally, Agee’s fourth plane of experience, the act of collecting a record, contains all of these. Recording is as vulnerable to prior experience as it is to revisionist memory, reflecting both the memory of an experience—in this case, Agee’s Alabama fieldwork—as well as the very process of writing. Agee writes extemporaneously in *Famous Men* about the process of writing the book, and his account serves to remind the reader that text, unlike photography, is not captured *in media res*. Joan Didion describes the procedure of reviewing her notes after the fact in the essay “On Keeping a Notebook,” confessing that the goal of her keeping a notebook has never been to maintain a factual record and admitting that she has been caught fabricating or embellishing the truth.<sup>82</sup> It is with this self-implicating tone, too, that Didion reveals the heart of her argument: “Our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable ‘I.’”<sup>83</sup> Didion is quick to draw a distinction between the sort of notebook that is of interest to her essay and another type that is for “public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful penseses.”<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, Didion’s essay illustrates the limitations not only of journalistic or ethnographic texts, which present as nonfiction a series of observations collected from a single vantage point, but also the limitations of research, itself selected and curated on the basis of its interest to the author.

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<sup>81</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 116.

<sup>82</sup> Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961) 2.

<sup>83</sup> Didion 3.

<sup>84</sup> Didion 3.

Barthes describes a similar experience in his own account of keeping a journal, “Deliberation,” a sort of precursor to Didion’s essay. Barthes describes returning to his journal to review what he has written the previous day and experiencing the feeling that it has “turned,” like milk on its first day or spoilage. Barthes describes perceiving his own sincerity as artifice, his spontaneity as artistically dissatisfying, and himself as a writer in a sort of “pose” that he hadn’t intended; he writes that “in a journal situation, and precisely because it doesn’t ‘work’—doesn’t get transformed by the action of a work—I is a *poseur*: a matter of effect, not of intention, the whole difficulty of literature is here.”<sup>85</sup> In this case, Barthes identifies (unintended) artifice and insincerity in his own writing nearly immediately after committing his experiences to record in his journal.

Agee’s four planes of experience “are, obviously, in strong conflict,” Agee writes, but with the caveat: “So is any piece of human experience. So then, inevitably, is any even partially accurate attempt to give any experience as a whole.”<sup>86</sup> Agee’s planes of experience are indeed in conflict with one another, but so, too, is perception inaccurate, memory unreliable, experience limited, and analysis subjective. Does awareness of these negate the value of attempting to represent truth in writing? Agee appears to argue otherwise. Consider the following passage, in which the author refers to *Famous Men* as if it were an historical record:

It seems likely at this stage that the truest way to treat a piece of the past is as such : as if it were no longer the present. In other words, the ‘truest’ thing about the experience is now neither that it was from hour thus and so, nor is it my fairly accurate ‘memory’ of how it was from hour to hour in chronological progression, but it is rather *as it turns up in recall*, in no such order, casting its lights and associations forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Roland Barthes, “Deliberation,” *The Rustle of Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986) 359.

<sup>86</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 215.

<sup>87</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 215.

This passage represents two sentiments that Agee expresses throughout the book. The first is the author's continued insistence on the value of emotional truth, particularly as it protects the humanity of his subjects. Agee in this passage reveals a greater concern for the authenticity of emotion and the emotional ramifications of true events than of the verifiability of the events themselves. Secondly, Agee here articulates a defense of the art of retelling by sheer virtue of its value *as art*. Art and the imagination can be harmful, the author writes in *Famous Men*, but they also "advance and assist the human race, and make an opening in the darkness around it."<sup>88</sup> Agee's book thus provides an impassioned defense for the art and craft of recall and recollection, even if it is unreliable.

## 2.1 "True Truth": *Famous Men* as Journalism

[H]ave been assigned to do a story on: a sharecropper family (daily & yearly life): and also a study of Farm Economics in the South (impossible for me): and also on the several efforts to help the situation: i.e. Govt. and state work; theories & wishes of Southern liberals; whole story of the 2 Southern Unions. Best break I ever had on *Fortune*. Feel terrific personal responsibility toward story; considerable doubts of my ability to bring it off; considerable more of *Fortune's* ultimate willingness to use it as it seems (in the theory) to me.<sup>89</sup>

So writes Agee in a letter in 1936, shortly before embarking on his journey to Alabama with Evans. The letter is a perfect summary of the author's obligations to the magazine, his creeping sense of his unworthiness of the task, and his premonition that the work would ultimately not be one of journalism. Indeed, *Fortune* never published Agee's Alabama record, neither the condensed record he originally submitted to the magazine nor the sprawling 400-plus-page testimony it became.

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<sup>88</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 205.

<sup>89</sup> James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (New York: George Braziller, 1962) 92.

Given both the author's opinion of journalism as a profession and the nature of his approach to the Alabama assignment, one can only assume Agee would be aghast at the notion of *Famous Men* as a work of journalism. Despite being a writer for *Fortune*, the magazine founded in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, and despite building a respected career in popular film criticism, Agee's relationship with the profession of journalism was—like his relationship to many things—a troubled one. In *Famous Men*, that sense of conflict between the writer and his supposed field rises to the surface primarily in those passages in which the author addresses the question of the text's verifiable accuracy. In "On the Porch: II," Agee argues vehemently against the conception that journalism—purportedly the vehicle driving his investigation of the tenant farming lifestyle—by definition reveals more truth than it does engender fictions. Journalism, Agee writes, "is true in the sense that everything is true to the state of being and to what conditioned and produced it (which is also, but less so perhaps, a limitation of art and science): but that is about as far as its value goes." All truth, Agee goes on to argue, is necessarily relative, which is no fault of journalism itself. Rather, Agee argues, the conventional mode of journalistic writing is "a very broad and successful form of lying." Strip journalism of lying, Agee writes, "and you no longer have journalism."<sup>90</sup>

*Lying* is a word Agee uses in the book sparingly and imbues with great negative weight. In one passage, Agee writes that while it is impossible to know the full truth, it is crucial to admit and to take advantage of knowing certain few truths because it is never wise "to educate a human being toward a good end by telling him lies."<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere, Agee writes the he is "reluctant to entirely lie," despite his admission that certain elements of his description are entirely fabricated.<sup>92</sup> By adopting a stylized, estranging, and indeed largely fictionalized form for his work of reportage, Agee makes a greater

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<sup>90</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 207.

<sup>91</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 221.

<sup>92</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 117.

claim about the veracity of journalistic texts as a genre. This distinction between the “true truth,” which Agee suggests can, indeed, be something of an invention, and lying, which in the case of journalism takes the form of “objective” facts, is one which assists to explain fictocriticism as a tool for cautious—if even reluctant—journalism.

Much like the role of the sensitive anthropologist Agee inhabits in the following chapter, Agee the journalist fictionalizes his reportage as a means of protecting and venerating true, individual lives. Trilling’s famous review of *Famous Men*, “Greatness with One Fault in It,” is largely critical of the book for reasons that will be shortly discussed, but even Trilling is sympathetic to Agee’s uncomfortable position as a journalist. “[T]he attitude of clear, cool investigation had been manifestly impossible,” Trilling explains in his review, acknowledging the considered reasoning behind the book’s highly unconventional form. “You cannot be cool about misery so intense, nor clear about people with whom you have lived.”<sup>93</sup> This chapter acknowledges Agee’s great literary aspirations, which no doubt contributed to the uniqueness and beauty of his book; it will argue that the primary impetus behind *Famous Men*’s fictocriticism, however, is the book’s very real human content.

### *Agee’s Heirs: New Journalism*

In the realm of journalism, flirtation with the boundaries of verifiable fact and literary play is very often subsumed under the heading *New Journalism*, which came into popular use long after Agee and Evans’ Alabama expedition and even the author’s death, following the tumultuous events of the late 1960s in America and around the world. Beyond its value as an intellectual exercise, the comparison of Agee’s work to that of the

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<sup>93</sup> Trilling 99.

New Journalists provides an additional window into the functionality of its form.

Whereas journalism was a profession of which Agee writes with great disdain in *Famous Men*—“I do not wish to appear to speak favorably of journalism. I have never yet seen a piece of journalism which conveyed more than the slightest fraction of what any even moderately reflective and sensitive person would mean and intend by those inachievable words”—New Journalists such as Joan Didion and Gay Talese may have felt more at ease with the profession.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, their aspirations, like Agee’s, went beyond the those of newspaper or magazine journalism, and their writing reflects the same effort to convey far more than the hard, objective facts.

Agee’s popularity has only increased since the publication of *Famous Men* in 1941. The author’s premature death in 1955 and the posthumous publication of his Pulitzer prize-winning autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family* boosted the writer’s fame tremendously. Scholarship in the years since has become ever more common and complimentary of the author, whose complete works (including a new edition of *A Death in the Family*) were published in 2007. This is not to say that the fictocritical style of *Famous Men* set off a movement in journalistic or fact-based writing; to the contrary, it appears that Agee was simply experimenting with and manipulating modes of reportage ahead of his time. One of the first major published works examining Agee and his writing, Kenneth Seib’s *James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment* foreshadows the writer’s delayed popularity. Written on the eve of the New Journalism movement in 1968, the biography argues that, like that of Gustav Mahler, “Agee’s time seems about to come.”<sup>95</sup>

The benefit of applying Wolfe’s term *New Journalism* to Agee’s writing is that it frames a series of trends unfolding in nonfiction and magazine writing in the late 1960s in such a way that it considers a movement motivated by a common impetus, rather than as

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<sup>94</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 207

<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Seib, *James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment (Critical Essays in Modern Literature)* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968) ix-x.

the output of a string of writers experimenting independently with the limitations of journalistic objectivity. Indeed, the inspiration behind New Journalism and the collision of events surrounding its genesis mirror the particularities of Agee's work and time, and the concerns of writers such as those collected under New Journalism's broad umbrella in many ways echo the tortured rhetoric with which Agee justifies the style of *Famous Men*. In particular, the (in)famous argument raised by Didion in the first pages of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* springs to mind: Agee seems acutely aware throughout his book that, as Didion states, "Writers are always selling somebody out." Didion's assertion will be discussed in greater detail below.

"New Journalism" is the most famous of several terms used interchangeably to describe modes of journalism that borrow from the conventions of narrative fiction or the novel; these include *the literature of fact* and, in book-length form, the *nonfiction novel*, among others. The appellation "New Journalism" is most often attributed to Tom Wolfe, himself the author of numerous unconventional journalistic texts and the editor of a compilation of representative essays published in 1973 and published under that name. Key figures of Wolfian New Journalism—that is, Wolfe's contemporaries and colleagues writing in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, all of whose work is sampled in the 1973 compilation—include Didion, Talese, Capote, George Plimpton, and Hunter S. Thompson. The work of these writers was widely circulated in magazines such as *New York*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's*, rather than in daily newspapers, pointing to a distinction between traditional ("hard") news and the long-form magazine journalism that these writers helped to popularize. The sprawl of these author's work and the depth of their reportage—investigative, often speculative, and personal in nature, rather than distanced and depersonalized—lent itself not only to the pages of these popular magazines but to the form of the novel-length book. Many of the most enduring pieces of

New Journalism from its early years in the 60s and 70s are book-length projects, novelistic in tone—consider, for example, Mailer’s *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* or Thompson’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—precursors to a hugely popular faction of writing published (and purchased) today.

Like Agee, many of these writers aspired to careers in literature rather than in journalism, which may also have contributed to the ease with which these authors constructed narrative and characterization or other techniques of fiction in their journalistic writing. Wolfe’s written accounts of the emergence of New Journalism call repeated attention to the evolution of the business and profession of journalism and, perhaps most importantly, to the emergence of the journalistic celebrity. The novelistic techniques of these writers appears to have contributed to their success; of all the writers Wolfe cites in “The Birth of ‘The New Journalism,’” his “eyewitness account” of the phenomenon published in *New York* magazine, the great majority remain American household names today along with the titles of their book-length investigations (*In Cold Blood*, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Mailer’s *The Fight*, Talese’s *The Kingdom and the Power*, inter alia). Wolfe describes his contemporaries as follows:

What they had in common was that they all regarded the newspaper as a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph. The idea was to get a job on a newspaper, keep body and soul together, pay the rent, get to know ‘the world,’ accumulate ‘experience,’ perhaps work some of the fat off your style—then, at some point, quit cold, say goodbye to journalism, move into a shack somewhere, work night and day for six months, and light up the sky with the final triumph. The final triumph was known as The Novel.<sup>96</sup>

In turn an investigative journalist, film critic, poet, screenwriter, and only posthumously a novelist, Agee seems to have written and spoken little about the aspirations of becoming

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<sup>96</sup> Tom Wolfe, “The Birth of ‘The New Journalism’; Eyewitness Report by Tom Wolfe,” *New York Magazine*, New York Media LLC, 14 February 1972 <<http://nymag.com/news/media/47353/>> 8 August 2014.

the Great American Novelist his successors in the 1960s and 70s demonstrated. Agee's letters to James Harold Flye, a Catholic priest and a lifelong mentor and father figure to the writer, nonetheless reveal Agee to have been hugely ambitious throughout his short writing and personal life. That ambition took the form of his desire to be, as he expressed to Flye, the possessor of a distinct literary voice with a "musical" quality; it is also evident in his relentless pursuit of a literary form that could protect and do justice to the subjects of his journalistic work.<sup>97</sup>

The extent to which these writers took liberties with the facts in their books and articles remains unclear, and perhaps it is a matter of little importance. For Agee, the last defender of the practice of journalism, the value in emotional accuracy appears to have far outweighed that of objectivity and critical distance. Well into the book, Agee writes that his "most serious effort will be, not to use these 'materials' for art, far less for journalism, but *to give them as they were and as in my memory and regard they are.*"<sup>98</sup> This serves as an admission that the facts on the ground in Alabama may indeed have been something other than their recollection in "memory and regard." The author, however, honors the truths in both.

One other significant parallel links Agee with the New Journalists, and that is the specificity of his historical setting in a tumultuous era in American history. In his book *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*, John Hollowell argues that the New Journalists wrote their sensational, fictionalized pieces in response to the turbulent 1960s, in which, as the author explains, "'reality' became more fantastic than the fictional novel."<sup>99</sup> Hollowell is not alone in this assessment; many of the individuals associated with the movement have expressed a sort of envy of the events unfolding on

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<sup>97</sup> Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* 47.

<sup>98</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 213.

<sup>99</sup> John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) 5.

the national and international stage. “It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination,” Philip Roth wrote early in the movement. “The actuality is continually outdoing our talents.”<sup>100</sup>

The era of the Great Depression, in which Agee became even more deeply embedded with his Alabama mission, offers a similar sense of crisis and upheaval; testimony of the nature of Roth’s suggests that this era, too, was a turning point for the American writer. Consider this description of the time, from Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds*:

Life at once seemed so different in tone, in the very consciousness that sustained it, that all conventional values were suddenly uprooted and many of them seemed cheap. Society was no longer a comfortable abstraction, but a series of afflictions; the crazy rhythms of dissolution gave one the sense that people, like their cherished illusions, were submitting without direction, submitting in a collective stupor of the will.<sup>101</sup>

Kazin, an admirer of Agee’s (long before it was the fashion, it is perhaps worth noting), confesses in *On Native Grounds* that every generation of American writers confronts its own set of problems that seem, to the critic with historical distance and especially to the writers themselves, to varying degrees revolutionary. He argues, however, that many Depression-era writers seem to have been compelled by a newfound sense of responsibility. Kazin writes of post-Depression American writers: “They were moved by an unconscious conflict between their desire to reorganize society and their struggles to survive in it; between the revolutionary subjects they often employed and their frightened and even sadistic use of them.”<sup>102</sup> Kazin could very well have been writing about Agee specifically: tangled in his own ambition and the desire to show his readers this

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<sup>100</sup> Hollowell 5.

<sup>101</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, 1942 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970) 363-64.

<sup>102</sup> Kazin 369.

disenfranchised sliver of American society, but also in the desire to protect and defend very the people his book puts on display.

*“Writers Are Always Selling Somebody Out”*

In *James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment*, Seib calls attention to the crippling anxiety and depression reflected in Agee’s letters to Flye during his early days at *Fortune* magazine, noting that this period of psychological unsettlement—one of many in Agee’s life—appears to have coincided with one of relative success and recognition for his work as a journalist. The confluence of Agee’s success and his unwieldy sense of responsibility comes as perhaps no surprise. Seib describes a writer for whom the disdain for traditional journalism ushered in success and contributed to a unique and severe personal turmoil:

During his final year at Harvard in 1932, Agee wrote a parody of *Time* magazine, which, along with a recommendation from Dwight Macdonald, resulted in a job offer as a cub reporter for *Fortune*. He accepted the position and worked for *Fortune* until 1939. For a young man with poetic ambitions, an excursion into the world of commercial journalism must have seemed like a destructive compromise. He admitted to friends that he was working ‘in a whorehouse.’ On the other hand, ‘there was also no doubt,’ W.M. Frohock points out, ‘that he took great satisfaction in concocting, out of the most recalcitrant technical materials, what have to be called masterpieces of that kind of journalism.’<sup>103</sup>

“That kind of journalism,” one is left to infer, is the writing that reflects Agee’s “compromise”; to some degree it reflects his poetic ambitions as well as his journalistic achievements. If, as Agee wrote, “journalism is true in the sense that everything is true to the state of being and to what conditioned and produced it,” this is the “truth” the writer sought to make the basis of *Famous Men*. The limitations of journalistic truthfulness the author indicates in this quotation draw the simple distinction between truthfulness and

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<sup>103</sup> Seib 6.

authenticity. Consider, furthermore, this comment from the first pages of *Famous Men*, in which the author appears to size up the task at hand:

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives on an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of ‘honest journalism.’<sup>104</sup>

While on the one hand Agee here admits a sense of resistance to his task as a journalist, this quotation also prefaces Agee’s attempt at surmounting that task. It is a rather fitting epigraph, in other words, to a work that takes pains to establish a mode of “honest journalism” that captures the process of living with and writing about a segment of the population with whom the author shares next to nothing and for whom he feels enormous sympathy. Agee’s journalism favors the authenticity not of facts but of the (in this case) jarring experience out of which that journalism is produced. It is perhaps for this reason that the author of *Famous Men* continually reminds the reader of the fabrications in the text, and that he writes extensively and with great aplomb about his own experiences living among the three families. The author’s distinction between falsehoods and “true truth” captures Agee at his most painstaking, contorting himself into feats of self-justification on behalf of himself, a writer of poetic ambitions at work in a “whorehouse,” and also of the subjects of his study, about whom he writes with compassion, fondness, and, all told, great reserve.<sup>105</sup> “All that each person is, and experiences, and shall never experience, in body and in mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself and

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<sup>104</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 5.

<sup>105</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 203.

of one root, and are identical,” Agee writes, “and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced.”<sup>106</sup>

Didion clarified her statement about writers “selling somebody out” in a 2006 interview with the Academy of Achievement, explaining that a writer “will always see [other people] from a slightly different angle than they see themselves, and they feel a little betrayed by that.”<sup>107</sup> In writing about the farmer George Gudger, of whom Agee appears to feel great respect, the writer admits to knowing that his portrayal of the man will fail to match Gudger’s own understanding of who he is. Recognizing the limitations of his singular vantage point, Agee resigns himself to writing about his *perception* of Gudger rather than about the real man. “I am confident of being able to get at a certain form of the truth about him, only *if* I am as faithful as possible to Gudger as I know him, to Gudger as, in his actual flesh and life (but there again always in my mind’s and memory’s eye) he is,” Agee writes. “But of course it will be only a relative truth.” The author adds, “Name me one truth within human range that is not relative and I will feel a shade more apologetic of that.”<sup>108</sup> Like Didion, Agee’s relationship to “selling somebody out” is one of resignation and ironic acceptance. Rather than adopting the detachment of a journalist, observing without commenting, Agee elects to enhance the subjectivity of his observations in order to argue the relativity of the truths collected in the book as a whole.

### *Des Temps Forts*

As Hollowell writes in *Fact & Fiction*, the responsibility of the journalist is to select what the French critic Jean Mouton calls *des temps forts*, or the significant moments. In the

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<sup>106</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 51.

<sup>107</sup> “Joan Didion Interview,” *Academy of Achievement*, 3 June 2006

<<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/did0int-1>> 31 January 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 211.

case of *In Cold Blood*, Hollowell explains, Capote could not have recorded all of the events of the Clutters' lives or have recorded every detail at his disposal regarding their murderers.<sup>109</sup> In selecting *des temps forts*, Capote necessarily constructs and shapes the narrative of his story and sways the perceptions and suspicions of his readers as well. In *Famous Men*, Agee describes the process of selecting *des temps forts* using the metaphor of relaying a true story to a friend; the storyteller, possessive of an irrepressible sense of invention, collects and shapes the facts of the story to his or her liking. Agee writes that the process of authorial invention results inevitably from three factors: first, from the writer's need, as a "part-artist," to create; second, from the reader's conviction that art is necessarily a fiction; and third, from the "weight of the art tradition," which deifies imagination and cleaves—right or wrong, science from art. In talking to a friend, notes Agee, "you are in part, and he knows you are in part, selecting or inventing toward his color—but your whole effort, at which you both may be willing and interested to spend a great deal of time, is to reduce these half-inventions more and more towards the truth."<sup>110</sup>

Crucially, it is these half-inventions Agee appears to admire and embrace. Here, again, Vaihinger's *Philosophy of "As If"* returns to relevance. The inventions of the storyteller relating a true event to a friend serve a function the logic of his story; likewise, Agee's inventions—be they total fabrications or merely shapings and selections—lend the reader the material by which, acting "as if" they were true, knowledge could be gained about these true-to-life individuals living in 1936 Alabama. Vaihinger explains this process as follows:

Actually the greatest and most important human errors originate through thought-processes being taken for copies of reality itself; but the ultimate practical agreement of our ideas and judgments with so-called 'things' still does not justify the conclusion that the processes by which the logical result has been obtained are the same as objective

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<sup>109</sup> Hollowell 71.

<sup>110</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 212-13.

events. On the contrary *their utility is manifested in the very fact that the logical functions, working according to their own laws, do constantly coincide in the end with reality.*<sup>111</sup>

By adopting a novelist's characterization, scene-setting, and tone of voice, Agee acknowledges the impossibility of the task of translating reality to the page, paying respect to the real-life individuals whose lives are to be represented in a single man's writing. He also establishes a logical foundation upon which the reader may glean new understanding of the individuals at the core of his study.

Agee may have been something of a reluctant journalist, but his work exhibits the same commitment to emotional honesty evident in the oeuvres of great novelists. However, Agee's text is emotionally honest only in the sense that it reflects the writer's own emotional experience. By "relative truths," Agee can only speak of truths relative *to him*, the singular lens through which all the experiences reflected in *Famous Men*—his own and those of the individuals around him. Agee's resistance to making interpretations of the actions of the individuals surrounding him is the focal point around which the following chapter revolves. By crafting a narrative out of falsehoods, Agee accounts for the tendency of journalism to discount "true truths" unearthed by the investigative journalist. As the following chapter will show, Agee's fictionalization of environments and observed behavior draws even greater attention to the highly personalized boundaries within which those truths may be perceived. *Des temps forts* ultimately reveal as much about their selector as their subject.

## 2.2 Conscience and Guilt: *Famous Men* as Ethnography

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<sup>111</sup> Vaihinger 8.

Quite often the discourse surrounding experimental, unconventional, or “literary” approaches to anthropology revolves around the untamable beast of the anthropologist’s guilt. Certainly, attributing the vagaries of ethnographic texts to their authors’ formidable consciences undermines these texts as literature—that is to say, it serves to distance them from considerations of aesthetics or craft—and installs and enforces conventions in anthropologic writing that may have grown outdated. It also points to a fissure in the practice of ethnography, calling the field of anthropology to the attention of a problem whose address has by and large drawn a line in the sand between traditional and adaptive techniques of writing, where other social sciences may have grown and evolved to solve a comparable challenge with greater cohesion. Yet on the other hand, the “guilt” of the anthropologist, poised as he or she is in a uniquely privileged position as observer (most often living in a considerably less wealthy, less scientifically and technologically advanced society), persists. In the context of *Famous Men*, moreover, the guilt of the ethnographer guides his pen; it is inexorable both from the book and from its research and writing. In Agee’s words, *Famous Men*’s tenant farmers were “left open and defenseless” during the period of the author’s visit, in which he performed the role of a “reverent and cold-laboring spy.”<sup>112</sup>

Fictocriticism has found particular favor in the field of anthropology precisely because of the void it has filled: Academics and ethnographers have embraced the term as a means of describing texts that draw attention to the unnatural and often uncomfortable tension between the observer and observed, an opposition native to the practice of performing and recording fieldwork, addressing the anthropologist’s guilt by serving to bridge the gulf between the two. It is also closely affiliated with a strand of anthropology in which the ethnographer takes part in the rituals and practices of his subjects in order to

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<sup>112</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 117.

come closer to them; anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas were famously engaged in this “participant observation,” a practice inherited by the likes of Bateson and Margaret Mead and now chronicled in the fictocritical fieldwork of anthropologists like Michael Taussig. The written work of each of these individuals strays from the conventions of their time, and its skepticism of objectivity comes as no surprise. These anthropologists perform and reflect upon their fieldwork with an attitude of give-and-take: Writers of fictocriticism in anthropology suggest that the characteristics of the fieldworker affect the interactions he or she has with others and, by extension, the ethnography, and likewise, the act of performing and analyzing fieldwork affects the fieldworker. They also engage the fictocritical form as a means of addressing the power dynamics at play in the field of anthropology and drawing attention to the ways in which ethnography further problematizes the disparity in their subjectivities. The adoption of the term *fictocriticism* by contemporary anthropologists only serves to further emphasize the subjectivity, the *making* (rather than the “making up”) of their texts.

One would be remiss not to call attention to the embrace of ethnographic fictocriticism by individuals in postcolonial countries in particular (*individuals* is a deliberate choice of words; while the anthropology departments of a handful of universities devote considerable attention to alternative ethnographic practices, especially in Australia and Canada, these programs are few and far between and largely reflect the effort of a few passionate professors).<sup>113</sup> Many of the best-known self-identified “fictocritics” hail from Australia and Canada specifically, both in the field of anthropology—consider Muecke, Anna Gibbs, and Taussig—and outside of it, in the broader categories of art and literature—Aritha van Herk and Jeanne Randolph. Flavell’s “Writing Between” investigates in some detail why, indeed, fictocritical anthropology has

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<sup>113</sup> Flavell, *Writing-Between* 5.

enjoyed particular favor in these Commonwealth countries, arguing that too much emphasis is paid to the influence of postmodernism and not enough to politics. Flavell writes, “Rather than mere textual or surface play—free from any ethical or political motivation—[...] ficto-critical texts are deeply troubled by the colonizing role of critical or academic writing.”<sup>114</sup> Further discussion of the complicated relationship of fictocriticism to writing in which authority is a necessary component appears in the conclusion of this thesis.

Once again, it is Muecke’s writing that offers perhaps the cleanest, clearest introduction to contemporary self-identified fictocritical writing, this time framed in the arena of anthropology. Muecke writes that a common effect of fictocritical form is to compel the writer to collapse him or herself into the text in order to address how he or she came into the position of authority.<sup>115</sup> The anthropologist’s book *No Road* outlines his relationship with and reliance upon fictocriticism to account for the complicated position of the author of ethnography in relation to both his subjects and to the text. “We have the elements of a story to be told,” Muecke writes in the book’s first pages, adding shortly, “But what language can I use to *carry* this story?”<sup>116</sup> Later, Muecke describes another moment in which the use of his own language falls short. In this case, Muecke conflates the limitations of his own language with the alienness of the landscape surrounding him. “Sometimes we travel to the edge of the city and the words run out at the same time as the houses,” Muecke writes. “Then we might find ourselves in a culture and a community where words might have a completely different purpose to the one we imagine they have: the landscape changes colour, we begin to lose our grip.” Reading *No Road*, one may come to assume that the journey Muecke undertakes is one that also describes his thinking of the book’s shape and form. *No Road*’s fictocriticism serves to address and to

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<sup>114</sup> Flavell, *Writing-Between* 10.

<sup>115</sup> Muecke, “The Fall” 108.

<sup>116</sup> Muecke, *No Road* 15

mirror the sense of losing one's grip—the reader must engage in a bit of sleuthing in order to determine, or even merely to guess, what is happening in Muecke's text, both narratively and intellectually—and also the desire to capture the feeling of isolation and estrangement.

*Origins and Urgent Questions: Clifford Geertz*

Muecke, however, is the inheritor of now nearly a century of writing about the writing about other people. At the eye of this storm sits Clifford Geertz, best known as a champion of symbolic anthropology, who wrote at great length about the complications of fieldwork and the evolution he witnessed in the practice of writing ethnography. Geertz's work offers insights into literary and cultural theory beyond the field of anthropology, reflecting the influence of several of the authors whose writing was discussed in the first part of this thesis. In fact, in "Being There: Anthropology and the Scene of Writing," Geertz provides an answer to that famous question, "What does it matter who is speaking?":

Given the person-specific (*not* 'personal') nature of our judgments in these matters, the obvious place to begin such an engagement is with the question of what, in anthropology, an 'author' is. It may be that in other realms of discourse the author (along with man, history, the self, God, and other middle-class appurtenances) is in the process of dying; but he...she...is still very much alive among anthropologists. In our ingenuous discipline, perhaps as usual an episteme behind, it still very much matters who speaks.<sup>117</sup>

Geertz argues that Foucault in "What Is an Author?" distinguishes too sharply between realms of discourse in which the author function remains and those in which it largely does not. Foucault places the sciences in this latter category on the basis of scientific

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<sup>117</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 6-7

subjectivity, and herein lies the locus of anxiety Geertz has identified as central to the adaption of new modes of ethnographic writing. Anthropologists have traditionally placed their faith in the “mechanics of knowledge,” including the legitimacy of their empathy and insight and their unverifiable interpretations of other people’s feelings, thus seizing the difficulties of fieldwork as explanation for their trouble constructing scientific accounts rather than the flaws in the ethnographic discourse. If the relation between observer and observed (rapport) can be managed, the relation between author and text (signature) will follow—it is thought—if itself,” Geertz writes.<sup>118</sup> Quite to the contrary, fictocriticism, employed in the discourse of ethnography, reveals unease, or at the very least skepticism, of precisely that relation between the observer and observed, reflected in a different—or often *uneasy*—rapport between author and text.

Of particular note in Geertz’s contributions to anthropology is the notion of *thick description*, writing that relates not only an observed behavior but also the context in which that behavior is performed and what it signifies within that context. The term is a riff off Gilbert Ryle’s *thin description*, the account of observed behaviors divorced from the explanation of why they were performed and what they meant. Geertz illustrates the distinction between “thick” and “thin” descriptions with the gesture of the wink; Ryle’s thin description illustrates only the act of contracting the eyelid, whereas thin description distinguishes this gesture from that of a wink or twitch. In his famous essay “Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Geertz writes:

[...] between what Ryle calls the ‘thin description’ of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher...) is doing (‘rapidly contracting his right eyelids’) and the ‘thick description’ of what he is doing (‘practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion’) lies the object of ethnography: a stratified

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<sup>118</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives* 10

hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, received, and interpreted [...].<sup>119</sup>

The trouble, Geertz goes on to write, is that much of anthropological research is understood as “observing” behavior whose meanings have already been unraveled and explained rather than “interpreting” individual actions. Shaped behaviors provide a basis for an anthropologist’s understanding of their meanings, but the objective fact of their performance does not in and of itself offer much to the anthropologist in the way of “understanding” his subjects. Geertz here calls upon Wittgenstein to draw upon the metaphor of travelling to a foreign country: simply visiting an alien place—even with a mastery of its language—does not imbue one with an understanding of its people.<sup>120</sup> All of this goes to serve to argue for, as the title of Geertz’s essay indicates an “interpretive theory of culture,” for an ethnographic practice that moves beyond objective fact and replicable gesture into the realm of interpretation in context—nonetheless maintaining the belief that no other culture may be fully understood.

Geertz sympathizes with anthropologists who choose to emphasize their unnatural, oftentimes challenging role, arguing that the development of the first-person “I” serves to address and sometimes even come to terms with the gulf between the observer and observed.<sup>121</sup> If observing is a personal task, Geertz asks, isn’t observation also? “To be a convincing ‘I-witness,’” Geertz argues, “one must, so it seems, first

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<sup>119</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973) 7.

<sup>120</sup> Geertz, “Thick Description” 13.

<sup>121</sup> This is certainly not to say that Geertz would have regarded Agee’s “fieldwork” as in any way rigorous or respectable. “I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one’s sentiments run loose,” Geertz writes in closing “Thick Description.” He adds, “Nothing will discredit a semiotic approach to culture more quickly than allowing it to drift into a combination of intuitionism and alchemy, no matter how elegantly the intuitions are expressed or how modern the alchemy is made to look.” Many inheritors of Geertz’s theory and modern practitioners of fictocritical ethnographies, Muecke included, may have veered into this territory of “intuition and alchemy” Geertz here challenges; that does not, however, discredit Geertz’s essay as explanatory of and invaluable to the fictocritical approach to ethnographic writing, which moves beyond so-called thin descriptions and by and large resists the notion of understanding a foreign “other.” Geertz, “Thick Description” 30.

become a convincing ‘I.’”<sup>122</sup> The reader is reminded in Geertz’s essay “I-Witnessing: Malinowski’s Children” of Barthes’ “Deliberation,” in which the author confesses almost instant dissatisfaction with his writing and describes a creeping insincerity of which it is impossible to rid his journals. The trouble for Barthes, it seems, lies not in the experiences he attempts to record but in his ability to record them in language in his journal. Likewise, the problem for anthropologists writing under the influence of and compelled by the same questions as Malinowski is not one of research but one of writing—not of participant observation but of participant description.<sup>123</sup> To address this task is to define fictocriticism, years before Muecke or any of his cohorts adopted the term to describe their method. Fictocriticism in anthropology sets out to solve the problem of participant description, as Geertz explains years in advance of the genesis of the term:

The problem, to rephrase it in as prosaic terms as I can manage, is to represent the research process in the research product; to write ethnography in such a way as to bring one’s interpretations of some society, culture, way of life, or whatever and one’s encounters with some of its members, carriers, representatives, or whomever into an intelligible relationship.<sup>124</sup>

All of this is meant to illuminate the two major obstacles Agee faces and attempts to overcome in researching and writing *Famous Men*, a process he describes in great detail in the text: first, to establish a rapport between observer and observed and to do so in such a way that honors the humanity (and perhaps the disadvantages) of the observed, and second, to do so in a mode of writing reflective of the severity of the task and the sincerity of the author. Agee himself states this in somewhat simpler terms in his

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<sup>122</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives* 79.

<sup>123</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives* 83.

<sup>124</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives* 84.

introduction to the book when he explains it as an effort to contrive techniques of describing a “portion of unimagined existence.”<sup>125</sup>

*Toward a Fictionalized Theory of Culture*

Well into *Famous Men*, Agee ponders the same questions any thoughtful anthropologist might ask:

[...] 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? Granted—more, insisted upon—that it is in all these particularities that each of you is that which he is; that particularities, and matters ordinary and obvious, are exactly themselves beyond designation of words, are the members of your sum total most obligatory to human searching of perception: nevertheless to name these things and fail to yield their stature, meaning, power of hurt, seems impious, seems criminal, seems impudent, seems traitorous in the deepest [...]<sup>126</sup>

This is but one of many instances in which Agee *Famous Men* reveals a sense of deep torment in writing about other people and, in particular, people with fewer economic and intellectual advantages than the author himself. The book provides an exhaustive record of the psychological toll Agee’s fieldwork took on the anthropologist–author, and Agee’s other writings offer additional evidence. “My writing is in bad shape,” Agee confesses to Father Flye, admitting that he hasn’t written in five months. His trouble, he writes, is that “such a subject cannot be seriously looked at without intensifying itself toward a centre which is beyond what I, or anyone else, is capable of writing of: the whole problem and nature of existence.” Framing the effort in terms of its moral implications, Agee continues, would fail to do justice to the task.<sup>127</sup> The author certainly frames his project in terms of moral problems in several instances in the text, particularly in the theoretical,

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<sup>125</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* x.

<sup>126</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 88

<sup>127</sup> Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* 105.

highly moralistic “On the Porch: II.” Agee’s primary technique, however, is not in moving “toward a center” beyond Agee himself, but in recalibrating that center in the locus of his own experience. Rather than claiming to understand the three families, Agee fictionalizes, makes speculations, crafts potential interpretations. All of these are presented in the language of literature.

The fictionalization in Agee’s “ethnography” is perhaps captured in the first section of the book, which moves most rapidly between genres and modes of writing, before the book enters more deeply into description of the farmers’ homes and surroundings and into the author’s theoretical musings. This fictionalization is perhaps most noticeable in passages of extreme lyricism and in the author’s rambling digressions, which punctuate sections in which the author describes his experience in Alabama in language more common to formal ethnographic writing. Consider the chapter labeled simply “I:”, appearing early in the text as a part of “A Country Letter,” written in a dreamy, trancelike tone of voice; it begins, “The light in this room is of a lamp,” and continues shortly, “I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in hot so much as touching this plain of water, I can tell you anything within the realm of God, whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you.”<sup>128</sup> While the chapter resembles on the one hand an extract from the author’s journal, Agee’s late-night reflections on the circumstances of his stay in Alabama are written in such a way that heightens and intensifies the author’s perceptions. The scene the author sets, delivered in the first person, could appear as an expository description in novel:

It is the middle and pure height and whole of summer and a summer night, the held breath, of a planet’s year; high shored sleeps the crested tide: what day of the month I do not know, which day of the week I am not sure, far less what hour of the night. [...]

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<sup>128</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 46

And it is in these terms I would tell you, at all leisure, and in all detail, whatever there is to tell: of where I am; of what I perceive.<sup>129</sup>

Using this disclaimer as a point of departure, Agee plunges into a dreamlike description of the room and the house in which he writes and of the individuals that lay sleeping nearby; each of the chapter's sentences is punctuated almost exclusively with a colon where the reader might expect a full stop. Nothing about the chapter resembles a work of social science, and Agee's disclaimer itself provides an interpretation of this chimerical interlude. By intensifying the account of his perceptions—or, rather, by indulging these passages a tone to match the emotional tenor of his experience late at night in the Gudger home—Agee serves to remind the reader that the book is less a photographic reproduction than a series of perceptions captured and recorded by a single, distinctive individual with a single, distinctive literary voice. Further highly fictionalized and intensified accounts of Agee's experience among the farmer's families demarcate the limits of verifiable "fact" in his ethnography. The author routinely personifies objects and spaces, as in the textual interlude following "On the Porch: I": "Every leaf drenches the touch; the spider's net is heavy. The roads lie there, with nothing to use them. The fields lie there, with nothing at work in them, neither man nor beast."<sup>130</sup> By continuously drawing the text back to the space of sentiment and romanticism, Agee restores and re-restores the reader's awareness of his experience as colored by and vulnerable to the author's own emotion and temperament. Elsewhere in the book's first section, Agee adopts the speech of his subjects in order to craft a sort of dramatic text in their (unattributed) language, presented in succession and without quotation marks. It remains unclear to what extent these statements are "true": Agee may indeed have transcribed them verbatim, or recreated them out of real-life language captured in the process of his

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<sup>129</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 47.

<sup>130</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 41.

fieldwork, or fabricated them entirely. Here are three of the many statements and monologues Agee pens in the voice of the farmers and their families and neighbors:

My mother made me the prettiest kind of dress, all fresh for school; I wore it the first day, and everyone laughed and poked fun at me [...]

I made her such a pretty dress and she wore it at once, and she never wore it away from home again:

Oh, thank God not one of you knows how everyone snickers at your father.<sup>131</sup>

This last technique of fictionalizing the words of his subjects in particular, and all of the aforementioned techniques to varying degrees, circumvents the problem of representation and interpretation native to all anthropologic texts by engaging in precisely the sort of speculation that traditional anthropology avoids. In other words, by presenting the speech of his subjects (a) without quotation marks or attribution, (b) without explanation or context, and (c) in succession like the lines of poetry or the dialogue in a play script, Agee distances the reader from the observed subjects and reinforced his position as the text's primary and sole figure of authority.

Placed in the uncomfortable position of acting as an observer in the field, a cultural interpreter for a wealthy, well-educated audience, Agee enlists *Famous Men's* fictocritical form in order to overturn the expectations placed on the writer of ethnography. By calling upon techniques of fiction, the author draws attention to his unwavering, unreliable subjectivity; in coupling his lyrical, digressive language with opinion and polemic, Agee draws attention to the fiction native to ethnographic texts. All ethnography, even Geertz himself writes, is necessarily fictive.<sup>132</sup> James Clifford, writing in the introduction to the collection *Writing Cultures*, echoes this assertion; the necessity of lies of omission and rhetoric renders fiction out of all "constructed truths," Clifford writes, but rather than connoting fiction with falsehood, one ought to understand it as

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<sup>131</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 70

<sup>132</sup> Geertz, "Thick Description" 15.

merely suggesting “the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive.”<sup>133</sup> In adapting a fictocritical form for his ethnography, Agee leans into his position of authority in order to express the exclusivity and limitation of his singular vantage point.

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<sup>133</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 6-7.

### 3: Conclusions & Ironies

*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. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.*

Agee, *Famous Men* 10

With hope, this anachronistic application of the term *fictocriticism* to Agee's 1939 book has successfully probed the implications of the term and its function both alongside genres of nonfiction and as a genre in and of itself. The first half of this thesis engages in an analysis of the key terms and concepts necessary for this examination, firstly by dissecting the component parts of the term *fictocriticism*, and secondly by performing a survey of several key theories of authorship, focusing on the potential—or, such is the case, the impossibility—of extracting the author from the text. While vernacular usage of the term *fictocriticism* employs it as a catchall appellation for writing lying at the interstices of fictional and nonfictional genres, the Derridian “Law of Genre” commands that each genre is contaminated by the next. Thus, the law stating “genres are not to be mixed” is revealed to be something of a false premise and *fictocriticism*, then, is examined as a mode of heightening and drawing attention to the falsehood of generic rigidity and to the fluidity with which fiction perpetrates genres primarily associated with nonfiction writing. With the support of Armand's essay “Spectres of Sovereignty,” this analysis of genre also briefly examines the implicit authority of the speaking subject

which fictocriticism—as highlighted in the latter sections on the genres of journalism and ethnography—attempts to unsettle.

This analysis of genre opens the door to dismantling the dichotomy between fiction and nonfiction, or the dichotomy between fiction and criticism implicit the term *fictocriticism*. Agee’s notion of “true truths” guides the analysis of fiction towards Vaihinger, whose *Philosophy of “As If”* argues that while senses and perceptions are “real,” human knowledge is acquired and furthered based on a practical economy of fictions, which we adopt “as if” they were true in order to establish some order in an irrational world. Rather than constructing a “nonfiction” book that interprets and explains the lives of three farmers’ families, Agee emphasizes the fictions he creates in order to order his experience living among them. The second part of the thesis dissects the fictocritical elements of Agee’s journalism and ethnography, respectively, in order to reveal the practical fictions the author necessarily creates in writing ostensibly nonfictional texts. By drawing attention to these fictions, the author honors the real-life subjects at the center of his reportage and study, possessors of their own experiences and perceptions, the only “real” nonfictions, Vaihinger argues, about which Agee lacks the tools to write truthfully. Thus, Agee constructs “true truths,” practical fictions from which the reader may nonetheless glean new knowledge.

In a compilation of academic essays presented on the occasion of what would have been Agee’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, the *New York Times* literary critic Dwight Garner begins his essay “Why Agee Matters” by drawing attention to the ambivalence and, in fact, distaste Agee himself might have had for the event. Agee, Garner writes, would have “detested” the warmth and appreciation expressed at the gathering and in the collection of essays; the

critic cites an article in *The Nation* in which Agee claimed that “arteries harden” “in the subject and in the people interested” when historians get to work. Garner continues:

He would have commiserated with the poet W. H. Auden, who in 1944 foresaw the ‘sad day, indeed,’ when Agee’s collected film criticism would ‘be the subject of a Ph.D. thesis.’ The funny thing about Auden’s comment, so many decades later, is his assumption there would be only one of those theses on Agee’s criticism, instead of dozens or even hundred. Someday there will surely be thousands. Agee wouldn’t have read them; he loathed what he called ‘the emasculation of acceptance.’<sup>134</sup>

Garner goes on to say that if Agee had survived the hardening of his arteries and had managed to hear some of the essays presented at the event in his honor, if only in stolen moments between cigarette breaks, the writer would have been proud of himself, pleased with the work presented, and impressed by the aptitude of the scholars engaging with his writing. Perhaps this is the case, yet Garner fails to address exactly that with which Agee would take umbrage. What is “emasculating”—that is to say, what is limiting, undermining, debilitating—about the acceptance of *Famous Men* and about the scholarship surrounding it is that it engages with the work as something isolated and to be revered. In so doing, scholarship of the book, which today largely responds favorably to Agee’s prose, is admiring of the book’s fictocritical form as a style but not as a technique. It admires the languid prose with which Agee fictionalizes actual events—no longer is *Famous Men* considered the “failure” Trilling deemed it in the *Kenyon Review*—without examining the practicality of Agee’s fictions. In other words, it appraises Agee’s efforts without analyzing the function behind the fictionalization that, as Vaihinger writes, is necessary for human knowledge. After all, *Famous Men* is, as Agee states from the

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<sup>134</sup> Dwight Garner, “Why Agee Matters,” *Agee at 100: Centennial Essays on the Works of James Agee*, ed. Michael Lofaro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012) 1.

outset, a sustained effort “to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence.”<sup>135</sup>

What’s more, the great majority of scholarship surrounding *Famous Men* continues to discuss the book’s highly rationalized form in a mode of writing that stifles the fictions at its heart of its own discourse. There is no small irony in writing about *Famous Men*—much less the practice of fictocriticism—in language which benefits from the implied authority of its author. While *Famous Men*’s unrelentingly lyrical form suggests as much, Agee finally concedes that the text is “about” its own fictionalization in the space of a footnote. Buried deep in the text in “On the Porch: 2,” Agee’s polemical justification for the book’s fictocritical form, the author admits:

I may as well explain that *On the Porch* was written to stand as the beginning of a much longer book, in which the whole subject would be disposed of in one volume. It is here intended still in part as a preface or opening, but also as a frame and as an undertone and as the set stage and center of action, in relation to which all other parts of this volume are intended as flashbacks, foretastes, illuminations and contradictions.<sup>136</sup>

Only buried in this footnote does the reader of *Famous Men* learn that the human lives at the center of the Alabama expedition *themselves* serve a function for Agee, illustrating the principle the author expounds in “On the Porch: 2” that humanity and perception are entirely irreplicable in writing. How fitting, though, that Agee’s assessment appears in digression, poetry, narrative, and dialogue—in other words, that it get tangled in *Famous Men*’s highly evident fictions—rather than embedded in discourse that denies the making, if not the *making up*, of the authority of its speaking subject. By refusing to deny the fictions inherent in his discourse, Agee also refuses the authority those fictions implicitly grant the author. “Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, or as religion, or

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<sup>135</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* xviii.

<sup>136</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 217.

as authority in one form or another,” Agee writes. “[...] Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again...and this is the kiss of Judas.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Agee, *Famous Men* 12.

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