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"But chiefly we now engaged in mutual listening": Participation in "Art as Experience" and "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"

Howard, Catherine Elaine, Ph.D.

Rice University, 1994

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"BUT CHIEFLY WE NOW ENGAGED IN MUTUAL LISTENING":  
PARTICIPATION IN ART AS EXPERIENCE  
AND LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN  

by  
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ABSTRACT

"But Chiefly We Now Engaged in Mutual Listening": Participation in *Art as Experience* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

by

Catherine E. Howard

James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and John Dewey's *Art as Experience* converge in several fundamental ways, all hinging on the notion of participation in art. Although Agee and Evans may seem at first glance to be stylistically mismatched in their book, an examination of their work in light of pragmatic aesthetic theories introduced by Dewey reveals several ways in which they meet. For Dewey experience and community are the major components in confronting existence; Agee and Evans also examine their tenant families in terms of experience and community. Specifically, they approach Deweyan goals in emphasizing the art of the everyday, in using art as a communicative tool to improve a social situation, and in employing art as a way to approximate "truth."

Thinking in terms of experience, the more subjective individual factor, gives rise to the idea of perception, of basing one's aesthetic frame on current experience and memories of past experiences. Agee and Evans both participate in this process, which Dewey calls "consummatory experience." In addition, both artists evoke consummatory experiences from the reader. The more objective factor,
community, leads to a consideration of democracy, a cooperative of shared moral values. Again, Agee and Evans come together in examining community and in searching for democracy, particularly in their uses of art for communication.

A fundamental problem with subject-object dichotomy occurs both in Dewey’s theory and in Agee and Evans’ work. Subjects, those observing, and objects, those observed, are not equal. Some of the objects that Agee and Evans examine are human beings, potential subjects, who are not allowed to participate in consummatory experience. Dewey emphasizes that thinking of subjects and objects as separate entities is not fruitful; rather, subjectivity and objectivity are processes to be undertaken, and true art occurs when subject and object merge. Although Agee and Evans fall short of a merging of subject and object, both of them mix subjective and objective techniques in their respective portraits of a time and a place. Agee, Evans, and Dewey meet in their uses of participation, both in goal and in method.
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For Konstantin Kolenda.
INTRODUCTION

... an effort in human actuality

--Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

... it is not an examination such as might be carried on by a sociologist in search for material relevant to his purpose. The one who sets out to theorize about the esthetic experience embodied in the Parthenon must realize in thought what the people into whose lives it entered had in common, as creators and as those who were satisfied with it, with people in our own homes and on our own streets.

--Art as Experience

James Agee and Walker Evans' Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is variously a sociological document, a poem, a journalistic account, a narrative, an autobiography, a political manifesto, a satire, a portrait, a scrapbook, a home movie, an epic, a polemic, a letter, and a fable. Perhaps most important, though, it is a philosophical reflection on what history, art, literature, and sociology should and can be, at the same time that it illustrates its position. Fundamental to its stance on this large set of issues is the idea of participation. The artist must interact with his topic, and the reader must cooperate with the artist. This notion of participation also appears in John Dewey's Art as Experience, a work not only of aesthetics, but a valuable ruler by which to measure the whole of his philosophy. An examination of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men in light of Dewey's pragmatic aesthetic thought reveals that Agee and Evans show a true picture of the tenant
families that they examine and of themselves, presenting faithfully both object and subject of their study to the cooperative participant reader.

In the summer of 1936 Fortune magazine sent the writer James Agee south to document in prose the effects of the Great Depression on poor white cotton sharecroppers. His assigned photographer was Walker Evans, on loan from the government's Farm Securities Administration. The two traveled to Hale County, Alabama, where they located three tenant families that were willing to submit themselves to such a study. Agee and Evans lived with one of these families, headed by Floyd and Allie Mae Burroughs, whom they called George and Annie Mae Gudger in the text of their work. They also studied Bud and Lily Fields ("Bud and Ivy Woods"), Allie Mae's father and his new younger wife, and Frank and Kate Tengle ("Fred and Sadie Ricketts"), their neighbors.¹

During their month-long stay, Agee and Evans got to know the families better than they had expected to. The resulting magazine article came to far too many pages and was rejected by Fortune, but subsequently Agee revised and added to the text, and Harper & Row agreed to publish it. However, because of disagreements about format,² Agee withdrew the

¹ References to these figures will be by Agee's fictional names when they are discussed as characters in the text and by their "real" names, which Evans used, when they are discussed as images in the photographs.

² Agee insisted that the book, because of its subject matter, should be issued in an inexpensive edition, less than $1.50 a copy, and should have covers resembling those of either an old Southern hymnal or a government report. See Geneviève Moreau, The Restless Journey of James Agee, trans.
manuscript, and the book was eventually published by Houghton Mifflin in the summer of 1941, five years after the project had begun. The book appeared at a particularly bad time; the United States was about to enter World War II, and there was little interest in another book on poverty in the South. In addition, several other similar efforts had beaten Let Us Now Praise Famous Men to press, most notably Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's You Have Seen Their Faces.

After selling fewer than six hundred copies, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was remaindered and largely forgotten until Houghton Mifflin released a second edition in 1960. This edition, used widely in sociology classes, caught fire in the various human rights movements occurring at the time, and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men has been considered an American classic.
classic ever since. In addition to being influenced by the documentary movement of the 1930s, of which it was a part, and by the government program which partially funded it, Agee and Evans' book strongly reflected pragmatic aesthetic theories appearing at the time.

Pragmatism, an American school of thought founded in the late nineteenth century by C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, is based on the tenet that the measure of the worth of an idea should be its usefulness and practicality in daily life. Peirce, the first proponent of the idea, restricted its effects to the natural sciences; James applied it more closely to human experience, especially in his studies in psychology; and Dewey extended it first to education and the still emerging social sciences and then to aesthetics. In his application of the scientific method to philosophy and educational reform ("Learn by Doing"), Dewey had a vast impact on American thought, and his ideas were widely established by the 1930s. Living to age ninety-two, he remained remarkably prolific, producing more than eight hundred works in metaphysics, epistemology, logic, psychology, aesthetics, religion, ethics, politics, education, and social reform.8

Perhaps the two most important facets of Dewey's thought are experience and community. The goal of social

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reform for him is to initiate a "community of shared moral values." Experience for Dewey is an active, social phenomenon, and it entails the possibility of shaping the future. Potentially, then, for Dewey everyone possesses the ability to contribute to the process of human interaction in what he terms a "creative democracy." Like Dewey, Agee and Evans want to find grounds for believing in an America worthy of consideration; they too are searching for a democratic cooperative of shared moral values. And, like Dewey, they seek it through an examination of experience and community.

Dewey's Art as Experience appeared in 1934, two years before Agee and Evans' trip, and its central ideas—including Dewey's emphasis on relating social reform to aesthetics—were in the air at the time. Art as Experience began as a series of lectures that Dewey delivered at Harvard in the

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winter and spring of 1931,\textsuperscript{11} when Agee was a junior there.\textsuperscript{12} Although \textit{Art as Experience} may not have directly influenced \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, the two books certainly contain similar themes and methods, and Dewey's book makes a useful frame for studying Agee and Evans' work.

To speak of Dewey in connection with \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} is appropriate historically. Roy Stryker, the director of the Photography Unit of the Historical Section of the Farm Securities Administration, for which Evans worked, had as teacher and mentor Rexford G. Tugwell, the New Deal official who engineered the photography project to begin with and who had been a colleague of Dewey's at Columbia.\textsuperscript{13} Tugwell synthesized the ideas of Dewey, economists Simon Patten and Thorsten Veblen, and others in his economics text \textit{American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement}.\textsuperscript{14} Thus the progression of thought would be from Dewey through Tugwell to Stryker and on to Evans. However, Stryker was not Agee's boss, and Evans hated and would not listen to him.\textsuperscript{15} A more probable connection might have occurred through Evans'
teachers. Social documentary photographer Lewis Hine studied at Chicago, possibly under Dewey,16 and Evans later studied under Paul Strand, a student of Hine's.17 Generally, in his documentary project Tugwell embraced Dewey's idea of instrumentality; that is, photographs of poor social conditions should not merely demonstrate those conditions as they are but should spur viewers to do something about them. Agee and Evans, in spite of their disregard for Stryker, brought this objective to the assignment that became Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

Stryker's program involved several other author/photographer collaborations, including Sherwood Anderson's Home Town (photographs edited by Edwin Rosskam, curator of the FSA photo collection); Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor's An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion in the Thirties; Archibald MacLeish's Land of the Free (with assorted FSA photos); Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid's Sharecroppers All (FSA photos); and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's 12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States.18 The goal of these photo-


textual documentaries, following the lines established by Lewis Hine's work twenty-five years before, was a combination of documentation and hope for social betterment. Again, Dewey's influence may appear through Hine. While not conclusive, these effects are certainly plausible.

In addition to possibly influencing Let Us Now Praise Famous Men historically, Dewey's ideas contribute theoretically to the reader's understanding of Agee and Evans' book. For Dewey, experiences function as transactions between an individual and his environment. Agee and Evans explore both individuals and environments, particularly illustrating in photographs and in text the interaction between them. In addition, Agee is able to describe the transactions that he and Evans undergo in their new environment, and these descriptions apply to the reader's own "experience" of interaction with text and photographs, as well.

The objectives of Agee, Evans, and Dewey converge in three fundamental ways. First, they share a concern for the aesthetic quality of the everyday experience. On the first page of Art as Experience, Dewey emphasizes his main purpose, "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally

recognized to constitute experience."¹⁹ Agee and Evans seek the same end in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with their photographic and textual examination of the daily activities of the three families.

Second, the purpose of art for Dewey, as for Agee and Evans, is to change things for the better through communication and increased understanding among cultures or individuals. "[W]hen the art of another culture enters into attitudes that determine our experience genuine continuity [and thus for Dewey genuine art] is effected."²⁰ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* forces the reader to confront the plight of its families by presenting their daily experiences as aesthetic. Moreover, the action involved in the presentation and acceptance of this information is in itself aesthetic. Both Agee and Evans view and represent art in the actions of the tenant farmers; further, Agee recognizes that which is artistic in his seeing, and the beauty of his description produces an aesthetic experience, what Dewey would term "an experience," in us as readers. A similar effect occurs upon viewing Evans' photographs. The point of this aesthetic experience is to bring about changes for the better, both in environments and in individuals.

Finally, Dewey claims that art occurs when subject and object merge. He writes, "The thoroughgoing integration of

what philosophy discriminates as 'subject' and 'object' (in more direct language, organism and environment) is the characteristic of every work of art. The completeness of the integration is the measure of its esthetic status. "21 That Agee and Evans are able to change the scene that they report on, and that the scene in turn affects them, is not, in the final analysis, tantamount to their merging with the objects whom they observe. Agee, at least, wishes to participate in the tenants' world, but ironically because of his different background he is finally unable to do so.

At first glance, Agee and Evans seem to be, if not diametrically opposed, at least very strange bedfellows for this book. Their styles, and even to some extent the contents of their work, appear to be radically different. Agee is widely considered to be "Romantic," verbose, "subjective," confessional, and emotional, whereas Evans is seen as more "Classical," terse, "objective," documentary, and intellectual. 22 Hilton Kramer, for example, indicates

21 Dewey, Art as Experience, 281.

that Agee is "essentially a modeler," while "Evans, on the other hand, is essentially a carver." Other apparent differences immediately springing to mind are fluid vs. static, rich vs. stark, nocturnal vs. diurnal, watching vs. watched, lyric vs. declamatory, speculative vs. factual, deep vs. superficial, musical vs. sculptural, aural vs. visual, and temporal vs. spatial. Through a study of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, however, the reader may come to realize that Agee and Evans are much more similar than they first appear, both in style and in content. In none of the cases listed above does a strict dichotomy hold for Agee and Evans; for each set of "opposites," both artists' work contains a mixture of the two characteristics. The proportions may differ, but both elements are present.

There is no question that the photographs and the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are meant to be compared to and with each other. Agee emphasizes in his Preface that Evans' "photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative." In an application for a Guggenheim

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"conflict" is actually more of a counterpoint.


24 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Three Tenant Families: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941, 1960; Boston: Houghton, 1980) Book Two, xv. [Subsequent page number references to this work are as follows: "Book One" with a roman numeral refers to Evans' photographs, which are unnumbered in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. "Book Two" with a roman numeral refers to the front matter of the text, including Evans' written foreword. The author will be listed as "Agee" or "Evans" accordingly. An arabic numeral refers to the main body of Agee's text in Book Two.]
Fellowship Agee explains about the Alabama project, "One part of the work, in many senses the crucial part, would be a strict comparison of the photographs and the prose as relative liars and as relative reproducers of the same matters." 25 After such a comparison, several critics have recognized that Agee and Evans indeed belong together in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Lincoln Kirstein, for instance, states that Evans' style approaches Agee's. "Walker Evans' eye is a poet's eye. It finds corroboration in the poet's voice." 26 Peter H. Ohlin claims that Agee and Evans approach each other in their simplicity and symmetry. 27

Agee and Evans may also be seen as fitting companions particularly in light of Dewey's prescriptions in Art as Experience. Specifically, their similarities become clear upon examinations of the categories of experience, community, perception, democracy, subject-object dichotomy, and portraiture. Chapters one and three below address experience and community, two pervasive factors in Dewey's thought. Chapters two and four explore perception and democracy, the somewhat problematic results of thinking in terms of experience and community. Experience and perception, chapters one and two, represent the subjective aspect of Dewey's plan, whereas community and democracy, chapters three

25 Agee, Collected Short Prose, 134.
27 Ohlin, 104.
and four, represent the objective aspect. That is, experience and its resulting aesthetic program based on perception rely principally on the individual viewpoint, while community and its emphasis on democratic equality are founded upon interaction among individuals. In both cases, a fundamental problem with participation occurs; it seems that subjects, those observing, are allowed to participate in constructing aesthetic and political frames, whereas objects, those observed, are not. Chapter five, subject-object dichotomy, examines Dewey's answer to the problem, his dictum that in art subjective and objective aspects, as well as subjects and objects themselves, must merge. Chapter six, portraiture, traces Agee and Evans' attempt at this Deweyan task; their failed efforts indicate that Dewey's solution is inconclusive and problematic. However, Agee and Evans meet and meet Dewey in their interest in revealing truth as best they can, under the limitations and restrictions of their positions as observers. Participation is fundamental to their endeavors.
I. EXPERIENCE

Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long.

--Walker Evans

Physical things are not only the meaning of what we see and hear; they are also the means we employ to accomplish our ends.

--George Herbert Mead

A major facet of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* is, as the title suggests, experience. James Agee and Walker Evans, as well as Dewey, are concerned with this aspect of existence in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Both Dewey and Agee have elaborate theories regarding the definition and types of experience, and both Agee and Evans seem to practice Dewey's theoretical schemes. A problem common to all three thinkers is the question of selection. By definition, the representor must choose what to represent; the problem that this selection entails is the filter through which the viewer receives experience.

Sense experiences largely make up who a person is, and the reader of the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* comes to know James Agee through reports of his experience as much as the families that he studies, the Gudgers, the Ricketts, and the Woods. A major point of controversy with the book is the extent to which Agee is consciously present. Throughout the text he reminds the reader that both he and the reader are intruding into the scene he reports on; however, he is aware that his intrusion is not only unavoidable but
necessary to his project. He writes, "George Gudger is a man, et cetera. But obviously, in the effort to tell of him (by example) as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is."¹ Agee's experience is as fundamental to the story as George Gudger's. Rather than feeling Agee's narrative as an overwhelming presence, we as readers should accept it as a necessary medium through which we may understand George Gudger's experience and apply it to our own.

Walker Evans too, though generally considered far less "subjective" than Agee, is aware of the role of experience. His use of his own subjective experience becomes apparent upon study of his groupings of photographs that at first glance seem to be "objective" and indicative of their subjects'² experience. For example, Evans combines in a horizontal format a photograph of two straw-hatted old men talking and one directly below it of two mules facing the camera.³ Evans makes a social comment indirectly, revealing a side of himself not immediately obvious to the viewer. Like Agee, Evans acts as a filter for our understanding of the tenants' experience. Both Agee and Evans mix an

¹ Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 239.
² In photography criticism, the term "subject" usually means the object photographed, rather than the photographer.
³ Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, xlviii-xl ix.
objective, reporter-like approach with a subjective, personal one. In neither case is the material presented to us as entirely factual or entirely introspective. Instead, both artists present what they observe, as they observe it, for us in turn to observe.

Dewey claims that art and experience are inextricably linked. He distinguishes between the "art product," the statue, poem, painting, or musical composition, and the "work of art," the active, creative process that the viewer, reader, or listener undertakes in experiencing the art product. Both Agee's and Evans' art products illustrate Dewey's insistence that art be imbued with experience. Agee and Evans not only reported others' participation in events, but lived with them and attempted to some degree to replicate their experiences, both for themselves and for us, the readers. Evans advises photographers, "Concern yourself not with the question whether the medium, photography, is art. The question is dated and absurd to begin with. You are art or not; whatever you produce is or isn't. And don't think about that either; just do, act." If a photograph by Evans is "art," it is such because of the way he approached taking it and because of his own experience as well as that he was.

attempting to report.

Dewey defines experience as follows: "Experience in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events." Agee and Evans both participate in such an active commerce with the world, alertly observing and reporting what they see. Dewey continues, "Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ."\(^7\) Therefore, according to Dewey, experience is not entirely subjective, and community or communication is not totally objective. Rather, the two facets of existence, selfhood and the external world, are intertwined.

Agee writes of George Gudger,

\[H\]e is exactly, down to the last inch and instant, who, what, where, when and why he is. He is in those terms living, right now, in flesh and blood and breathing, in an actual part of a world in which also, quite as irrelevant to imagination, you and I are living. Granted that beside that fact it is a small thing, and granted also that it is essentially and finally a hopeless one, to try merely to reproduce and

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\(^7\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 25.
communicate his living as nearly exactly as possible, nevertheless I can think of no worthier and many worse subjects of attempt.

The same seems to me true of every item in the experience of which I am speaking, and I could say it with equal sincerity of conviction of all human experience.\(^8\)

Gudger and his external world affect and in a sense create each other. On a very basic level, Gudger tills the earth, plants crops, and harvests cotton, at the same time that his environment burns his skin, breaks his back, and furrows his brow. In addition, of course, his relationships with others shape who he is as he shapes them. In accord with Dewey's prescription, Agee recognizes the worth of the attempt to communicate the shapings Gudger undergoes. These shapings have shaped Agee and in turn shape us.

For Dewey experience is a process\(^9\) involving interaction between a person and his surroundings, including other people.\(^10\) It is more than mere knowing.\(^11\) Like the eighteenth-century empiricists, Dewey emphasizes the importance of sense experience in dealing with the problems

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of existence. Unlike them, he feels that experience provides a sufficient basis for coping with the world, for affecting the future. Cornel West writes, "Dewey holds that connections, continuities, and relations are neither alien to experience (as Hume thought) nor supplemented by nonempirical sources (as Kant believed). Rather they permeate experience."\(^{12}\)

Dewey claims, "Thinking goes on in trains of ideas, but the ideas form a train only because they are much more than what an analytic psychology calls ideas. They are phases, emotionally and practically distinguished, of a developing underlying quality; they are its moving variations, not separate and independent like Locke's and Hume's so-called ideas and impressions, but are subtle shadings of a pervading and developing hue."\(^{13}\) One must collect impressions and draw from the whole of past experience to affect and order future experience. Stressing the crucial role of participation in experience, Dewey writes, "Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication."\(^{14}\) Agee and Evans do not merely interact in a sterile, observant way with the tenants and the tenants' environment; they live in their houses, accompany them

\(^{12}\) West, 91.  
\(^{13}\) Dewey, Art as Experience, 44.  
\(^{14}\) Dewey, Art as Experience, 28.
throughout their workdays, share their meals and conversations, and play with their children, both of them seeming to approach what Dewey calls "an experience."

Fundamental in Dewey's understanding of experience is his concept of "consummatory experience." Dewey divides experience into several categories. "Immediate experience," direct experience of a thing or person, as opposed to mental consideration only, involves the emotions as well as the intellect.\textsuperscript{15} Consummatory experience, which Dewey also calls "an experience," is differentiated from immediate experience by an element of collaboration with the artist on the part of the viewer.\textsuperscript{16} On several levels, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} encourages the reader to participate in such a collaboration. The simple placement of the photographs before the text, for instance, forces the viewer to speculate on the meaning of the information presented. When the only clues a viewer has are the previous photographs he has seen, he must himself actively construct the relationships among individuals presented, drawing inferences as best he can and testing them against each new piece of information he is given.

Another type of experience that Dewey discusses, "esthetic experience," occurs when "an experience" is deliberately cultivated.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, experience may also

\textsuperscript{15} Rockefeller, 253.
\textsuperscript{17} Philip M. Zeltner, \textit{John Dewey's Aesthetic Philosophy} (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 1975) 17.
contain a religious element. Dewey is careful to emphasize that "religious experience" is not to be separated from other types of experience, but exists within them.18 Agee also makes sure not to distinguish religious experience from other types of experience, stating, "Everything that is is holy."19 For Agee, as for Dewey, the aesthetic and the religious are one.20 The goal of art should be to get at "truth," and this "truth" is inherent in everything that exists. Therefore, art may take as its object of study anything that exists, and Agee and Evans attempt to document in art the "truth" that they have encountered in Alabama.

Documentary (or, as Walker Evans is careful to call it, "documentary style"21) lends itself to the type of experience Dewey called consummatory. Joseph North explained to the 1935 American Writers' Congress that the style called "reportage" popularized by such journalists as Lincoln Steffens and John Reed "helps the reader experience the event recorded."22 Let Us Now Praise Famous Men also has this effect. Victor A. Kramer claims of Agee, "Whether in poetry or for the screen, whether in journalism or in fiction, he found ways to evoke actuality."23 Agee accomplishes this

18 Bernstein, John Dewey, 159.
19 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 459.
22 Qtd. in Stott, 54.
23 Victor A. Kramer, Agee & Actuality: Artistic Vision in His Work (Troy,
effect through a variety of techniques, including painstakingly ornate description and overwhelming lists of detail such as this one.

... the three new boards of differing lengths that were let in above the left of the door, the staring small white porcelain knob, the solesmoothed stairlifts, the wrung stance of thick steeple, the hewn wood stoblike spike at sky, the old hasp and new padlock, the randomshuttered windowglass whose panes were like the surfaces of springs, the fat gold fly who sang and botched against a bright pane within, and within, the rigid benches, box organ, bright stops, hung charts, wrecked hymnals, the platform, pine lectern doiled, pressed-glass pitcher, suspended lamp, four funeral chairs, the little stove with long swan throat aluminum in the hard sober shade, a button in sun, a flur of lint, a torn card of Jesus among children: 24

The reader feels as though he is experiencing the scene for himself. Evans also gives us the feeling of experiencing a setting, especially in the 8x10 glass negative photographs. The textures of wood grain, old tin, split cloth, and fine dust become virtually tactile.

Agee's evocation of actuality indicates his awareness of the importance of the function of experience in existence. He writes, "The mind and the spirit are constantly formed by,

24 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 39.
and as constantly form, the senses, and misuse or neglect the
senses only at grave peril to every possibility of wisdom and
well-being." For Agee, an understanding of sense experience
is essential to an understanding of identity. His elaborate
description of the components of the odors of the Gudgers'
house, for example, contributes to our understanding not
only of the house but also of its inhabitants and of their
daily activities.

In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men Agee writes, "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 of one root, and are identical:
and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever
quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite
had precedent." Experiences compose an individual's
existence, and the function of art is to help the reader or
viewer approach another's experience in order to come to know
him better. In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men this process
occurs both with the tenant farmers and with Agee and Evans
themselves.

Agee writes, "I am respectful of experience in general
and of any experience whatever, and . . . it turns out that
going through, remembering, and trying to tell of anything is

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25 Helen Levitt and James Agee, A Way of Seeing: Photographs of New
26 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 154-55.
27 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 56.
of itself (not because the Experience was either hot or cold, but of itself, and as a part of the experience) interesting and important to me: and . . . as I have said before, I am interested in the actual and in telling of it, and so would wish to make clear that nothing here is invented."\textsuperscript{28} As with Dewey, the critical factors for Agee are "the actual" and "telling of it"; subjective experience interacts with communication and community for an approximation of objectivity. Agee's interest in communication parallels Dewey's emphasis on cooperation. Moreover, since the truth consists of sense experiences, real objectivity is only potentially attainable through a comparison with others' experiences. "The truth" is what Agee experiences; it is functional in the pragmatic sense of relativity. Thus, "nothing is invented," even if he remembers "wrong."

Like Dewey, Agee has a theory about experience; in \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, he discusses what he calls "four planes" of experience.

Very roughly I know that to get my own sort of truth out of the experience I must handle it from four planes:

That of recall; of reception, contemplation, \textit{in medias 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

\textsuperscript{28} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 244.
return.

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

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.

These are, obviously, in strong conflict. So is any piece of human experience. So, then, inevitably, is any even partially accurate attempt to give any experience as a whole.29

The third plane, "By recall and memory," parallels Dewey's stress on consummatory experience, with elements of memory and imagination added to present experience; the fourth, "As I try to write it," mirrors Dewey's emphasis on communication.

Quite often, as Agee promises, several of these planes occur at the same time. For instance, consider this passage from Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: "The floors are made of wide planks, between some of which the daylighted earth is visible, and are naked of any kind of paint or cloth or linoleum covering whatever, and paths have been smoothed on

29 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 243.
them by bare feet, in a subtly uneven surface on which the polished knots are particularly beautiful."30 In one image, Agee can capture a place, its inhabitants, their tribulations, and the peculiar grace of their everyday lives. Words like "daylighted," "naked," and "smoothed" lend a sense of action to the static scene, making the image come alive even before the reader notices the passive voice and comes to consider the agency of the action. Once he realizes the kind of toil inherent in "polish[ing]" the wood, the term "beautiful" takes on a new significance; the wood is beautiful in itself, and in the type of hardship it represents, and in its Deweyan aesthetic combination of beauty-for-itself and "earned" everyday beauty.

In addition, Agee evokes in the reader a replication of Agee's own aesthetic response to the planks. The wood is not what Dewey would call an "art product," although Agee's description of it is, but it brings about in Agee what Dewey would call "an experience," an active aesthetic response, which Agee recounts for the reader and which the reader, through Agee's elegantly simple prose, feels for himself. In terms of Agee's planes, this passage appears to have been written "as it happened," but at the same time, it contains an element of contemplation in medias res, which certainly translates into an awareness of the problems of writing about it. It is difficult to tell in many passages how much Agee

30 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 155.
is elaborating on recall and memory; here, it seems to be a straightforward rendition of an image as he saw it.

Issues of reported experience are somewhat more clear cut for Evans' work. Instead of an aspect of time or memory on his part, the mediating force in Evans' work is space or selection of point of view. Every major character mentioned in the text appears in an individual portrait in Book One. In addition, there are photographs of these people's habitats and environs, empty and from "their" points of view. Finally, each section includes a group of photographs of these people at work and interacting with others. So we as viewers are to replicate each individual's experience by seeing him or her head on, confronting him or her eye to eye, by seeing each individual's home and work area "through his or her eyes," and by seeing each of them in candid poses, from an outsider's point of view. In each case, Evans mixes these approaches instead of grouping them according to purpose.

Evans' 8x10 negative photographs of the era contain hardly any people, except for the tenant portraits, and even these look as immobile as pieces of furniture. People seem to be treated as objects.\textsuperscript{31} These photographic subjects are usually presented singly, instead of being depicted as interacting with one another; rather than showing us these

\textsuperscript{31} J.A. Ward, \textit{American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985) 84, 152.
people having experiences, Evans exposes us to their environments, so as to evoke in us as viewers a replication of their experiences. Or, if it is not an exact replication, at least it is an evocation of what our experiences would be like in those settings. Accomplishing what Dewey describes as the task of the artist, Evans makes us participate, makes us think, and makes us feel.

Another way that Evans fulfills his purpose of making us participate is in his ordering of the groups of photographs. Dewey writes, "A pause in music is not a blank, but is a rhythmic silence that punctuates what is done while at the same time it conveys an impulsion forward, instead of arresting at the point which it defines." Evans' arrangement of blank pages between the sections of his photographs works exactly in this way. In addition, within each section there is a rhythm of placement of the photographs. Dewey explains,

Experiencing like breathing is a rhythm of intakings and outgivings. . . . William James aptly compared the course of a conscious experience to the alternate flights and perchings of a bird. The flights and perchings are intimately connected with one another; they are not so many unrelated lightings succeeded by a number of equally unrelated hoppings. Each resting place in experience is an undergoing in

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which is absorbed and taken home the consequences of
t prior doing. . . .

. . . Fulfilling, consummating, are continuous
functions, not mere ends, located at one place only.
An engraver, painter, or writer is in process of
completing at every stage of his work. He must at each
point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole
and with reference to a whole to come.33

This process applies to the task of the artist, and in Book
One of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men it applies equally to the
task of the viewer.

Experience exists on several levels in Let Us Now
Praise Famous Men: specifically, first, the experience of
the tenants; second, the filter of Agee's and Evans' actual
experiences, of their experiences as they relate them, and of
their experiences of relating; and finally, our experience
in viewing the photographs and reading the text. The process
is complicated by the fact that in documentary the artist is
at the same time spectator and representer, becoming a
middleman of sorts.

J.A. Ward articulates a problem with this filter,
claiming that Agee was aware that language results in "a
translation of an experience rather than a rendering of it."34
Evans was also aware of the mediation involved in

33 Dewey, Art as Experience, 62-63.
34 Ward, "James Agee's Aesthetic of Silence," 196.
presentation of images of experience. The filter strains out portions of the tenants' experience, through Agee's and Evans' experiences, for us to apply to our own experience. This straining involves selection of what to report on the parts of the mediators, Agee and Evans. Dewey states,

The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest. In both, an act of abstraction, that is of extraction of what is significant, takes place. In both, there is comprehension in its literal signification—that is, a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole. There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist.  

Once the material is presented to us, we select what to focus upon, in a manner similar to Agee's and Evans' previous selections.

The question of the right to select is defended by Dewey. "Taking my stand, then, upon the connection of esthetic effect with qualities of all experience as far as any experience is unified, I would ask how art can be expressive and yet not be imitative or slavishly

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37 Wilma Dykeman in *To Render a Life*. 
representative, save by selecting and ordering the energies in virtue of which things act upon us and interest us?"\(^{38}\) Selection is not only inescapable, it is necessary to the artist's task. The issue of selection in photography is more subtle than it is in narrative, and the filter is more transparent. In replying to the statement "the camera never lies," Agee and Evans are in agreement. Agee writes,

> It is clear enough by now to most people that "The camera never lies" is a foolish saying. Yet it is doubtful whether most people realize how extraordinarily slippery a liar the camera is. The camera is just a machine, which records with impressive and as a rule very cruel faithfulness precisely what is in the eye, mind, spirit, and skill of its operators to make it record.

> It is, in fact, hard to get the camera to tell the truth.\(^{39}\) Evans responds to the question in an interview with Yale Alumni Magazine:

("Do you think it's possible for the camera to lie?")

> It certainly is. It almost always does.

("Is it all right for the camera to lie?")

> No, I don't think it's all right for anything or anybody to lie. But it's beyond control. I just feel

\(^{38}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 189.

that honesty exists relatively in people here and there.\textsuperscript{40}

Evans holds a pragmatic view of truth as a relative function. Because meaning has to do with consequences of actions, shifting "truth" is seen as that property of experience which works in a practical situation. Agee, too, is aware of the difficulty of defining "truth" as anything other than what the recorder has in mind. Stanley Cavell states, "To say that photographs lie implies that they might tell the truth; but the beauty of their nature is exactly to say nothing, neither to lie nor not to."\textsuperscript{41} So, for Cavell, Agee, and Evans, the meaning of the statement depends on what is intended by the phrase "to lie."

Agee quotes Margaret Bourke-White as saying, "One photograph might lie, but a group of pictures can't."\textsuperscript{42} The problem with this statement becomes clear when one considers the possibility of a series of misleading photographs. How could such a series be any more "truthful" than a single misleading photograph? Agee and Evans, who continually emphasize the inescapable distortion of the filter, disagree with Bourke-White on this point and on others. For example, Evans remarks, "You notice that Agee is saying ad nauseum almost throughout the book: 'For God's sake, we must not

\textsuperscript{40} Qtd. in Evans, \textit{Walker Evans at Work}, 238.


\textsuperscript{42} Qtd. in Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 453.
exploit these people, and how awful it is if we are. And we are working for this goddam profit-making corporation that's paying us, and we feel terrible about it.' You didn't find that in Bourke-White anywhere. Nor even awareness of the fact that she should have felt this." Bourke-White does not share Agee and Evans' view of the moral responsibilities that come with the artistic endeavor. Giving a true representation, either in narrative or in photographic image, involves an honest representation of the material at hand and an accurate measure of the reader's or viewer's sensibilities.

Agee and Evans come together in their Deweyan conjuring of consummatory experience in the reader. According to Dewey, art, which requires the artist to interact with his subject matter by comparing it with his own experience, finds meaning in its ability to generate an experience. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men achieves this goal of interaction, both in Agee and Evans' cooperation with their subject matter and in their evocation of experience in us as readers. They interact with the tenant families, and in telling the story of their interaction, they cause us to cooperate with the two of them, as well as with their relation of their own cooperation, and on a more removed level with the tenants.

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43 Qtd. in Stott, 223.
45 Alexander, 241.
That we approach the tenants through the filter of Agee's and Evans' experiences contributes to our understanding of the authors as well as of those whom they examine;  *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* fulfills the Deweyan requirement of encouraging us to participate in consummatory experience just as its authors had.

According to John Steinbeck there are two methods of documentary, the general and the specific.  *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* falls into the category of the specific, which invites the viewer to identify with a small representative group; this identification involves an element of participation on the part of the viewer.  *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* differs from the other documentary textual/photographic projects of its era in that the others emphasize the overview.\textsuperscript{46} The specific category lends itself more readily to the type of participation Dewey advocates. Agee writes in a review of *National Velvet*, "If the audience could have experienced what the girl experienced. . . ."\textsuperscript{47} The point in art is for the audience to identify with the thing represented in a reciprocal fashion. Experience is of utmost importance in this process for Agee and Evans, as it is for Dewey, and both of them make use of what Dewey calls consummatory experience, particularly with regard to perception of events. Despite the selection necessary to

\textsuperscript{46} Puckett, 121-22.

their task, they encourage the reader to participate in the artistic process.
II. PERCEPTION

Truly to make what we perceive
Identical with what we see.

--James Agee

We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie
that makes us realize truth. . . .

--Pablo Picasso

Thinking in terms of experience involves the idea of
perception, an important concept in both Art as Experience
and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Dewey's description of
"consummatory experience," which he relates to perception,
includes, in addition to the goal of doing and undergoing, an
element of memory, of pastness brought to bear upon present
experience. This cooperative past-present imprinting results
in construction of the individual's aesthetic, which
necessarily introduces a moral phase into perception and
apprehension of reality. Aspects of the moral element of
aesthetic experience include unity, form, and truth.

Dewey, Agee, and Evans share a concern for presentation
of the art of the everyday, examining daily habits,
surroundings, and tools as aesthetic. The problem with
participation in Agee and Evans' examination of the art of
the everyday lies with what they examine; some of their
objects of study are human beings who are not allowed by Agee
and Evans' selective process to participate in constructing
an aesthetic framework for themselves. This problem lends
itself to a comparison of what the characters and authors of
Let Us Now Praise Famous Men think of as aesthetic. In the pragmatic design beauty, like truth, is a relative value.

Agee's essay in A Way of Seeing defines the role of perception in art. "The artist's task is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of aesthetic reality, but to perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world, and to make an undisturbed and faithful record of the instant in which this movement of creativeness achieves its most expressive crystallization."¹ It is the responsibility of the artist to point out "aesthetic reality" or potential beauty to the viewer or reader. Evans, too, understands the value of perception. He said in conversation, "Agee of course was another matter altogether. He didn't teach, he perceived; and that in itself was a stimulation. We all need that kind of stimulation, wherever it comes from. In a sense you test your work through that and it bounces back strengthened. My work happened to be just the style and matter for his eye."² So, for both Agee and Evans perception is a valuable component of participation in reality; the artist acts in a Socratic manner, helping the viewer or reader to recognize the beauty inherent in actuality.

Agee writes,

For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally

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¹ Agee, A Way of Seeing, 4.
² Evans, qtd. in Katz, 83.
and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.³

In this famous sentence from Let Us Now Praise Famous Men critics have focused on the harmonious phrase "the cruel radiance of what is." It is worth noting, however, that Agee's emphasis is on the "effort to perceive." The point of the endeavor is the "seeking to perceive"; one may only hope to approximate reality "as it stands." One critic claims that Agee's view that the perceiver's values affect the "truth" reported did not emerge until after World War II.⁴ In light of the sentence quoted above, however, it would seem that the germ of the significance of perception existed in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. By the time he was writing film criticism, Agee had certainly fully come to this position, indicating the importance of communication through poetic devices and participation of the reader or viewer in the process of perception.⁵ His film scripts also indicate a

³ Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 11.
⁴ Barson, 75, 120.
⁵ Mark Wilson Flanders, Film Theory of James Agee (New York: Arno, 1977) 44, 46, 74, 76.
concern for use of the camera as an active participant.\textsuperscript{6}
Similarly, Agee forces his reader to participate,\textsuperscript{7}
recognizing that cooperation is essential to the effort to perceive.

Dewey also stresses the significance of perception in consummatory experience. He writes,

For to perceive, a beholder must \textit{create} his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.\textsuperscript{8}

This act of recreation occurs on two levels in Agee's text. At one stage, Agee perceives an object, such as the Gudgers' flowerbed, as a work of art, ordering the elements of the whole to create his own experience. On another level, we as readers must undertake a similar process in recreating Agee's description. For instance, he describes the flowerbeds as

\begin{itemize}
  \item Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 60.
\end{itemize}
follows.

Each window is framed round with a square of boards.

Ten or twelve feet out in this yard, and precisely in line with these front windows, as if they were projections of them, and of about the same size, two hollow squares of wood are laid upon the earth and are sunk level with it: and these are in fact two projections and are related with these windows, and indeed are windows, of a sort: for they are intended to let through their frames from the blank wall and darkness of the earth a particular and gracious, pleasing light; they are flower-beds. The one at the left is sprung through with the same indiscriminate fennels of the yard; the one on the right, the same. But here among this rambling of bastardy stands up, on its weak stem, one fainting pale magenta petunia, which stares at its tired foot; and this in the acreage of these three farms is the one domestic flower.⁹

For him, the yard is more than a mass of weeds with two ramshackle corrals containing a single bloom. In recognizing and recreating the beauty of the actuality and of its intention, Agee creates a poetic description that encourages us, in order to understand it, to cooperate and contribute to it, much in the same manner as he did with the yard. We must

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⁹ Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 139-40.
think. We note, for example, the juxtaposition of round and square, the geometric specifications, the emphasis through passive voice on the process of building the beds, Agee's characterization of them as physical projections of the windows at the same time he projects onto them his own interpretation of them as figurative windows, the personification of the flower, which is not only fainting but tired, as the tenants are, the sprung rhythm of the bed sprung through with fennel, the oxymoron of a "pale magenta" and the echo of "fainting pale," the identification of light, figurative light from the flowerbed windows, with cultivation and art. Agee recognizes that the flowerbeds are a poem, and his description of them is one also.

Dewey emphasizes that "[t]he product of art--temple, painting, statue, poem--is not the work of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties."\textsuperscript{10} Agee and Evans interact with their environment in such a way as to produce an art work of their own, and in so doing they have also produced an art product, the book, that in turn induces us as readers to participate in an art work of our own as we read the text and study the photographs. Evans makes us as percipients gather details and particulars, as he had to in selecting which shots to take. The order of the last section

\textsuperscript{10} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 218.
of Book One of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*11 compels us to draw inferences and posit hypotheses in order to get any meaning out of the photographs. For example, a juxtaposition of two photographs of doorways,12 one framed in elaborately ornate gingerbread, the other in a tangled garland of vines, forces us to compare the two with regard to environment, social setting, economics, and beauty. Evans evokes a consummatory experience on our parts, making us perceive or actively do, rather than see or passively undergo.

Discussing "doing" and "undergoing," Dewey indicates that perception occurs not merely upon having the experience, but upon reflecting and understanding the meaning of the experience.13 The role of perception lies in making connections between "doing" and "undergoing." Dewey writes of the potter and painter's tasks, "Moreover, at each stage there is anticipation of what is to come. This anticipation is the connecting link between the next doing and its outcome for sense. What is done and what is undergone are thus reciprocally, cumulatively, and continuously instrumental to each other."14 The reader of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* must participate in the flux of doings and undergoings, passively receiving new bits of information from Evans or Agee and actively assimilating them into the empirical

framework he has built from previous bits of information.

Dewey's influence is visible in Lewis Hine's recognition that the viewer must be active in examining photographs in series,\(^{15}\) and Evans also realizes this fact. An element of remembering is present in the viewer's action. Dewey writes, "To see, to perceive, is more than to recognize. It does not identify something present in terms of a past disconnected from it. The past is carried into the present so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter."\(^{16}\) This awareness of the past makes the difference between an experience and a perception. In addition, this is why one person's perception differs from another's, because it has a different past tied to the experience.

Both Evans and Agee show an interest in the relationship of past to present. Evans writes, "Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past."\(^{17}\) Agee's awareness of art's connection of the realms of sense experience, one's present, and morality, one's past,\(^{18}\) indicates an understanding of Dewey's idea. He writes, "All of the past one finds useful is 'usable' because it is of the present."\(^{19}\) According to Dewey, "Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are


\(^{18}\) Barson, 117.

\(^{19}\) Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 353.
not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reenforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is." This passage relates to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, for example, in that George Gudger is most certainly troubled by his past and perturbed by his anticipation of the future. Therefore, he cannot celebrate anything about his own life, whereas Agee and Evans, who possess the luxury of not having to worry about the past and future, can. One of the most "artistic" passages of the book, the thunderstorm, describes a time when all of the participants, including Agee, have forgotten to be troubled by the past or perturbed by the future and when they are very much at one with their environment.

*Art as Experience* proclaims, "The difference between that elusive and fragmentary thing psychologists call a sensation and a perception is the singleness, the integrated unity, of the latter." Evans achieves this integrated unity; rather than a "disconnected succession of snapshots," he presents us with a portfolio, a scrapbook that tells a story by building a sequence of images one upon another. In a 1935 analysis of *Art as Experience* in

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comparison to Dewey's earlier aesthetic theory, E.A. Shearer points out, "What he makes evident is how sensations gather to themselves, condense upon themselves, an increasing meaning."24 Another name for the fusion of past sensations with present ones is "funding."25 Dewey claims, "But the fundamental mistake is the confusion of the physical product with the esthetic object, which is that which is perceived."26 Therefore, Evans' photograph of Allie Mae Burroughs is not only different for one viewer than another, but different from who she really was. "For an object is perceived by a cumulative series of interactions ... in a continuous building-up of the esthetic object."27 Attempts to update the tenants' narratives28 miss this point in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men;29 the tenants exist for us as characters in the book. "Annie Mae" is that picture and those words, and according to Dewey, this means that she will be different for you than for me and also different than she was for herself, because of the unity of Agee and Evans' presentation in combination with

26 Dewey, Art as Experience, 223.
29 Shiner, 177.
all of our differing past experiences.

Funding is affected by the form the supplied information takes. As Dewey puts it, "Form is a character of every experience that is an experience. Art in its specific sense enacts more deliberately and fully the conditions that effect this unity."30 The text of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is at the same time highly structured and rather loose. Its form has been analyzed as a sonata, a religious service, a theater performance, and various other metaphors.31 William Stott claims that the apparent lack of order in the text is its order. "The form imitates the process of consciousness, wherein perception is sudden, inexplicable, quickly lost, and always beginning again."32 This idea fits Dewey's definition of form itself as experienced, as a name for an "organization of energies."33 I.A. Richards, Agee's visiting professor at Harvard, states, "The business of the poet, as we have seen, is to give order and coherence, and so freedom, to a body of experience."34 Agee's text, at first appearing to lack order,

30 Dewey, Art as Experience, 142.
32 Stott, 310.
achieves coherence when examined in any one of these patterns.

Samuel Hynes claims that the form of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a series of efforts to solve the insoluble problem of attempting to express actuality in language. In this endeavor, Agee's text mirrors the apparent lack of form in nature. Agee elaborates, "The forms of this text are chiefly those of music, of motion pictures, and of improvisations and recordings of states of emotion, and of belief." At the same time that the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has the feel of an improvisation or of stream-of-consciousness technique, it develops like a piece of music or a film, each new fragment of information relying for meaning on accumulated fragments from before. Thus, Agee's text, like Evans' photographs, fulfills Dewey's requirement of integrated unity in funding.

For Dewey, art and life are inseparable; the title *Art as Experience* is very clear in its meaning. Agee also wants to eliminate distinctions between art and life, emphasizing the practical uses of an endeavor such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In 1926 George Herbert Mead, a friend of Dewey's and his colleague at the University of Chicago,

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37 Edman, "Dewey and Art," 55.
wrote about motion pictures, "A genuine aesthetic effect is produced if the pleasure in that which is seen serves to bring out the values of the life that one lives."³⁹ Let Us Now Praise Famous Men accomplishes such an effect. The search for truth and moral values is bound to aesthetics for Dewey,⁴⁰ and Agee⁴¹ and Evans⁴² also believe that their ventures will result in getting at truth. The value structure sought through art, however, is necessarily individualistic and subjective, due to the highly individual nature of experience, both in the first degree and in funding. Form and unity affect the quest for moral values.

Evans says in response to an interview question on the variation in prints, "Take one negative and print it several ways, and just one will be right. It's a question of truth. You can make a very false picture from a wonderful negative, or you can make a true one."⁴³ So, for Evans, truth resides not only in the ordering of the series or in his editing process, but in the quality of each photograph as well. One

⁴⁰ Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, 86; Morton White, Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) 278; Rockefeller, 175; Alexander, 269; Westbrook, 415.
⁴² Ward, American Silences, 161.
⁴³ Evans, qtd. in Katz, 86.
print is more apt to bring out values than another. Agee's moral quest also takes shape in his subject matter.44

In Art as Experience Dewey makes a case for the art of the everyday.45 He writes, "The understanding of art and of its role in civilization is not furthered by setting out with eulogies of it nor by occupying ourselves exclusively at the outset with great works of art recognized as such. The comprehension which theory essays will be arrived at by a detour; by going back to experience of the common or mill run of things to discover the esthetic quality such experience possesses."46 Dewey's call for a return to the accoutrements of everyday life for aesthetic fulfillment was generally heeded. For instance, according to Warren I. Susman, "In 1934 The Museum of Modern Art . . . held an important show it called 'Machine Art.' Common household and industrial objects--stoves, toasters, kitchenware, chairs, vacuum cleaners, cash registers, laboratory equipment--were displayed as works of art."47 Agee also participates in this trend of recognizing the beauty of the everyday,48 and this

45 See Graña, 136-37; Rockefeller, 396-97.
46 Dewey, Art as Experience, 16.
recognition involves a moral element.\textsuperscript{49}

Agee's beautiful prose alone would be aesthetically pleasing, but in addition, he is a master of perception. That is, rather than beautifying something that is not beautiful, in description he calls our attention to something that is potentially beautiful if truly examined. Squalor, especially squalor that has become routine for those forced to live in it, becomes poignantly graceful when Agee describes it. The same effect occurs in Evans' photographs.\textsuperscript{50} This recognition of beauty in the everyday involves a moral choice in its attempt to escape the class snobbishness involved in divisions of art and experience.

Agee is hesitant to classify \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} as what would be considered a standard art work. "\textit{[F]or 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.}"\textsuperscript{51} According to Agee, this "would be an art and a way of seeing existence based, let us say, on an intersection of astronomical physics, geology, biology, and (including psychology) anthropology, known and spoken of not in scientific but in human terms. Nothing that springs from this intersection can conceivably be insignificant: everything is most significant in proportion as it approaches

\textsuperscript{49} Moreau, 270.
\textsuperscript{50} Stott, 273, 296.
\textsuperscript{51} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 111.
in our perception, simultaneously, its own singular terms and its ramified kinship and probable hidden identification with everything else.\textsuperscript{52} He emphasizes that \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} has more at stake than the simple effort at entertainment. As an attempt to communicate the interrelations of the human condition, the book takes on a moral air in its efforts to apprehend "truth" and in its quest for a system of values to share.

All three of these thinkers spurn the distinction of art as something "special" to be hoarded away in museums. Agee writes, "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art."\textsuperscript{53} Evans is also hesitant about the role of the standard work of art, saying,

\begin{quote}
Very quickly and very early on I learned the true straight path for me, the path of getting away from "arty" work, the obviously beautiful. When you are young you are open to influences, and you go to them, you go to museums. Then the street becomes your museum; the museum itself is bad for you. You don't want your work to spring from art; you want it to commence from life, and that's in the street now. I'm no longer comfortable in a museum. I don't want to go to them, don't want to be 'taught' anything, don't want to see 'accomplished' art. . . . Museums have a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 245.
\textsuperscript{53} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 15.
wonderful function, but there comes a time when the artist had better stay out of them, I think.\textsuperscript{54}

The type of art to which Agee and Evans aspire is somewhat different from "regular" art and hence more difficult to define, as \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} is difficult to categorize.

Dewey writes,

[Art] is a quality of activity. Like any mode of activity, it is marked by \textit{movement} in this direction and that. . . . A tendency, a movement, occurs within certain limits which define its direction. But tendencies of experience do not have limits that are exactly fixed. . . .

Thus any one can select passages of literature and say without hesitation this is poetic, that is prosaic. But this assigning of qualities does not imply that there is one entity called poetry and another called prose. It implies, once more, a felt quality of a movement toward a limit. Hence the quality exists in many degrees and forms. Some of its lesser degrees manifest themselves in unexpected places.\textsuperscript{55}

Not only do Agee's nearly five hundred pages of text constitute a prose-poem, but his recognition of poetry in the everyday also crosses the boundaries of what is usually

\textsuperscript{54} Evans, qtd. in Katz, 88.

\textsuperscript{55} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 227-28.
defined as "art." For example, he claims that "the partition of the Gudgers' front bedroom is importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem" and that Annie Mae on her wedding day "was such a poem as no human being shall touch."

Agee is aware that art, no matter how concerned with the ordinary or how revolutionary, is still the privilege of those who are advantaged enough in money, class, education, and background to receive it. He writes,

'Sense of beauty': Is this an 'instinct' or a product of 'training.' In either case there appears to be almost no such thing among the members of these three families, and I have a strong feeling that the 'sense of beauty,' like nearly everything else, is a class privilege. . . . They live on land, and in houses, and under skies and seasons, which all happen to seem to me beautiful beyond almost anything else I know, and they themselves, and the clothes they wear, and their motions, and their speech, are beautiful in the same intense and final commonness and purity: but by what chance have I this 'opinion' or 'perception' or, I might say, 'knowledge'? And on the other hand, why do they appear so completely to lack it?

This question of class privilege is a problem in both Art as Experience and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, and Agee is

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56 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 204.
57 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 286.
58 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 314.
aware of it. Although he knows it will be a failed attempt, he still tries to circumvent the class issues involved in a representation of "beauty."

The issues of beauty, what is perceived as beauty, and what becomes beautiful in its description are paramount for both Dewey and Agee. As we have seen, perception with the individuality inherent in funding leads to the development of aesthetic structures and definitions of beauty. The issue of participation appears, raising questions like, why does Annie Mae hate her house so much and think it is ugly? And, more significantly, why does Agee think it is beautiful? The answers are not so simple as would first appear. Annie Mae has attempted to participate by decorating her house as best she can. "Pinned all along the edge of this mantel, a broad fringe of white tissue pattern-paper which Mrs. Gudger folded many times on itself and scissored into pierced geometrics of lace, and of which she speaks as her last effort to make this house pretty." However, despite her feeble attempts to create beauty, her perception of the house remains one of ugliness, possibly due to the limitations of her past experience in funding of the perceptive process. The tenants' aesthetic frames are definitely quite different from Agee's.

He comments on the tenants' aesthetic habit of

decorating work shoes.

Many men, by no means all, like to cut holes through
the uppers for foot-spread and for ventilation: and in
this they differ a good deal between utility and art.
You seldom see purely utilitarian slashes: even the
bluntest of these are liable to be patterned a little
more than mere use requires: on the other hand, some
shoes have been worked on with a wonderful amount of
patience and studiousness toward a kind of beauty,
taking the memory of an ordinary sandal for a model,
and greatly elaborating and improving it. I have seen
shoes so beautifully worked in this way that their
durability was greatly reduced.\textsuperscript{61}

In this passage, Agee attempts a discussion of what the
tenants perceive as aesthetic, yet his appreciation is on a
different level from theirs. He approaches allowing them to
participate, short of quoting them, yet his description
remains selected and filtered, as is everything else in the
book. Evans utilizes the same technique, as, for instance,
in his allusion to Van Gogh in the photograph of Gudger's
work shoes.\textsuperscript{62} Appreciations of beauty are definitely
influenced by class.

Agee writes, "but at present a few more remarks on the
'beauty' itself, and on the moral problems involved in

\textsuperscript{61} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 262-63.
\textsuperscript{62} Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, Book One, xiv; Stott, 273.
evaluating it. . . . To those who own and create it this 'beauty' is, however, irrelevant and undiscernible. It is best discernible to those who by economic advantages of training have only a shameful and a thief's right to it: and it might be said that they have any 'rights' whatever only in proportion as they reorganize the ugliness and disgrace implicit in their privilege of perception." According to Dewey, to be complete a work of art must contain an element of participation, yet Annie Mae is not allowed to participate by Agee and Evans' aesthetic frame or by the social constrictions placed upon her. More than likely she does not view her life as a work of art. Mead claims that "those that can import the aesthetic experience into activity must be fortunately engaged and engaged in rewarding undertakings," a major difference between Agee and Evans and the tenants. That Agee was not as busy as the tenants made possible the withdrawal and resulting perspective necessary to his perception of their environment as beautiful. In the cooperative effort at a common task, Mead claims, "something of the delight of consummation can crown all intermediate processes." However, it is doubtful that George Gudger would tell of the delight of plowing a field for cotton or the esprit de corps with his mules. At the same time, the

63 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 202-203.
64 Bernstein, John Dewey, 156.
66 Ward, American Silences, 77.
tenants do not lack a sense of what is beautiful. For instance, the Gudgers insisted that Evans take a family photograph in the "Sunday portrait" style which was not included in either edition of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Evans later said that he wished it had been included and that he would put it in a new edition.

The awareness of the tenants' differing valuations of the beautiful and different aesthetic frames is also apparent in Agee's examination of their fondness for symmetry. He claims, "all really simple and naive people incline strongly toward exact symmetries," and adds a footnote: "And many of the most complex, and not many in between." Both Evans' photograph and Agee's description of the Gudgers' front room mantel illustrates the tenants' tendency toward symmetry. Two vases sit equidistant from the china plate, which is placed exactly in the center of the shelf, almost directly underneath a calendar, which is in turn framed on either side with pictures. Even the muddied dress shoes are placed precisely in the center of the shelf underneath the table. Agee's interest in the tenants' symmetrical arrangements in decor, architecture, and interior design, however, lies in the fact that none of the symmetries is

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68 See Stott, 284-87, for a discussion of this photograph. The photograph appears in this book on p. 63 [unnumbered] of the photograph section located between pp. 140 and 141 of the text.
69 Stott, 287.
70 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 156.
71 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, ix.
72 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 162-65.
exact. The tenants' efforts are toward balanced proportions, but Agee is attracted by the "sprung" symmetrical similarities to Oriental asymmetry. Class, education, and background play a role in Agee's funding and therefore in determination of what he perceives as beautiful. His preferences may indicate a certain aesthetic prejudice, yet the tendencies he observes exist even in the tenants' children as adults. A wall in Elizabeth Tingle's living room, for example, holds Evans' portraits of her father and mother, one of which is basically square in composition, and the other of which is a narrow vertical rectangle. Both of these photographs have been matted and framed to the same proportions, and they hang next to each other on the wall. However, they are hung at slightly different heights, one perhaps an inch higher than the other.74

Agee and Evans share an interest in perception, particularly in their emphasis on bringing past experience to bear on present. In their recognition of a moral function for art and a valuing of the art of the everyday, they approach Dewey. All three thinkers encounter a problem with participation on the individual level. Although necessary selection allows the reader to be a participant, it does not do so for the individual examined. Dewey writes, "The material itself is widely human. . . . The material of

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73 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 144, 230.
74 Maharidge and Williamson, Book One, 16.
esthetic experience in being human—human in connection with the nature of which it is a part—is social. . . . For while it is produced and is enjoyed by individuals, those individuals are what they are in the content of their experience because of the cultures in which they participate." Art brings together individuals who differ according to background. Agee and Evans limit the participation of the tenant families to a certain extent, but they themselves have been affected by the community of these people. Their trip to Alabama changed the families there, and it also changed Agee and Evans, and through their filter, us, as well. Therefore, in a sense, although the tenants do not participate in consummatory experience in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, we as readers are assisted in our perception by their experience.

75 Dewey, Art as Experience, 329.
III. COMMUNITY

Art is a social function. --Christopher Caudwell

... every man's experience ought to be worth something to the community from which he drew it, no matter what that experience may be, so long as it was gleaned along the line of some decent, honest work... --Jacob Riis

In addition to subjective, individual experience, Dewey examines the more objective, cooperative idea of community in *Art as Experience*. Agee and Evans also employ the concept of community in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, reporting on the set of interrelationships that they observe among the tenants. Dewey points out that community and communication are closely related concepts, and Agee and Evans utilize his prescription to relate what is experienced on an individual basis. Particularly in its examination of the tenants' work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* reveals the processes of cooperation and participation of which the artists partake. Dewey's views on work and art apply to Agee and Evans' project in imparting what they have observed about one community to another, that of their readers. Agee and Evans believe Dewey's claim that one of art's purposes is social betterment; both individual experience and the life of the community may be improved through art. In the case of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, art should be able to improve not only the tenants' community but also the reader's.
According to Dewey, "life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it."¹ Agee concurs with regard to nature and man. Relating to one's surroundings leads to relations with others in the attempt to deal with the common environment. This interaction is especially apparent in the case of the tenants, who are greatly dependent on factors like the weather. For example, Agee writes about cotton farming,

There are times of year when all these three [men, women, children] are overlapped and collaborated, all in the field in the demand, chiefly, of cotton; but more largely, the woman is the servant of the day, and of immediate life, and the man is the servant of the year, and of the basis and boundaries of life, and is their ruler; and the children are the servants of their parents; ... and all this effort takes place between a sterile earth and an uncontrollable sky in whose propitiation is centered their chief reverence and fear, and the deepest earnestness of their prayers, who read in these machinations of their heaven all signs of a fate which the hardest work cannot much help, and, not otherwise than as the most ancient peoples of the earth, make their plantations in the unpitying pieties of the moon.²

¹ Dewey, Art as Experience, 19.
² Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 325.
Each individual, man, woman, or child, has a specific role at the same time that he or she bands together with the others in an attempt to overcome the indifferent elements. Dewey is careful to indicate that individualism and collectivism are not dichotomous constructs; rather, they are mutually defining and mutually dependent. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* depicts individuals coming together as groups in the photographs as well as in the text. In the case of each family section, Evans' emphasis is largely on individual and still-life environment shots, yet in each section there is a single family portrait, which falls after we have been introduced to at least one of its individual members and before we get to know some of its members better.

Agee and Evans' aesthetic project itself deals with the concepts of experience and community. Mead writes, "The reporter is generally sent out to get a story, not the facts. . . . Whether this form of the enjoyed result has an aesthetic function or not depends upon whether the story of the news, after being thrown into this acceptable form, serves to interpret to the reader his experience as the shared experience of the community of which he feels himself to be a part." Agee is particularly skillful at making us as readers feel this "shared experience," even though we and he will never be farmers. "There are three harrs you might

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use but the spring-toothed harr is best."6 Evans also draws us into the tenants' community of experience, primarily in his use of point of view to make us feel as though we are experiencing the tenants' environments. In the photographs ending the Burroughs and Tingle sections, for instance, we follow workers finished with a task carrying products to their uses. Mrs. Burroughs takes in the milk,7 and we tag wearily along behind her. Frank Tingle, harnessed in his overalls as his mule is harnessed in his yoke, slumps in the wagon, driving the cotton to gin,8 and we ride along in the back, glad of a moment's rest after picking. The Fields section ends simply with a view of the garden, and we feel the need to get to work on its collapsing fence.

Perception and description, which correspond to experience and community, are fundamental to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.9 Particularly in their descriptive modes, Agee and Evans make us feel a sense of community among the tenants at the same time that they include us in the community of their readers. However, the two realms of community of tenants and community of observers do not remain completely separate. Having traveled to Alabama in 1936 to participate in a community that was already established, Agee and Evans experienced not only the county seat of Greensboro

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6 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 331.
7 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, xvi.
8 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, xiv.
9 Stott, 309.
and the small town down the road from the tenants' farms, but
the communities made up of the families themselves,
particularly of the Gudgers. In addition to invading and
reporting on established communities at the city, town, and
farm levels, they changed these communities by participating
in them, even for a short time. Agee's prose reflects his
painful awareness of his and Evans' effect on the community.
For example, he writes of the Ricketts children, "(Jesus,
what could I ever do for you that would be enough.)"\textsuperscript{10} and "I
have no right, here, I have no real right, much as I want it,
and could never earn it, and should I write of it, must
defend it against my kind."\textsuperscript{11}

Evans, although his work is less obviously intrusive,
also realizes the import of his and Agee's observations on
the communities that they were visiting. For instance, one of
his photographs of Dora Mae Tingle includes his own shadow,\textsuperscript{12}
and he decides to omit it from the final collection. The
photograph was made on a 35mm negative rather than on an 8x10
glass negative; therefore, it is not clear whether Evans
consciously made the decision to make an editorial comment on
his awareness that he altered the community in which he
participated for a time by including his own image. Since
the 35mm cameras of the time were not equipped with reflex

\textsuperscript{10} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 386.
\textsuperscript{11} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 410.
\textsuperscript{12} Walker Evans, \textit{Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security
catalog number 293.
lenses, he may not have been aware of the inclusion of the image in the frame. However, in either case, his final decision to omit the photograph from either *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* or *American Photographs* indicates his awareness of the problem of observer altering the scene observed.

Evans' work is definitely concerned with the issue of group experience. From the first few pages of Book One of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, we get the sense of a community at work in the collection of people presented. Before knowing the names or functions of its members, we sense that this group clearly exists in a hierarchical structure. The first photographic subject stares confidently back at us, dressed in a coat and tie (if a rather shabby coat and tie, at least a coat and tie) over seersucker trousers. The sleeves are a bit too long, and he wears a wedding band. He is clean-shaven, his white hair is neatly combed, and from the look of his belly, he is well fed. One eyebrow is raised slightly, as though he resents our prying as we stare back. Upon turning the page we discover an individual of a different sort altogether. This man wears overalls with holes in them, and his shirt is ragged at the shoulders. He has not shaved recently, and he sits or squats in a doorway, facing the camera at an oblique angle. He, too, wears a little frown, but one gets the impression, almost, that he is

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13 Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Book One, i.
squirming under the microscopic eye of the camera. His curly hair is unkempt, and his neck is sunburned. Upon very close examination, we can see the reflection of the photographer in his eyes. The woman on the facing page is more akin to this man than to the first, but at the same time she appears to be more defiant than he. She is as weathered as the wood she stands against, and her hurt, defensive look dares us to imprint words like "hurt" and "defensive" on her.

Who are these people? We get a sense of their interrelatedness, even before we become aware of exactly what relations they have to one another. It is clear that the order of the photographs relates to some sort of vertical power structure. What turns out to be the landlord appears first in the Burroughs section, then the father, the mother, and eventually the children in order of descending age. In the Fields section the father appears first, then the entire family all at once. The Tingle section, like the Burroughs section, begins first with the father, then the mother, but the children appear in random patterns. In all three cases, the "communities" represented by Evans' arrangements mirror Agee's descriptions. George Gudger's life is dominated by his landlord; in Agee's depiction, all of the members of his family are given strong individual personalities. Bud Woods has the strongest character not only of his own family, but of all three of them. His family appears in the text largely

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15 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, iii.
as a single unit. Fred Ricketts' children, on the other hand, seem to run about, all looking alike and talking at the same time in a confusing animated flurry of Southern dialect. In each case, Evans' editorial comments contribute to these effects.

Differences in community among the three families also become apparent in the photographs in their groupings—not in Evans' editorial arrangement of the photographs, but in groupings of family members within the photographs themselves, especially in the "family portraits."¹⁶ The Burroughses are shown from a distance sitting on their porch, resting or sewing or talking to the children. They move about freely, ignoring or ignorant of the camera's watchful eye. The Fieldses appear in their bedroom, lined up in a row to face the camera. The women confront the camera assertively, while the man and the children focus on someone or something slightly off to one side. The Tengles also appear on a porch lined up to face the camera, but they seem much less relaxed under the observer's gaze than the members of the other two families. Although their expressions range from apprehensive to curious to bored, they appear somewhat less comfortable than the Burroughses or the Fieldses.

Unlike the children in the Burroughs photograph, which also centers on the mother, the children in the Tingle portrait crowd around their mother like a flock of anxious

¹⁶ Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, v, xx, xxxix.
chickens. Of course, part of the problem of composition here is caused by arranging eight bodies in such a small space. The Fieldses are arranged in a more linear fashion, the man flanked by two women. The men do not appear in the photographs of the Burroughses and of the Tengles. Again, visible presence of assembly raises issues of the communities at work among these individuals.

The arrangements of groups prompt us to ask questions such as, Who is the man in the Fields portrait? A father or a grandfather? Which one is he possibly married to? Is that his daughter on the bed with his grandchildren? (Of course, it turns out to be his second wife.) Knowing that clue and that that is her mother who lives with them on the right, we posit a community at work. They all look rather comfortable living in such cramped quarters and inhabiting such a cramped photograph. The woman on the left looks agreeably assertive. The child with the safety pin on her dress seems fairly complacent, while the little boy is active enough to be restrained. The older lady with the cartoon shoes has an expression difficult to define—is it mischievous or apprehensive? What do her clenched hands indicate? Our questions show that we are also members of a community of inquiry, at work in cooperation with Evans to discern facts about the communities he presents.

In addition to observing and reporting on a community and affecting it by their observation, Agee and Evans created
a new community— that of their readers. Agee's teacher I.A Richards describes a three-way community of poet, poem, and reader, an idea similar to what Dewey claims about the "triadic relation" in logic. Dewey writes, "There is the speaker, the thing said, and the one spoken to. The external object, the product of art, is the connecting link between artist and audience. Even when the artist works in solitude all three terms are present." Let Us Now Praise Famous Men provides the connection between the tenants' community and the reader's.

For example, Dewey writes, "The level and style of the arts of literature, poetry, ceremony, amusement, and recreation which obtain in a community, furnishing the staple objects of enjoyment in that community, do more than all else to determine the current direction of ideas and endeavors in the community. They supply the meanings and terms of which life is judged, esteemed, and criticized. For an outside spectator, they supply material for a critical evaluation of the life led by that community." Evans' photographs of the fireplaces at the Burroughses' and the Tengles' houses communicate differences in the two family groups. We, as a reading community, determine that the Burroughses are neat,

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18 Dewey, Art as Experience, 111.
20 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, ix, xlii.
ordered, clean, precise, symmetrical, and careful, while the Tengles are disordered, dirty, messy, assymetrical to some degree, and uncaring. The Burroughses, for instance, display a single wall calendar set to August 1936, the month in which the photograph was taken. On their mantel they have decorative objects, placed with a certain amount of care and an eye to design. The fireplace is whitewashed. The Tengles, on the other hand, have no fewer than four calendars on the wall, one from two years before the photograph was made. Their mantel is littered with useful objects such as a medicine bottle and an oil can. The fireplace is filthy. We as viewers infer differences in the Burroughses' and Tengles' communities, and the "differences" we posit tell as much about our community as about either of theirs.

Community intersects with communication. Without one the other cannot exist; moreover, the two social constructs exist symbiotically, not merely coexisting side by side, but depending mutually upon one another. The word "communicate" stems from the Latin verb communicāre, to impart or to participate. "Community," a related term, comes from the Latin communis, meaning common, public, universal, general, familiar, democratic.21 In his interest in community and communication, then, Dewey demonstrates concerns for such familiar themes as participation and democracy. He writes,

"Because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist. But it is the consequence of his work—which indeed lives only in communication when it operates in the experience of others." 22 The "experience of others" amounts to community for Dewey.

Dewey claims that communication is "the foundation and source of all activities and relations that are distinctive of internal union of human beings with one another." 23 Therefore community and communication are codependent. Dewey states, "For it is by activities that are shared and by language and other means of intercourse that qualities and values become common to the experience of a group of mankind. Now art is the most effective mode of communication that exists." 24 It is clear that for Dewey art results in communication, 25 and it is through communication, that is, through comparisons of descriptions of experience, that the project of community is furthered. 26 Art, in particular, communicates by extolling experience, 27 and it is the principal means whereby individuals come together into communities.

22 Dewey, Art as Experience, 110.
23 Dewey, Art as Experience, 337.
25 Bernstein, John Dewey, 157; Hook, 207-08; Edman, "Dewey and Art," 58; Shearer, 659.
26 Kolenda, 13-14.
27 Edman, "Dewey and Art," 62.
In an Ageeian sentence Dewey writes, "In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience." 28 Both Agee and Evans attempt in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men to bridge the gap between two very different types of communities, the community of the tenants and the community of their readers. Dewey states, "Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen." 29 This is precisely the effect that Agee and Evans achieve in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

In addition to using the technique of consummatory experience, both Agee and Evans communicate facts about the tenants' community by drawing comparisons with our own. We not only experience "what the tenants experienced," but we actively participate in comparing their experiences with ours. Agee accomplishes this effect largely through calling our attention to his anomalous presence within the scene, while Evans achieves it by placing our point of view in the position of a tenant's. In the first case we are shown

28 Dewey, Art as Experience, 110.
29 Dewey, Art as Experience, 248-49.
juxtapositions of community experience; in the second we see them for ourselves.

Thirties documentary is held to be about communication in general but Agee faced the additional problem of "attempting to devise a new method of communication." Dewey also encountered many of the same problems of communication that Agee did, in his attempt at a novel project. Irwin Edman writes of being in a class of Dewey's, "this profoundly original philosopher was struggling to find a vocabulary to say what had never been said in philosophy before, to find a diction that would express with exactness the reality of change and novelty, philosophical words having been used for centuries to express the absolute and the fixed. . . . Here was not an answer but a quest for light in the living moment of human experience." Both Dewey and Agee participate in this quest.

A major theme of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is that it is impossible, in words at any rate, to convey what has been experienced. Agee writes about "the grief of incommunicability," "In that grief I am now as then, with the small yet absolute comfort of knowing that communication of such a thing is not only beyond possibility but irrelevant to

30 Stott, xi.
it.  

Although his task is impossible, it is necessary to continue the attempt to communicate. Agee's sorrow stems from his feeling of obligation to relate truth, and this is a difficult problem for him precisely because "truth" is what is at stake. Since a failed attempt to communicate truth alters that truth, art has political and moral as well as aesthetic import.

For Agee and for Dewey, the issue of communication, like the issue of experience, relates to truth, and in both cases cooperation and participation are factors. In the case of experience and perception, the topic of reciprocity appears in the form of consummatory experience, cooperation of the reader with the artist; in the case of community, the reader participates by making comparisons among communities in order to understand cooperation within a single community. So, on one level, community appears in the groups depicted in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, and on another, it appears among the groups of Agee and Evans' readers. It is the goal of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men to bring these two sets of people closer together in mutual understanding. Of course, the participatory problem with Agee and Evans' effort is that the process is a one-way street; the reading community is allowed to bridge the gap between the two, whereas the tenant community is not.

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34 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 469.
35 Ohlin, 68, 75.
The cooperation issue is most visible in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the section on the work the tenants do. Mead comments that it is in the enjoyment of community in labor that the aesthetic attitude becomes apparent.36 Indicating that in the tenants' lives the community of the family exists solely for work,37 Agee explains that they deal with their lot by adopting toward it a certain "automism, a quiet, apathetic, and inarticulate yet deeply vindictive hatred, and at the same time utter hopelessness."38 It is clear that the drudgery of farming cotton, which Agee describes at length,39 is by no means the way to a fulfilling life. According to Mead's criterion of the feeling of community or camaraderie in one's labor, these tenants' attitudes cannot be aesthetic.

Agee's examination of their labor, however, is most certainly aesthetic. Richard Poirier states that the Robert Frost poem "Mowing," "manages to make the forms and processes of actual work into a version of literary archaeology. The implication . . . is that careful and intense ordinary labor, when applied to the things of this world, can gradually dissolve their commodity values into mythological ones. And this is just what any intense literary labor does, so it is suggested, when it digs into and transfigures words."40

40 Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Convergences: Inventories of
both levels, Agee approaches Poirier's statement by mythologizing. He writes,

But just roughly, only as a matter of suggestion, compute the work that has been done so far, in ten acres of land, remembering that this is not counting in ten more acres of corn and a few minor crops: how many times has this land been retraced in the rolling-gaited guidance and tensions and whippings and orderings of plowing, and with the steadily held horn, the steady arc of the right arm and right hand fist ing and opening like a heart, the heavy weight of the sack at the right side?  

Agee universalizes and makes us feel the actual weight of the sack, both at the same time. The image of the hand beating in time like a heart and measuring out seed as the heart regulates the flow of blood evokes comparisons of work, life, and life-sustaining crops. This worker, on his rolling-gaited Odyssean sea, is larger than life.

Evans' few photographs of the tenants actually working do not have the same effect. Each of the family sections contains precisely one photograph relating to actual work. The first, of Lucille Burroughs picking cotton, is the most universal of the three, since we cannot see her features. Instead we recognize in the sea of cotton leaves the aching

the Present (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992) 89.
41 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 331.
42 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, xv, xxv, xl.
back and neverending chore. The second, of Bud Fields standing with his sack, ready to begin picking, and the third, of Elizabeth Tingle washing dishes, are more individualized. Nevertheless, in each case we recognize the omnipresent and unending monotony of the tasks at hand. These individuals do not seem to take an aesthetic pleasure in their work.

Agee and Evans' own work is another matter. Agee writes,

It was good to be doing the work we had come to do and to be seeing the things we cared most to see, and to be among the people we cared most to know, and to know these things not as a book looked into, a desk sat down to, a good show caught, but as a fact as large as the air; something absolute and true we were a part of and drew with every breath, and added to with every glance of the eye. It was good even, to be doing the limited job we had been assigned.43

Evans emphasizes that the tenants realized the import of Agee's task. He writes, "The families understood what he was down there to do. He'd explained it, in such a way that they were interested in his work. He wasn't playing."44 Evans himself was not playing either, yet he stresses the enjoyableness of his and Agee's job, claiming that it "was

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43 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 253.
44 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book Two, xi.
really hard work, but not thought of as such at the time. If you're young and interested, as we were, you throw yourself into work like that without any thought of sparing yourself, or without any thought of the time invested or energy either. That is work at its best, the way all work ought to be, and seldom is."45 Evans' comment points up a distinction that Dewey makes. For Dewey, art and the aesthetic attitude toward life consist in an amalgamation of means and ends.46 Agee and Evans are able to accomplish just such an amalgamation in their work, whereas the tenants cannot. According to Agee's account, this situation is due to the incredible burden and type of work that the tenants must endure.

The problem in Dewey's and Mead's comments on labor is that while conjoining of means and end is an admirable goal, it is not always an attainable one. In a democratic community, the question is, who gets the opportunity to attempt such a conjoining? Agee and Evans both approach Dewey's views on communal life. The fundamental problem with these views lies, as it does with experience, in participation. If one advocates a "community of shared moral values," he must also specify or at least raise the issue of whose values will be chosen to govern the group. This

46 Shearer, 623, 627.
problem becomes more apparent with an examination of democracy.
IV. DEMOCRACY

Both Jefferson and Dewey described America as an "experiment."

--Richard Rorty

Countless millions of Europeans had all their lives seen in the U.S. a dream of liberty and security, of democratic generosity and efficiency. With the American armies had come the American reality, and it was not—it could not have been—the stuff of the dream.

--James Agee

Dewey's Art as Experience, like the majority of his works, is ultimately concerned with democracy. Just as an examination of perception reveals the notion of truth for the individual, the study of democracy indicates the existence of the notion of truth for the group. Dewey gives communication an unusually strong position in his idea of democracy;¹ his definition of democracy includes the building of communities in order to empower individuals politically, socially, and culturally.² In its use for purposes of social change and improvement, art affords power to both individuals and communities. Agee is also interested in issues of political, social, and cultural empowerment which the idea of democracy engenders. Two major topics in a comparison of Dewey and Agee on democracy are the moral element in the determination of truth for the group and the notion of social improvement, particularly with regard to Dewey's and Agee's views on the

² Westbrook, xv.
educational system at work in the communities that they discuss.

Dewey defines democracy as "but a name for the fact that human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups—families, industrial companies, governments, churches, scientific associations and so on." For Dewey, democracy contains both political and moral elements. He states, "A Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." The point of the democratic community is to inquire into the problematic human situation; the democratic community is "dedicated to life as art," that is, to life as a continual sharing of possible answers. Clearly, Dewey's version of democracy involves more than politics. Cornel West points out that Dewey's creative democracy was very different from the liberal political programs of the 1930s. Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan, in Dewey's opinion, fell far short of the mark, leaving much of the political and economic power in the hands of those who


5 Westbrook, 248-49; Dewey [1892], qtd. in Rockefeller, 1; White, Pragmatism and the American Mind, 26-27.


7 Alexander, xx.
were already empowered. 8 Curiously, however, Dewey's ideas were widely viewed as a foundation for Roosevelt's strategies. For example, Henry Steele Commager claims that the Tennessee Valley Authority was a Deweyan experiment in cooperative freedom. The TVA "was the proving ground, as it were, of a dynamic democracy." 9 Agee 10 and Dewey might balk at such a forceful phrase as "proving ground"; Agee, especially, held high hopes for the project of the TVA, but his idea of democracy involves a more cooperative freedom than the sort illustrated in the Tennessee Valley project.

Artists of the thirties, including Agee, were extremely politically aware. In addition to realizing that art influences politics, 11 Agee felt that his art must address "real life" issues and have social consequences. 12 The view that art may extend beyond the cultural realm is becoming more and more accepted; according to Robert Penn Warren, "whatever works to make democracy possible is 'really' democratic," and he claims that "'poetry' is an essential one of the 'whatevers.'" 13 For Agee, as for Dewey, art has

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8 West, 107.
10 For Agee's Fortune articles on the TVA, see Agee, James Agee: Selected Journalism, 3-18; 63-96.
political and moral clout.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has been recognized as being both particularly American\(^{14}\) and radically democratic,\(^ {15}\) and it is clear that Agee was aware of the issues of democracy in his work. Robert Fitzgerald writes, "It can be said of him that he was American to the marrow . . . . He took Patrick Henry's alternatives very seriously. Deep in him there was a streak of Whitman, including a fondness for the barbaric yawp, and a streak of Twain, the riverman and Romantic democrat. What being an American meant for an imaginative writer was very much on his mind."\(^ {16}\) Agee strives, like Dewey, for a type of democracy superior to the one embodied by the American political system of his time. He writes in a letter to his teacher and lifelong friend, Father James Harold Flye,

Democracy of vote alone  
Is hardly livelier than bone.  
Democracy that's economic  
Alone, is not one bit less comic.  
To own your life is hardly good  
Unless you own your livelihood:  
To own your livelihood's as bad

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\(^{14}\) Hynes, 339-40.  
If, in exchange, your life is had.17

In another letter to Father Flye, Agee states, "As I know you realize, I am capable of many doubts and qualifiers about democracy. But however great they are, I prefer it to any other conception of how people should try to live together."18 As early as 1934, Agee professed allegiance to America at the same time that he cast doubt on America's political ideals. He writes in "Dedication" in Permit Me Voyage, "To Mark Twain; to Walt Whitman; to Ring Lardner; to Hart Crane; to Abraham Lincoln; and to my land and to the squatters upon it and to their ways and words in love; and to my country in indifference."19 Agee's regard for the individual becomes apparent in such a passage, and he maintains this sentiment into the 1950s, writing, "Perhaps, I could say that my political faith is in the individual and in whatever I suppose is for the concept and the growth of the individual."20

At various times both Agee and Dewey professed to entertain political tendencies that are somewhat other than democratic. In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men Agee writes, "I am a Communist by sympathy and conviction"21 and goes on to list several problems with the communist system as it

17 Agee, Letters, 165.
18 Agee, Letters, 169.
20 Agee, qtd. in Spears and Cassidy, 171.
21 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 249.
appeared in Soviet Russia. By 1954, however, he writes in a letter to his second wife, "If I try to bring it down into labels, I am non-Communist, and for that matter anti-Communist." The same letter indicates his leanings toward democratic socialism, as well as his misgivings about that system: "I became sufficiently convinced that here, too, in the conflict between liberty and security, liberty had to die, or anyhow to be hobbled beyond what I could accept or give allegiance to." Dewey also gave consideration to socialism, although he held little regard for state socialism and Marxism. In particular, he admired guild socialism, and he advocated a system that could provide for a network of democratic associations without too strong a central government. Certain aspects of other political-economic systems appeal to Dewey and Agee, but in the end, both of them long for a democracy worthy of consideration, a morally, socially, and culturally democratic system that gives the individual his due at the same time that it stresses the benefits of mutual cooperation and participation in communities.

It is somewhat more difficult to make a case for Evans' uses of Deweyan ideas of democracy, particularly in light of his insistence that his work is apolitical. He states that American Photographs, for instance, "was neither journalistic

22 Agee, qtd. in Spears and Cassidy, 171.
23 Agee, qtd. in Spears and Cassidy, 172.
24 Westbrook, 249.
nor political in technique and intention." 25 In the essay that accompanies American Photographs, however, Lincoln Kirstein claims that the "photographs are social documents." 26 Although the project of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is a rather different case, its photographs are also social documents, and one may argue that Evans is democratic, in a Deweyan sense, in the way that Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine were. The Alabama book was conceived by Fortune as a journalistic report, and from its inception it was viewed by Agee as a chance to help others—the community on which he was to report and the community to which he was going to be reporting. Evans sided with Agee.

Hine inherits from Mead the notion of "sociality," the idea of taking on others' points of view "as the condition for having a point of view of one's own." 27 Like Hine, Evans hopes to change people, stirring in the viewer feelings of community with those depicted. He is aware of the connection between participation and truth, claiming of being a photographer, "The wrong kind of man can't get the truth out of anyone. You have to give people a sense of pleasure and participation. You have to win them. They have to be with you." 28 Westbrook emphasizes that Art as Experience deals not with the experience of artists but with that of "ordinary men

25 Evans, Walker Evans at Work, 151.
26 Kirstein, essay, American Photographs, Evans, 195.
27 Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 204.
28 Qtd. in O'Neal, 61.
and women."\(^{29}\) Such a democracy of aesthetics applies to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men in that the book concerns itself first with describing everyday objects and indicating the beauty of the quotidian, which the tenants themselves often do not see, and second with examining what the tenants perceive as aesthetically pleasing. Both of these concerns exist with an eye to changing what we as readers view as beautiful. Dewey claims that community provides the means for sharing moral values;\(^ {30}\) the aesthetic interests of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men present the familiar problem with participation. Due to the structure of community, it is difficult to define either artistic or moral values for the group.

Agree realizes that truth is altered in the context of the group, but that in a pragmatic sense this alteration may contribute to truth. He writes,

When, in talk with a friend, you tell him, or hear from him, details of childhood, those details are perhaps even more real to you than in your solitary memory; and they are real and exciting to both of you in a way no form of art can be, or anyhow is. He is accepting what you say as truth, not fiction. You in turn, and the truth you are telling, are conditioned in some degree by his personality—you are in part, and he

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\(^{29}\) Westbrook, 391.

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. The centrally exciting and important fact, from which ramify the thousand others which otherwise would have no clear and valid existence, is: that was the way it was.31

Community helps us to apprehend "truth," since we can come to an understanding of the world only by sharing our experiences with others and by participating in theirs.32 The goal of art and community is to use what "truth" we have been able to gather in order to improve society.

Writing that "all art is a process of making the world a different place to live, and involves a phase of protest and of compensatory response,"33 Dewey indicates that art is a means for implementing social change. A primary topic for both Dewey and Agee is the educational system, for Dewey as a means to change, and for Agee as a target for change. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men may be read as an example of the Deweyan "phase of protest." Communication is both the end and the means of education for Dewey.34 Emphasizing the importance of learning by doing, he presents the model

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31 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 241.
32 Kolenda, 122.
33 Dewey, Experience and Nature, 272.
34 Steibbel, 293.
classroom as a democratic community in miniature. It is clear that the educational system represented in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* does not aspire to either of these emphases, democracy or community. Dewey, like Agee and Evans, recognizes that the system in place leaves much to be desired. He writes, "With our present system of education—by which something much more extensive than schooling is meant—democracy multiplies occasions for imitation not occasions for thought in action."  

Part of the problem with the present system, at least in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is that the status quo has such a stranglehold upon the community that the tenant children are indoctrinated with it before a teacher (if there were a good one available) can reach them. Agee elaborates: "In school a child is first plunged into the hot oil bath of the world at its cruelest: and children are taught far less by their teachers than by one another. Children are, or quickly become, exquisitely sensitive to social, psychologic, and physical meanings and discriminations." Dewey hopes for an educational system that will "break down class barriers," yet in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee indicates that class barriers exist within the less privileged class itself. For

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38 White, *Science and Sentiment in America*, 287.
example, the other children ostracize the Rickettses, who in turn band together and become a "problem" in the classroom and elsewhere.39

Noting that the failure of education portrayed in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is representative of a major theme of larger failures of the democratic system, Kenneth Seib claims that "Agee's criticism of American education and society is as caustic as Upton Sinclair's exposure of the Chicago stockyards, Sinclair Lewis' denunciation of Main Street, and John Dos Passos' arraignment of capitalism."40 Agee states, "I feel that I can say only, that 'education,' whose function is at the crisis of this appalling responsibility, does not seem to me to be all, or even anything, that it might be, but seems indeed the very property of the world's misunderstanding, the sharpest of its spearheads in every brain: and that since it could not be otherwise without destroying the world's machine, the world is unlikely to permit it to be otherwise."41 In Agee's view, something is wrong with the educational system in particular and with the democratic system as a whole. He has great faith, but neither of these is implemented fairly. Junior Gudger has been promoted to another grade unduly, and Maggie Louise is held back a year unfairly,42 but Agee's concern is

39 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 303.
40 Seib, 53.
41 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 290.
42 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 301, 296.
more fundamental; "natural craftsmen, like Junior, should not necessarily have to struggle with reading and writing; they have other ways of learning, and of enlarging themselves, which however are not available to them." The system does not in any manner of speaking attend to the tenants' educational needs.

Evans' photographs of schools also indicate that the educational system falls short of educating. On a fundamental level, they reveal an abominable lack in the quality of the facilities. Agee describes the sterile new schoolhouse for whites, as well as the overcrowded one-room shacks the blacks must use, and it would appear that Evans' two photographs fall into the latter category. The first shows what seems to be a fairly sturdy structure set up on blocks. Its sign declares, "St. Matthew. School." The photograph appears with one below it of figures sitting outside a barbershop, causing the viewer to reflect on the types of education available in the two different settings. This lower photograph with its black figures resting below a sign announcing, "I'd walk a mile for a Camel" and its white figure sitting in an automobile has its own messages to proclaim about democracy and equality. The second school photograph occupies a similar horizontal-format

43 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 302.
44 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, lvi, lx.
45 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 297.
46 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, lx.
juxtaposition with one of an almost-empty train station below it. "Glean Hill School''s open doors to knowledge appear to be more ominous than inviting; the weathered shack set up on large rocks is going nowhere. On the other hand, the invitation to travel in the lower photograph is certainly an option for education, despite the fact that no trains are available. In the case of both school photographs, static images of square buildings up on blocks are countered with images related to vehicular motion. Agee writes, "'Education' as it stands is tied in with every bondage I can conceive of, and is the chief cause of these bondages, including acceptance and respect, which are the worst bondages of all."47 For both Evans and Agee, as for Dewey, the state of education leaves much to be desired.

Problems inherent in Dewey's and Agee's ideas of democracy fall into two main categories, of participation and of freedom vs. equality. According to Dewey, "democracy means that personality is the first and final reality."48 In a system that stifles individuality as much as the tenants' does, this statement presents a problem. Dewey claims, "In any case, an individual is no longer just a particular, a part without meaning save in an inclusive whole, but is a subject, self, a distinctive centre of desire, thinking and aspiration,"49 yet it is clear that the tenants function more

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47 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 308.
48 Westbrook, 42.
as cogs than as individual machines in a cooperative assembly line. Although Dewey's emphasis is on the positive aspects of belonging to a community, Agee and Evans show that membership in a group can also be stifling to individuality. Dewey writes, "The modern habit of using self, 'I,' mind, and spirit interchangeably is inconceivable when family and commune are solid realities."50 It would seem that the question of roles indicates the entire participatory problem in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Annie Mae and George exist largely in terms of their roles in the scheme of family, Annie Mae, for instance, as mother, cotton picker, preparer of meals, and so on. Not only is she not presented in terms of a "subject, self," but it seems that she does not exist as a subjective self, except in terms of her roles.

This participatory question may be applied to Evans' photographs, as well. Are the photographs definitive of the personalities presented, or vice-versa? Evans is generally commended for allowing his photographic subjects to "define themselves" by confronting the camera head on.51 In this way, Evans may be said to practice democracy of the sort Dewey and Agee seek; his photographs "all look alike," yet their differences seem to be indicative of actual differences in personality among the individuals represented, rather than of artistic variants Evans has consciously decided to present.

50 Dewey, Experience and Nature, 163.
51 Stott, 268.
At the same time, Evans also defines the tenants' personalities to some degree by capturing them at specific instances. The four views of Allie Mae Burroughs or the various poses of Bud Fields capture different "characters"; in the selection of which image to include in his presentation, Evans defines the individual. Even the slight differences in the two photographs of Allie Mae used in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and American Photographs reveal two different personalities, one quizzical, the other confident.

William Stott points out about Let Us Now Praise Famous Men that its "hero is, as Agee said, human consciousness" and that "his most persuasive propaganda against the tenant system was exactly that it diminished consciousness." For Dewey, art involves the problematic democratic idea of "intrinsic freedom." The tenants of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men are afforded no such "intrinsic freedom"; they lack both the means and background necessary to enjoy art. As with the category of experience, the problem of participation exists for the category of community, and Dewey was aware of this problem. Agee, at the same time he and

52 Evans, Walker Evans at Work, 127.
53 Evans, Walker Evans at Work, 132-33.
54 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, iii.
55 Evans, American Photographs, photograph number 14.
56 Stott, 311.
57 Edman, "Dewey and Art," 65.
58 Gunn, The Culture of Criticism, 74; Westbrook, 249.
Evans study the lack of democratic community among the tenants,\textsuperscript{59} recognizes that reading and writing are a form of power.\textsuperscript{60} The issue of "doing good for rather than with others"\textsuperscript{61} evident in Dewey is indicative of the problem with participation. Agee and Evans hoped to do good with; the question is whether or not they were able to accomplish this goal.

The theme of democracy is also "problematic" in another way in both Dewey and Agee. Both of them fervently want democracy to work, but Dewey, at any rate, finds himself in a dilemma: in a democracy whose major premise is that all are to be free and equal, how can one individual be free without impinging on another equal individual's freedom? Dewey claims that everyone in the democratic community shares and contributes,\textsuperscript{62} yet the tenants of \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} do not share and contribute in a positive way. Agee recognizes the problem of inequality and is painfully aware that it occurs in his own case, particularly in the categories of class and money. Longing to participate in the tenants' community, he laments his background advantage, pointing out that half of his family stems from Tennessee.


\textsuperscript{61} Westbrook, 164.

\textsuperscript{62} Dewey, qtd. in Gunn, \textit{Thinking Across the American Grain}, 72.
mountain stock. He wishes to alleviate the disadvantages that the tenants suffer. According to Dewey, liberty is power, so that issues of freedom become issues of who retains power. Agee is grieved that in his and Evans' case they themselves do, but at the same time he is determined to use his power in the ways he deems most useful to the tenants. This noble aspiration, however, does not erase the problem.

So, the question is, if America were a true democracy in Dewey's sense of moral creative democracy, would it really work? We want to believe that it will, and when we read Dewey we do, but we do not live our lives in accord with these hopeful beliefs. Frank Lloyd Wright's work is an excellent example of the same problem. Striving for architecture "for the people," an "organic architecture functional to the needs of a changing culture," he builds houses in Oak Park which the rich elite now own. His aesthetic is "Americanism" with a capital A, but because of a fundamental problem in our culture, hardly any of us live in Usonian houses. That both Dewey and Agee gloss over the fact that democracy is not implemented in everyday life indicates a problem with reading pragmatism in general; in many cases, pragmatic theory makes much more sense in opposition to other frameworks that are not working than it does standing on its

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64 Westbrook, 435.
own.

What do liberty and equality together come to? Dewey's answer is an example of a valiant, beautiful, doomed effort to reconcile them, but in the end it seems that these dichotomous constructs cannot coexist. Dewey specifically claims that freedom and equality are not "incompatible values," yet he recognizes that they sometimes conflict. Richard H. King claims that Agee experiences a similar incongruity. He states, "In sum, Agee was committed to democratic visions as well as to the elitist assumptions of modern literature. . . . Agee explicitly sought a democratic, high art. It was not the only apparent contradiction that marked his life and his work."

The issues of power and freedom that Dewey and Agee examine are still with us in the 1990s. For example, sixty years later, election debates still concern such subjects from the 1930s as equal opportunity for health care. In part, World War II allowed people to ignore these issues for a time; at this point, a return to an examination of the issues of liberty and equality is necessary, and both Art as Experience and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men have valuable insights to offer. In each case, democracy is presented as the best social alternative with which to work. Richard

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66 Westbrook, 436.
68 King, 208.
Bernstein urges, "Creative--radical--democracy is still 'the task before us.'" Both Agee and Evans approach Dewey in setting about this task.

V. SUBJECT-OBJECT DICHOTOMY

We can no longer speak of the behaviour of the particle independently of the process of observation.
---Werner Heisenberg

The photographer's power lies in his ability to re-create his subject in terms of its basic reality, and present this re-creation in such a form that the spectator feels that he is seeing not just a symbol for the object, but the thing itself revealed for the first time.
---Edward Weston

Art for Dewey involves what he calls the integration of subject and object.\(^1\) Agee, as subject observing the tenants and their world as objects, longs for such an integration but in the end is unable to find it; nevertheless, in the quest, both Agee and Evans utilize a mixture of subjective and objective techniques. Although Agee's work is generally regarded as "subjective" and Evans' as "objective," actually both artists use aspects of each category. Rather than the stereotypical concepts of words as subjective and photographs as objective, both the text and the photographs of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men display facets of each description. One indication of the possibility of an approaching of subject and object is that the subject, by observing the object, alters it. He further alters it in the relating of it to his community, and the listeners, or in Agee and Evans' case the readers and viewers, by their own observation of the report also alter both the subject reporting to them and the object

\(^1\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 281.
reported to them.

Therefore, an examination of the attempt at a mixture of subject and object in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men involves, on one level, Agee and the tenants or Evans and the tenants, and on another level, us as readers and Agee's text or Evans' photographs. Furthermore, the "subjective" and "objective" methods that Agee and Evans employ are by no means identical with or even directly related to Agee and Evans as subjects and the tenants and their environment as objects. It is clear that Agee, in particular, wishes for a merging of subject and object like the one Dewey discusses; it is further clear that he eventually comes to the realization that such a merging is impossible, both in the original experience and more surely in the retelling of it to his reading community. However, Agee's and Evans' combination of subjective and objective methods in the attempt to approximate such an integration remains unquestionable.

For Dewey, the experience of the individual and the relation and comparing of experiences among individual members of the community are united in art. Agee and Evans seek to relate their experiences with one community to the separate community of their readers in such an integrated fashion. Although they fall short of the mark in uniting subject and object, their attempt involves Deweyan methods, which both of them use; in addition, in utilizing a mixture
of subjective and objective techniques Agee and Evans approximate each other's work.

Agee not only desires to participate in the tenants' world,² he understands both the impossibility of doing so and at the same time the importance of continuing the attempt.³ For example, in the Preamble he appears to question his and Evans' motives, writing, "And it seems curious still further that, with all their [his and Evans'] suspicion of and contempt for every person and thing to do with the situation, save only for the tenants and for themselves, and their own intentions, and with all their realization of the seriousness and mystery of the subject, and of the human responsibility they undertook, they so little questioned or doubted their own qualifications for this work."⁴ Written in third person, this statement itself appears to be objective while it is actually self-critical after the fact. In addition, it suggests that Agee developed doubts during and after the project about the possibility of completing his task. One indication of Agee's developing cynicism is his relinquishing of the plan to make the book affordable and the text understandable to someone in the tenants' situation. Agee may have come to believe that such a plan was naïve to begin with, but a statement like "this is a book about

³ Ward, American Silences, 94, 80.
⁴ Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 8.
'sharecroppers' and is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, and especially for those who can afford the retail price"5 shows his cynicism and bitterness about having to give up such an idea.

Evans also demonstrates concern for the subject-object issue, particularly in his combination of subjective and objective methods. At first glance, Evans' work appears to be perfectly straightforward: the photographic subjects face the camera head on, returning the viewer's stare. However, Evans affects the photograph in his use of such techniques as cropping and editorial arrangement. Susan Sontag refers to "camera's twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it,"6 indicating an effect found in Evans' work. At the same time that a photograph presents "reality," the "true world," the "scene as it was," it has been altered by Evans' choice of framing, composition, and presentation. That is, as John Rogers Puckett points out, the seemingly objective picture with which photographs present us may not be; conversely, the subjectivity of words often provides us with a more credible picture of reality than a photograph would.7 Of course this distinction applies to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, with Evans' apparent objectivity and Agee's overwhelming contemplation of his own subjectivity.

5 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 14.
7 Puckett, 21.
Dewey stresses that experience is not either physical or mental, but is permeated with both factors, because it is composed of interaction between a subject and an object. He writes, "In an experience, things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it." Both sides of the equation affect each other. At the same time that Agee and Evans were affected by their experiences in Alabama, they also changed the environment that they studied.

Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle indicates that the mere process of observing a phenomenon alters that phenomenon; by participating in the scene, that is, by attempting to describe it or even to observe it, the observer changes it. Pragmatism also asserts that interpreting the world changes it. Heisenberg's principle concerns the description of atoms. One may either describe an atom as rings of discrete particles orbiting a fixed nucleus, as the solar system is most often depicted, a portrait in space, or as a cloud of motion with particles that can never be pinpointed by the observer, a portrait in time. But one cannot make both descriptions concurrently. In choosing which way to describe the atom, the observer changes what the

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8 Dewey, Art as Experience, 251.
9 Gunn, Thinking Across the American Grain, 4.
atom is, not only in his own perception, but in fact. This elusive point has to do with the fact that the atom largely is his perception. For Dewey changing perception changes reality because the observer's relationship with the observed is an integral part of the reality of the observed.\textsuperscript{10} Dewey might claim that this process of alteration occurs in \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} and that Agee and Evans sometimes make a portrait in space and sometimes one in time. That they sometimes choose one method and sometimes another does not change the fact that they affect what they observe by choosing. The observer's affecting the scene by his participation in it is clearly a theme in 1930s reportage\textsuperscript{11} and in Agee's work.\textsuperscript{12} Agee is fully aware of his inability to show both solar system and cloud pictures at once, the single instant in space and the flux of motion over time.\textsuperscript{13} His recognition of the necessity of choosing what sort of picture to draw contributes to his awareness of his own situation as the drawer; he and Evans understand that they are in an awkward position of power\textsuperscript{14} in their ability to affect the picture by choosing what to depict.

\textsuperscript{10} White, \textit{Science and Sentiment in America}, 276.
\textsuperscript{11} Stott, 188.
\textsuperscript{13} Allister, 95.
\textsuperscript{14} Paula Rabinowitz, "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}," \textit{Cultural Critique} 21 (Spr. 1992): 145.
Several of Evans’ techniques also approximate this application of Heisenberg. For example, Evans’ revisions of the cropping of the photographs for the second edition "changes their meaning."\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, the significance of Evans’ editing arrangements is widely recognized.\textsuperscript{16} Evans himself realized that his choice of editing order affected the meanings of what he presented, writing in a letter to Carleton Beals in 1933 about his Cuba photos, "I think that arrangement will still mean something. It was a perplexing job, so many different courses to follow."\textsuperscript{17} He states, "I think too that photography is editing, editing after the taking. After knowing what to take you have to do the editing. The secret of photography is, the camera takes on the character and the personality of the handler."\textsuperscript{18} Evans’ commentary on the scenes he views becomes clear only upon examination of his editing arrangements. Claiming that the artist "collects and edits the world around him,"\textsuperscript{19} Evans further indicates the importance of ordering photographs into a coherent statement. In an article from 1931 Evans uses the phrase, "a photographic editing of society."\textsuperscript{20} He suggests

\textsuperscript{15}Stott, 230.
\textsuperscript{16}Puckett, 112; Kirstein, essay, \textit{American Photographs}, Evans, 193; Trachtenberg, \textit{Reading American Photographs}, 289; Ward, \textit{American Silences}, 166.
\textsuperscript{17}Evans, \textit{Walker Evans: Havana 1933}, 5.
\textsuperscript{18}Qtd. in Katz, 86.
\textsuperscript{19}Qtd. in Katz, 88.
that in arranging photographs in a particular order he is changing not only the meaning of the photographs but also of what they represent. The viewer's perception of the entirety of Evans' photographic essay contributes to the meaning of what Evans photographed; Evans' editing arrangement is crucial, since in consummatory experience the viewer himself constructs reality, basing it on past experiences, including the experiences of the previous photographs in the series.

According to Evans, he as subject definitely affects the experience as well as the art product. He writes, "It's as though there's a wonderful secret in a certain place and I can capture it. Only I can do it at this moment, only this moment and only me. That's a hell of a thing to believe, but I believe it or I couldn't act."21 As far as subjectivity goes, this statement indicates that a specific art product and its consequent experience are contingent on a certain time, place, and artist as subject. Although the viewer ultimately makes "reality," he could not do so had Evans not first captured certain images (which only he can capture) and arranged them in the most effective order. Artist and viewer are equal partners in an experience.

Agee also understands the importance of capturing particular images and arranging them in a certain order. One of the issues that he sets forth is that of selection on the part of the writer. Dewey mentions the universal acceptance

21 Qtd. in Katz, 87.
of the fact that art is selective. Lamenting the need to select, Agee claims that the written account is far less powerful than the experience itself. He states that "written, these facts lose so much of their force and reality" and indicates that this loss is in part due to the writer's need "to select and invent." Selection of which sort of portrait to present as well as of which objects and events to portray affects the "reality" of what is reported.

It is evident that Agee is aware of subject-object issues, and he recognizes that the juxtaposition of media in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men affects our perception of reality, making us aware that both photographs and text are subjective. For example, a comparison of Agee's description of the Gudgers' henroost with Evans' photographs of it clarifies both the textual and photographic descriptions. Agee's portrait in this case is one of a place, as is Evans', although words like "rotted" also suggest temporality. The photographs confirm the textual description of the building; for instance, at first glance in Evans' head-on shot the "box nailed at the top" is not apparent, but a comparison with the side view corroborates Agee's statement. Conversely, the

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22 Dewey, Art as Experience, 73, 100.
24 Barson, 27, 39, 74, 77.
25 Puckett, 139.
26 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 132.
27 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, xiii, and Book One, xvi, at right.
text adds to the photographs. Without Agee's description of sapling perches, it is difficult to tell from the head-on photograph alone what is inside the building. The chinks of light that Agee describes are readily discernible, but the angled poles are not easily identified without the textual information. In the case of the henhouse, text and photographs reinforce one another, but individually each conveys a slightly different emphasis. The cartoon-like skewed angles of Evans' chicken coop immediately strike the viewer with a sense of place, whereas Agee's textual description lends more of an idea of the processes occurring there, explaining where the children find the eggs and emphasizing the heat of the scene and the odor in the building.

Agee clearly recognizes the confused roles of subjective and objective experience. The narrator in his story "They That Sow in Sorrow Shall Reap" remarks of experience,

As a rule, experience is broken upon innumerable sharp irrelevancies; emotion and reality, obscurely fused and inexplicably tarnished, are irreducible; their rhythms are so subtly involved, so misgoverned by chance, as to be beyond analysis; and the living mind, that must endure and take part, is soon fugitive before, or else, however brave, falls to pieces beneath this broad unbeautiful pour of chaos.
The experience referred to is objective; the same difficulties hold in the case of subjective experience. The true sum of experience is, as a rule, an inconceivably complex interpenetration of subjective and objective experience. And the true sum and whole of experience is doubly chaotic.  

Agee realizes the difficulties inherent in the attempt to portray the "interpenetration of subjective and objective experience." The form he chooses to work in, reportage, attempts to overcome problems caused by combining subjectivity and objectivity. However, Agee himself experiences difficulties in his attempt to make the two forms of experience coalesce.

In his October 1937 "Plans for Work" Agee claims that what would become Let Us Now Praise Famous Men "is to be as exhaustive a reproduction and analysis of personal experience, including the phases and problems of memory and recall and revisitation and the problems of writing and of communication, as I am capable of, . . . and it is likely therefore to involve the development of some more or less new forms of writing and of observation." He anticipates the need for new forms of discourse to demonstrate the coming together of subject and object.

Not only does Let Us Now Praise Famous Men not fit any

28 Agee, Collected Short Prose, 82-83.
29 Rabinowitz, 154.
30 Agee, Collected Short Prose, 133.
single style, it employs a multitude of discursive modes in its attempt to portray interpenetrated subjective and objective experience. Agee's utilization of techniques such as sudden shifts in voice, style, tone, and type of diction, his unusual uses of punctuation, rhetorical figures, cadence, and dialect, and his pervasive grim humor call attention to his experiments with modes of discourse. For example, at several points he suddenly breaks with the previous style, sometimes commenting on this action and sometimes simply shifting. He writes, "But from where I say, 'The shutters are opened,' I must give this up, and must speak in some other way, for I am no longer able to speak as I was doing, or rather no longer able to bear to." Such shifts have the effect of heightening the intensity of Agee's self-conscious presence, making the text a sort of thinking aloud on his part, as well as emphasizing the problems he encounters as he attempts to write, a phase which he calls the fourth plane. In spots, these shifts have the flavor of a conversation with the reader. Agee's calling attention in this way to his subjective authorial role emphasizes the subjectivity of his experience at the same time that it implies the reader's

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32 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 44.
33 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 99, 147.
34 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 403.
35 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 243.
collaboration with the author.

To the same end, Agee alters conventional uses of devices such as punctuation. For instance, his use of commas to indicate slowed pace in a line like, "And I can't, feel, at home, in this world, any, more"\textsuperscript{36} accomplishes much the same effect as his sudden shifts in tone and style. We are made painfully aware of Agee's presence by his unusual manipulation of technique. Agee also uses a similar method with punctuation alone:

\begin{verbatim}
 it will be very different:) (?:

 ( (?:

 :) )

 How were we caught?\textsuperscript{37}
\end{verbatim}

In these three lines Agee attempts to represent what is going on in the thought processes of the "speaker." The afterthought "it will be different" becomes "will it be different?" and then progresses very quickly to a despairing "WILL IT?" which in turn leads to the frustrated "no, of course not," at which point the question shifts to "why is it like this?" ("How were we caught?") All of these complex emotional thoughts imprinted on the "speaker" by Agee appear with little use of words; while reporting what the "speaker" is supposed to have felt, Agee emphasizes his subjective role as author.

In addition, Agee makes unusual use of poetic devices

\textsuperscript{36} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 53.

\textsuperscript{37} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 81.
such as simile, metaphor, and personification. For example, he compares the Gudgers' house in the middle of the fields with a flower, a spider, a breast, and a ship. In each case, he experiments with symbols, trying first one and then another in an attempt to convey the centrality and relative stability of the house in a vast barren sea of crops. ("Or the farm is also. . . . Or it is. . . .") He mentions the "unlighted lamp which stands in the bare daylight in the beauty of a young nude girl" and the skillet which "is stuck by its handle through a rift in the wall and extends its round hand flat toward the center of the room." In each description, we acquire as much a sense of Agee himself as of the things described. Much as Evans does in the photographs, Agee personifies objects. He writes, "The chairs sit in exact regiment of uneven heights with the charming sobriety of children pretending to be officers of judges." In this and other cases, Agee gives objects as much or more autonomy than people, and in infusing his imaginative creations in these objects to the extent that he does, he again emphasizes his subjective authorial role. Not only does he describe in great detail what he deems important to the tenants' lives, he does so in a highly poetic manner. The reader cannot

38 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 129.
39 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 426.
40 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 129.
41 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 182.
42 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 180.
43 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 180.
separate the tale from the teller.

Agee's presence makes itself felt in the rhythms of his prose. For instance, Agee uses cadence of writing to suggest the slow motion and bumpiness of riding in a car. He writes,

Slowed a long way down into this nearly noiseless floating at five miles an hour I went both ways the whole length of the main street in the shade of the trees that overhung nearly all but the business block and there was not a stir of life anywhere: every last soul in all these shaded, jigsawed, wooden houses must be dead asleep under the weight of the hot greasy sunday dinner in shaded rooms, not even a sheet over them, whose added weight would break them open; and the houses themselves, withdrawn in their dark green, half-bald, twiggy lawns, were numb with sleep as ruins in the dappling and scarce twisting of their tree shade.44

The lack of punctuation makes us feel steadiness of motion, just a little faster than would be comfortable to walk, while the long phrases and one- and two-syllable words keep the pace at exactly five miles an hour, slowed yet constant. For a heightening of this effect, we need only read the sentence aloud. The rhythm of the prose mimics the rhythm and pace of the uneven, decelerated car ride. Not only does Agee relate what is there and what he experiences, but he attempts to

44 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 378-79.
make us feel what is there and what he undergoes. Again, "objective" description and an awareness of subjective creation coexist.

A superlative example of this mixture of subjective and objective technique is Agee's use of dialect. On the one hand, it is clear that Agee superimposes his creative imagination on what the tenants have said. Ranging from a mild "he would never do no such a thang"45 to the brutally comic "No sir-ree, she shore never did brang up nufn baout no dad blame axles attah dayut,"46 Agee's descriptions emphasize deviances from "normal" speech patterns. In all instances, we are aware of both the foreignness of the objects whom Agee observes and of Agee's subjective representation of their mode of speech. On the other hand, these approximations truly seem to be indicative of what Agee was hearing. Rather than stereotypical country vernacular, Agee recreates exactly what he heard, making use of his acute ear, and this process involves cooperation on the part of the reader. Consider, for instance, Agee's representations of the Ricketts children's speech. "You go awn daown the heel twthur Tip Foster's haouse is ncut in thaw his barn nfoller the foot paff awn aout thaw the corn tell ye come to a woods, take the on awn the right nanexunawn a liyuf nye come aout at the high een un a cotton patch, cut awn thaw the cotton patch,

45 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 89.
46 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 304.
you'll see the foot paff, ngo awn daown na heeln he's rat thur, the only haouse."47 Upon reading this passage aloud, we realize that this depiction is more "objective" than it would be if Agee had transcribed it into standard English. Elements of subjective and objective techniques remain inextricably interwoven in Agee's use of dialect.

Throughout Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Agee employs a dry, observant, ironic humor, as in this quotation from the title page of the Gudgers' Bible:

The New Testament

With the words spoken by Christ printed in red

(printed in red)48

Of course, Christ never said, "With the words spoken by Christ printed in red." Agee does not invent phrases that are not on the title page, yet the statement, filtered through his selective eye, is quite wry. A similar example is Agee's listing in a catalog of farm animals of two hens named after Ivy and Annie Mae.49 Again and again a dry report of "objective" things in the Gudgers' house takes on the tone of Agee's "subjective" satiric wit.

Utilizing a variety of subjective poetic devices applied to objective "real" images, Agee manages to be highly creative in portraying objects and events without straying from things as they were. The onomatopoeia in his phrase

47 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 386-87.
48 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 422.
"the shearing surflike shriek of the saw\textsuperscript{50} is an instance of such a portrayal. This complex image calls to mind not only the wavelike patterns in the wood after the process is completed, but also the rhythmic pulsing "shreeeeeee" of the circular saw. The description is at once highly imaginative and precisely true to life. Alliteration in a phrase like "Louise lies looking and listening with the light still on"\textsuperscript{51} explores strands of imagery that exist throughout the book. Light and dark, loud and soft, watching and listening, and repeated references to eyes are all reflected and foreshadowed in this single clause. The alliterative device in this instance calls our attention to themes that Agee wants to emphasize subjectively at the same time that it makes an objective statement.

Agee's reporting of phrases from scraps of newspaper found in a drawer at the Gudgers' echoes the poetry of e.e. cummings and the "newsreels" of John Dos Passos in its enjambment, its skewed logical sense, its rhythm, and its arrangement on the page. In a phrase like "GHAM NEWS"\textsuperscript{52} Agee, by reproducing what seems to be exactly what he sees, makes a "poetic statement" while he encourages us to participate in creating meaning. As readers we must replicate his task of supplying missing information for the phrase to make sense. This process could be called in some senses "objective,"

\textsuperscript{50} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 95.
\textsuperscript{51} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 72.
\textsuperscript{52} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 166.
since shreds of evidence are all we have for clues, both figuratively and in this case literally. In making sense out of what is there "objectively" (and there is of course the possibility that Agee altered or invented some of the examples; in any case, he certainly selected those that would best fit his purpose), each of us contextualizes the information in different past experiences, essentially also making sense out of the material "subjectively."

Two of Evans' favorite devices, allusion and juxtaposition, appear in the prose as well. Agee alludes, for example, to Emerson's "transparent eyeball" in claiming to be a "bodyless eye."  It seems that Agee hopes to report what he sees with minimal "subjective" filtering; still, he admits that his conscious presence will affect what is reported. Evans' reference to Van Gogh makes a statement about the tenants, while Agee's reference to Emerson makes a statement about the processes he himself has undertaken as an author. Agee's juxtapositions often point out juxtapositions that already exist in the tenants' environments. For instance, in describing the magazine cut-out decorations on the Rickettses' fireplace wall, Agee includes a description of "husbands in tuxedos showing guests an oil furnace," an image that combines within itself the ideas of formal attire and basement heating equipment, at the same time that it

53 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 187.
54 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 199.
ridiculously appears on the Rickettses’ wall; the Rickettses have neither tuxedos nor a furnace. In addition to indicating the “subjective” incongruities in the material at hand, Agee underlines similar juxtapositions in the placement of the material.

In using each of these techniques, Agee is subjective or poetic in prose while reporting objective events that really happened. Rather than merely being subjective by himself, he encourages us to participate in reconstructing objective reality, or as close to objective reality as it is possible to come, in light of the fact that each experiencer, both Agee firsthand and each of us later, will bring to "what really happened" a different set of funded experiences from his past.

Agee describes shadow, light, and color on the wood of the walls, comparing in a few phrases these intangible effects on a concrete surface with such material substances as bone, cloth, metal, and stone. For example, he states, "in full symmetry of the sun, the surfaces are dazzling silver, the shadows strong as knives and India ink, yet the grain and all detail clear: in slanted light, all slantings and sharpenings of shadow: in smothered light, the aspect of bone, a relic: at night, the balanced masses, patient in the base world: from rain, out of these hues of argent bone the colors of agate, the whole wall, one fabric and mad zebra of
quartered minerals and watered silks."\textsuperscript{55} Images like knives and ink set next to each other call to mind colors and textures such as black, sharp, hard, and liquid, all rather tangible attributes for something as difficult to grasp as shadows. Of course, knives and ink are also difficult to grasp, in different ways. About the wood, he refers to "the tone and quality the weather has given it, which is related one way to bone, another to satin, another to unpolished but smooth silver";\textsuperscript{56} this quality embodies at least three different textures. His phrase "the shadows of the savage breathings and eatings of the circular saws"\textsuperscript{57} personifies the processes once undergone by the wood. Again and again, Agee discusses the material in terms of flux, and the changing, the hard-to-get-hold-of, in terms of concrete images. For example, his phrases "the streaming killed strength of the grain,"\textsuperscript{58} and "the grain near these knots goes into convulsions or ecstasies such as Beethoven's deafness compelled"\textsuperscript{59} conjure images of flowing water and Romantic music, both of which are intangible, fluid, and tumultuous. Throughout, Agee discusses wood in terms of weather or music, and shadows, light, and color in terms of cloth, bone, metal, or minerals. At the end of this passage he shifts abruptly

\textsuperscript{55} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 146.
\textsuperscript{56} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 145.
\textsuperscript{57} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 145.
\textsuperscript{58} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 145.
\textsuperscript{59} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 145.
with, "But enough."60

Agee justifies his varied use of styles and modes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as follows:

Any given body of experience is sufficiently complex and ramified to require (or at least be able to use) more than one mode of reproduction: it is likely that this one will require many, including some that will extend writing and observing methods. It will likely make use of various traditional forms but it is anti-artistic, anti-scientific, and anti-journalistic. Though every effort will be made to give experience, emotion and thought as directly as possible, and as nearly as may be toward their full detail and complexity (it would have at different times, in other words, many of the qualities of a novel, a report, poetry), the job is perhaps chiefly a skeptical study of the nature of reality and of the false nature of recreation and of communication.61

Agee's project in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is an attempt to make the two worlds of experience and community, self and other, subject and object, meet; however, he realizes from the outset that his task is doomed. He states in the Preface, "Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques

61 Agee, *Collected Short Prose* 134.
proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense."62 Hoping to record exhaustively every detail, Agee continues, "Of this ultimate intention the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue."63 Although he maintains skepticism about the effectiveness of communication, he is committed to carrying out his experiment, and the gist of his attempt lies in the many types of discourse that he employs.

Examples of these varied modes of expression include narrative,64 poetry,65 reported dialogue in indirect quotation,66 quoted or imagined dialogue67 often in what may be exaggerated dialect,68 Biblical quotation,69 quotation of such authors as Shakespeare70 and Marx,71 paraphrasing of such authors as Blake,72 facts,73 outlines to guide the reader through sections,74 straightforward "reports,"75 extensive lists of objects,76 Dos Passos-like newspaper reporting,77

63 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book Two, xv.
64 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 63, ff.
66 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 399.
68 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 399.
69 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 82, 123, 360, 445.
70 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book Two, xviii.
71 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book Two, xix.
72 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 458-59.
73 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 115, ff.
75 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 257, ff.
76 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 172, 218, 456, ff.
77 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 166-69.
notes and clippings, a questionnaire from the Partisan Review with Agee's answers, direct address to the tenants, a letter, near stream-of-consciousness, dialogue with himself, and analysis of what he himself is doing. This spectrum of modes ranges from extremely "objective" relation of facts to extremely "subjective" personal rantings. Such passages as the Partisan Review questionnaire seem to have strayed fairly far from the topic at hand, the plight of Southern tenant farmers. Even the letter, presumably written to us as readers, contains a large dose of Agee; as anyone who has ever written one should be able to attest, letters are as much to oneself as to those to whom they are addressed.

In his more subjective modes Agee also speaks to us as though he were framing a play. The mediating structures of the Curtain Speech, for instance, with its single voice, and the Conversation in the Lobby during intermission are noisier than the passages surrounding them, with sentences that last often for two pages and make extensive use of colons. In both cases we hear Agee's commentary, official and informal,

78 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 449, ff.
79 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 349, ff.
80 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 362.
81 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 49, ff.
82 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 376.
83 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 384.
84 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 239, ff.
86 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 353.
on how he has written the play. Agee employs a mixture of subjective and objective methods within this vast array of dialogical attempts to make himself felt and not felt. Instead of a straight line of factual report to self-aware questioning, he jumps back and forth between the two poles of experience. He finds himself transformed in struggling with representing the lives of others,\textsuperscript{87} and in struggling with Agee's representations, we too are transformed, seeing his struggle and feeling our own.

That Agee feels remorse about his privileged position as observer appears in his many apologetic statements, both in \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} and elsewhere. For example, he writes in a letter to Father Flye on August 12, 1938,

> My writing is in bad shape. . . . My trouble is, 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. Trying to write it in terms of moral problems alone is more than I can possibly do. My main hope 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: well, there's no use trying to talk about it. If I could make it what it ought to be made

\textsuperscript{87} Staub, 159.
I would not be human.88

By September 25, 1941, he has come to the realization that this assessment is correct, writing to Father Flye, "it is a sinful book at least in all degrees of 'falling short of the mark' and I think in more corrupt ways as well."89 Agee recognizes that his project has failed and that in all probability it was doomed from the start.

He writes to Father Flye,

I made a try lately of writing the book in such language that anyone who can read and is seriously interested can understand it. I felt it was a failure and would take years to learn how to do but became so excited in it I had (and have) a hard time resuming my first method; including a sense of guilt. The lives of these families belong first (if to any one) to people like them and only secondarily to the "educated" such as myself. If I have done this piece of spiritual burglary no matter in what "reverence" and wish for "honesty," the least I can do is to return the property where it belongs, not limit its language to those who can least know what it means.90

Agee realizes that the attempt to communicate in a way that the tenants themselves can understand will never succeed but is nevertheless exhilarating.

88 Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, 104-05.
89 Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, 131.
In addition to appearing in personal correspondence, Agee's skepticism about his ability to communicate what he has experienced emerges in the numerous apologies in the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Although he attempts to overcome the problem of reconciling community and experience he seems to realize that he will not be able to and apologizes profusely for his shortcomings in this regard. His expressions of regret fall into the two categories of apologies directly to the tenants and apologies to the reader. He addresses the tenants, for example,

... how, looking thus into your eyes and seeing thus, how each of you is a creature which has never in all time existed before and which shall never in all time exist again and which is not quite like any other and which has the grand stature and natural warmth of every other and whose existence is all measured upon a still mad and incurable time; 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?

Clearly, he feels remorse at his inability to examine their lives without seeming to exploit them. However, this

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beautiful passage cannot be directed to the tenants, despite its being addressed to them, since it is written in a high, flowing diction that they would more than likely not understand.

Agee's apologies to the reader seem to progress from doubt about communicating to recognition of its impossibility to self-defense to self-retribution. First, Agee expresses fear of beginning the attempt and of failing to communicate his and Evans' experiences to the reader. He writes, "Performance, in which the whole fate and terror rests, is another matter."94 Progressing to sorrow over his inability to communicate with the characters in his book, Agee indicates a failure to connect with black workers whom he and Evans encounter, stating, "I could communicate nothing otherwise."95 He does not have any better luck with a white family that he meets on a porch, claiming that he was "unable to communicate to them at all what my feelings were."96 The man and the woman communicate with each other: "These two sat as if formally, or as if sculptured, one in wood and one in metal, or as if enthroned, about three feet apart in straight chairs tilted to the wall, and constantly watched me, all the while communicating thoroughly with each other by no outward sign of word or glance or turning, but by

94 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 16.
95 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 31.
96 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 37.
emanation."\(^{97}\) Agee, too, wants to participate in exchanges of this sort, but finds that he is most suited to communicate in such a way with those of his own background, including his readers. There is little doubt that he definitely does not communicate with the tenants as much as he would like to imagine. The passage in which he describes such nonverbal communication with Annie Mae's sister Emma\(^ {98}\) is a case in point; it is not clear whether she feels the same emotions that he does while staring into her eyes. The eternal dilemma with the problem of community and communication is, "How can I be sure that we feel the same?"

Beyond expressing remorse, Agee questions himself in a manner indicative of his awareness of a non-connection with the tenants. He writes, "For one who sets himself to look at all earnestly, at all in purpose toward truth, into the living eyes of a human life: what is it he there beholds that so freezes and abashes his ambitious heart?"\(^ {99}\) He also makes a simple statement of the impossibility of communicating with us as readers, mentioning "an excitement whose nature seems to me not only finally but essentially beyond the power of art to convey."\(^ {100}\) Agee's continued sentiment that he cannot make his text what it ought to be leads to a defensive position. He writes,"[S]ince I cannot

\(^{97}\) Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 34.
\(^{100}\) Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 228.
make it the image it should be, let it stand as the image it is: I am speaking of my verbal part of this book as a whole. By what kind of foreword I can make clear some essential coherence in it, which I know is there, balanced of its chaos, I do not yet know."\(^{101}\) At one point he states of his task in writing, "Some of the time you are trying to communicate (not necessarily to please); some of the time you are trying to state, communication or none."\(^{102}\) Agee also applies this defensive attitude toward his method of speculation, writing, "School was not in session while I was there. My research on this subject was thin, indirect, and deductive. By one way of thinking it will seem for these reasons worthless: by another, which I happen to trust more, it may be sufficient."\(^{103}\)

Finally, Agee employs self-deprecation. In a section addressed to himself he wishes that he had a girl and then immediately chides himself, "She was all right but what the hell, fantast."\(^{104}\) He continues in this vein, again addressing himself, "... and God --- Genius and Works of Art anyway and who the hell am I, who in Jesus' name am I. This is a beautiful country. You can take that and good art and love together and stick them up your ---. And if you think da dialectic is going to ring any conceivably

\(^{103}\) Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 291.
worthwhile changes, you can stick that and yourself up after. Just an individualizing intellectual. Bad case of infantilism. And --- you, too." Agee communicates his disgust at "failing" to himself and to us, and directly after this tirade he shifts back into straight narration: "As soon as I got on the slag above Madrid, I started watching. . . ." This range of attitudes on communication from doubt to self-retribution seems to progress linearly through the text. As readers, we should be aware of reasons for Agee's apologies. It is not clear, either for him or for us, whether he has failed in his task, and in light of the book's many attempts at an ending it appears that it never will be.

Displaying the American themes of self-analysis and self-criticism, Agee connects experience and community; it seems that in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men there is little or no separation between his own experience and his relation of it to the reader. His consciously subjective presence pervades the text. Despite his overwhelming desire to identify and emphasize the subjectivity in his position as observer, however, Agee often misses cases of his own imprinting. He manages to be supremely aware at the same time.

105 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 384-85.
106 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 385.
109 King, 208; Erling Larsen, James Agee, U of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers 95 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971) 26, 36.
time that he misses the point altogether. Speaking of eating and talking with the Gudgers on his first night at their house, he writes, "This form was one in which two plain people and one complex one who scarcely know each other discourse while one eats and the others wait for him to finish so they may get back to bed..."^110 If he scarcely knows them, how can he tell that he is more "complex" than they? His subjective assessment obstructs our participation in reconstructing the scene. Agee writes, "But it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it, sunken in sleep like stones; so that I know almost the dreams they will not remember..."^111 This statement is quite problematic. Agee maps his own consciousness onto the tenants', raising questions about such issues as selfhood and participation. It is rather presumptuous of him, for example, to claim that he can know their dreams—and better than they can.

Agee also impresses his thoughts onto others.^112 For instance, he asserts that Pearl enjoys clothes more than Louise and the Ricketts girls her age, and noting that Pearl's mother and grandmother "are of the sexually loose

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^112 Stott, 302, 303.
'stock'" he posits that she is "already showing the signs."\textsuperscript{113} Actually, according to an interview from 1980, Pearl never did drift in this direction, and in addition she was shocked to read as an adult Agee's opinions of her mother and grandmother.\textsuperscript{114} Another example is Agee's famous desire for Emma, Annie Mae's sister. He spends several pages imagining how wonderful it would be for her if she could be privileged to spend a day or two in bed with him, Evans, and Gudger.\textsuperscript{115} He is convinced that she understands and returns his desire for her;\textsuperscript{116} according to an interview, she claims never to have realized that he was attracted to her. In fact, she was supposed to have been a "live wire" and may have taken him up on an offer of lovemaking if she had known of Agee's interest.\textsuperscript{117}

In the passage in which Agee encounters the black workers who are made to sing for him and Evans\textsuperscript{118} Agee's remarkable treatment of the participants' several ways of looking at each other (fearful, compassionate, disdainful, interested, bored, subordinate, cliqueish) raises issues of class, caste, economic status, education, social background, and race. These political issues appear again and again in \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, most often when Agee constructs

\textsuperscript{113} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 280.
\textsuperscript{114} Raines, 36, 38.
\textsuperscript{115} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 62.
\textsuperscript{116} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{117} Raines, 38.
others' thoughts without sufficient evidence of what they are thinking. Concerning race, Agee on several occasions regards nonverbal communication on his part as successful, when it may not have been. His efforts are, of course, genuine and heartfelt, but there is no way that he can know whether the recipient of his good wishes has understood his meaning. Implying that he communicates with his eyes when there is nothing to say, Agee relates his effort with the black workers who sing for him\textsuperscript{119} and later with a young black couple that he has inadvertently chased.\textsuperscript{120} In both cases, Agee recognizes the gap in communication but imagines that something has occurred in the mutual gaze.

The issue of intruding observer also extends to gender, particularly in Agee's mapping of thought onto Emma, who gazes back at him.\textsuperscript{121} He writes, "Each of us is attractive to Emma, both in sexual immediacy and as symbols or embodiments of a life she wants and knows she will never have."\textsuperscript{122} How can he know that this is how she feels? He states of Ivy Woods and her mother that they "appeared to be by far the best satisfied and satisfying women, of their class or of any other, whom I happened to see during this time in the south."\textsuperscript{123} It is difficult to believe that Agee would be able to discern this fact without at least talking to these women.

\textsuperscript{119} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 29.
\textsuperscript{120} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 42.
\textsuperscript{121} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 64-66.
\textsuperscript{122} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 61.
\textsuperscript{123} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 280.
Agee's insensitivity to the thought processes of others occurs with regard to age as well. He imagines on several occasions what children are feeling, as in, "These are women, I am a woman, I am not a child any more, I am undressing with women, and this is how women are, and how they talk."\textsuperscript{124} Class, however, is perhaps the most obvious category in which Agee falls into this pattern. He says of his first meeting Fred Ricketts that Ricketts had "a fear that was saying, 'O lord god please for once, just for once, don't let this man laugh at me up his sleeve, or do me any meanness or harm.'\textsuperscript{125} How can Agee be sure that this has happened to Ricketts in the past or that these are his thoughts at this moment, merely from looking at him?

This imprinting also extends beyond class to issues such as strength of character. In a passage remarkable for its illogical and insensitive reasoning, Agee writes of the corns on Ricketts' feet, "Recognizing my own tendency half-consciously to alter my walk or even to limp under certain conditions of mental insecurity, and believing Ricketts to be one of the most piteously insecure men I have ever known, I suspect, too, that nervous modifications in his walking have had much to do with destroying his feet."\textsuperscript{126} In light of Agee's explanation in the previous sentence that Ricketts' corns had been caused by excessive use of stirrups, this

\textsuperscript{124} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 72.
\textsuperscript{125} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 361.
\textsuperscript{126} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 271.
statement is not only implausible but borders on libel. That Agee limps when he feels insecure is no proof that Fred Ricketts is either lame or beset by anxiety.

Instances of Agee's non-awareness of his own subjectivity often do not fall neatly into a category of race, gender, age, or class; in most cases there is simply a failure to connect, which involves Agee's imagining of an experience not directly communicated to him. For instance, he says of Annie Mae, "Saturday is the day of leaving the farm and going to Cookstown, and from the earliest morning on I can see that she is thinking of it."\(^{127}\) He continues, claiming that she has been watching him in order to detect what he is thinking, and in describing what she wears to church on Sunday he states that she will wear a particular comb "[i]f she is feeling happy." Agee's representation of thoughts of others that have not been expressed to him is indicative of problems connected to his own subjectivity.

The average reader would categorize Agee's work as subjective and Evans' as objective. While Agee's may be more recognizably self-aware and Evans' more material, both utilize a blend of subjective and objective methods. In his essay in *A Way of Seeing*, Agee delineates two kinds of photographers, the static, including Evans, and the fluid, including Helen Levitt. The advantage of the static lies in its "complex multiplicity of attitudes of perception,"

whereas the fluid constitutes "the simplest and most direct way of seeing the everyday world, the most nearly related to the elastic, casual, and subjective way in which we ordinarily look around us."\textsuperscript{128} Agee places his own work with Levitt's, no doubt, but he emphasizes that both styles are poetic, and in addition both camps utilize a mixture of subjective and objective methods.

Many critics recognize that the text of \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} is as much about Agee as about the tenants whom he studies.\textsuperscript{129} Attitudes toward this fact range from comments on "Agee's self-indulgence"\textsuperscript{130} and narcissism\textsuperscript{131} to indications that because of what is at stake Agee would loathe looking at human life "objectively."\textsuperscript{132} Some think that Agee's attitude is admirable, and some hate it, but all take for granted that it is "subjective." Evans, on the other hand, is generally considered to be far more "objective" than Agee. He himself holds this opinion, stating, "I didn't identify myself subjectively nearly as much as Agee did. I was working objectively on the visual material in front of me, which was incredibly rich."\textsuperscript{133} Susan Sontag agrees, claiming that Evans did not try to "express himself" in his photographs in \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}.

\textsuperscript{128} Agee, \textit{A Way of Seeing}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{129} See, for example, Barson, 99; Seib, 45, 129.
\textsuperscript{130} Rabinowitz, 165.
\textsuperscript{131} Frederick Wiseman in \textit{To Render a Life}.
\textsuperscript{132} Flye, qtd. in Spears and Cassidy, 75.
\textsuperscript{133} Evans, qtd. in Spears and Cassidy, 66.
Men. According to Evans, he utilized Flaubert's objectivity, "the non-appearance of the author, the non-subjectivity." The case is generally stated that Agee's work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is subjective and Evans' objective. However, this assertion is not so simple as it would first appear.

Agee's main interest in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* lies in his reactions to what he found and reported and in his anguish over the impossibility of communicating these sentiments. He wanted the book to be both a political work and a "study of consciousness." Why he had difficulty succeeding in combining issues of experience and community, self and other, is related to two fundamental problems in his text. First, there is a problem with what one critic calls Agee's "ethical error" of respecting his readers more than the tenants. That is, he does not treat the tenants as subjects. The basis of this problem is the fact that events experienced are necessarily subjective. Agee reports his own experience of the tenants, not the tenants' experience. W.M. Frohock states the difficulty a little more generously, "The problem, in other words, was one of telling

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134 Sontag, 30.
135 Evans, qtd. in Katz, 84.
138 King, 223.
the truth about what had been seen and felt by a man whom Agee distrusted—himself.\textsuperscript{139} T.V. Reed points out that even though the text makes use of "objective" "realism" and "subjective" "modernism," it still commits the basic error of reobjectifying the tenants.\textsuperscript{140}

That Agee mistakenly values his own experience over that of the tenants leads to a separate problem with the democratic community. At the same time that he wishes to help the tenants, he also wants to glorify them as they are.\textsuperscript{141} This conflict of interests results in some rather ludicrous conclusions on Agee's part. For example, he would deprive the tenants of electricity simply because he likes the way kerosene lamplight looks. "I cannot unqualifiedly excite myself in favor of Rural Electrification, for I am too fond of lamplight."\textsuperscript{142} These two fundamental problems, one with experience and the other with community, point to difficulties with subjects and objects.

Dewey answers the question of subject-object dichotomy by combining the two elements.\textsuperscript{143} Rejecting any dualism of subject and object,\textsuperscript{144} he chooses instead to view the processes involved in being either a subject or an object as

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\textsuperscript{139} W.M. Frohock, "The Question of Unkept Promise," \textit{Southwest Review} 42 (1957): 225.
\textsuperscript{140} Reed, "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real," 168, and \textit{Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers}, 51.
\textsuperscript{141} Slatoff, 266.
\textsuperscript{142} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 211.
\textsuperscript{143} West, 88; Kolenda, 58.
\textsuperscript{144} Rockefeller, 365; Edman, "Dewey and Art," 51.
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existing on a continuum. For Dewey, thinking in terms of mind-body dualism does not prove useful. Much of his concern is for the sensory-intellectual split, which he wants to disclaim. Less a "merging" than a mix or a focusing on other issues, this "split" is actually two aspects of a single phase of existence. Dewey writes, "A person can hardly cross a street where traffic is swift and crowded save as he keeps in mind differences which philosophers formulate in terms of 'subject' and 'object.' . . . [T]he uniquely distinguishing feature of esthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears."¹⁴⁵ According to Dewey, then, the esthetic measure of a book like Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is the degree to which reader and text or photographs lose their identities in the creation of the story related to tenant farming. We as readers are as fully implicated in this task as Agee and Evans.

At their best Agee and Evans are able to present an illusion of a world that the reader or viewer sees "as is," yet they are able to do this in spots precisely because they have interacted with that world and changed it. Moreover, we as readers go through a similar process, interacting with the text and photographs to change them in our minds according to

¹⁴⁵ Dewey, Art as Experience, 253-54.
our own experiences. This process of interaction with the tenants' world, particularly on Agee's part, remains partial and inconclusive, and his attempts to relate transactions that occurred and ones that he wished could have occurred take shape in the varied modes of discourse that he employs. That the tenants have changed Agee and Evans is undisputed; however, this mutual affecting does not amount to the "merging" of subject and object that Agee strives for. For Dewey, such a merging involves an integration of organism and environment, yet he stresses that the artist cannot get beyond his own funding. In addition, if the artist could, there would be no object for him to see.\textsuperscript{146} That is, if Agee lacked the Harvard education and "Northern" background that he so longs to circumvent in order to make a connection with the tenants, he would be a tenant farmer instead of a writer reporting on tenants, and there would be no book. Agee's task of reconstruction involves the problem of mutual exclusiveness; his two main desires are to live the tenants' experiences and to report them. However, if he were able to live their experiences, there would be no replication or reconstruction of what he sees. In fact, there would be not only no reporter, but also nothing to report. Reluctantly, Agee must settle for the only option available to him: reporting what he has observed without being able to experience it firsthand.

\textsuperscript{146} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, p. 95.
Dewey stresses the role of process; since inquiry is a transaction between the self and other transactions, a more significant topic than the relation of subject to object is that of subject to other relations.\textsuperscript{147} Frederick J. Hoffman questions whether "self" is not merely another name for process.\textsuperscript{148} If so, the subject-object split becomes less apparent, and the emphasis shifts to actions rather than actors and those acted upon. It can be useful to think of \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} as a process of discovery, both for Agee and Evans and for us. In addition, subjectivity and objectivity not only are organically related,\textsuperscript{149} they are both polar aspects of experience,\textsuperscript{150} experience as participated in by the individual and as reported to the community. According to Mead, "The subjectivity does not consist in the experience having the metaphysical nature of consciousness but in its failure to agree with a dominant common perspective which claims the individual."\textsuperscript{151} Thus, subjectivity is itself tied up in community and the processes of communication.

In light of Dewey's emphasis on process and Mead's indication of the role of community in subjectivity, the issue of subject-object dichotomy is not only not an issue of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[147] McDermott, 219.
\item[149] Rockefeller, 82, 105.
\item[150] Bernstein, \textit{Praxis and Action}, 205.
\end{footnotes}
interest, it is a non-issue. It has become clear in the twentieth century that the "real" can only be known in terms of the "imaginative"; therefore, the task, instead of one of supplanting consciousness, becomes one of exploring its limits.\textsuperscript{152} Subject-object fusion, according to Dewey, is not a useful topic to explore precisely because its elements are so inextricably intertwined.

Leslie Fiedler writes about Agee's novel \textit{A Death in the Family} that it "hovers between the subjective and objective, between the lyrical and the novelistic,"\textsuperscript{153} and the same claim can be made of \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}. Shifting between subjective and objective, rather than favoring one over the other,\textsuperscript{154} Agee's text allows us to cooperate in constructing the story. Agee mentions that his interest in writing lies, rather than in "expressing himself," in maintaining "an effort to be faithful to [his] perceptions."\textsuperscript{155} However, in asserting claims, either on the authority of others' reports, as with much of the information on cotton farming,\textsuperscript{156} or by "analogy," as with his speculations on what the houses must be like in winter,\textsuperscript{157} Agee does not apologize for supplementing his perceptions.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{152} Gunn, \textit{The Culture of Criticism}, 54.
\bibitem{155} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 356.
\bibitem{156} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 328.
\bibitem{157} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 209.
\end{thebibliography}
He also defends his right to do the same with his imagination, stating, "I must warn you that the result is sure to be somewhat inaccurate: but it is accurate anyhow to my ignorance, which I would not wish to disguise." 158

Even though Agee is usually considered to be the more subjective of the two artists and Evans the more objective, both of them use subjective and objective techniques at the same time. Therefore, Agee can be shown to be "objective" and Evans "subjective." The passage in which Agee examines the Gudgers' house in their absence, 159 for example, is lyrical, speculative, apologetic, and extremely self-aware, while it "objectively" describes items in their home. Agee's "objectivity" is also apparent in his many lists of words and things. In a long, elaborate list detailing items found underneath the Gudgers' house, Agee describes objects in painstaking detail—"bent nails, withered and knobbled with rust; a bone button, its two eyes torn to one; the pierced back of an alarm clock, greasy to the touch; a torn fragment of pictured print; an emptied and flattened twenty-gauge shotgun shell, its metal green, lettering still visible; the white tin eyelet of a summer shoe." 160 There is a similar list of things found in the Gudgers' storeroom 161 and another of objects in their smokehouse—"a broken plow-frame; pieces

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158 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 328.
159 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 135, ff.
161 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 183-86.
of an ice-cream freezer; a can of rusty nails; a number of mule shoes; the strap of a white slipper; a pair of greenly eaten, crumpled workshoes."\(^{162}\) However, in a footnote, he admits that he has been making some of it up. "Invention here: . . . I remember for certain only the sorghum cans. . . ."\(^{163}\) These most objective-looking passages turn out to be embroidered by Agee's subjective imagination. At the same time, though, they represent an objective allegiance to Agee's subjective memory.

His description of the calendar decorations on the wall over the Rickettses' mantel is also elaborate and elaborated upon.

. . . dickensians at Christmas dinner, eighteenth-century gentlemen in a tavern, medievalists at Christmas dinner, country doctors watching beside sick children, three-quarter views of locomotives at full speed, young couples admiring newly acquired brown and brocade davenports: all such as these overlaid in complexes and textured with the names and numberings of days months years and phases of the moon and with words and phrases and names such as . . . Kelvinator, Compliments of, Wist ye not that I am about my Father's Business, Mazola, Railroad Age, Maxwell House, They Satisfy, Mexico Mexico, The Pause that Refreshes, . . .

\(^{162}\) Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 133.

\(^{163}\) Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 133.
You Can't Afford NOT, Soft, Lovely Hands, You Owe It to Her, You Owe It to Him, You Owe It to Them . . . 164

Agee's footnote at the end of this section reads, "These are in part by memory, in part composited out of other memory, in part improvised, but do not exceed what was there in abundance, variety, or kind." 165 Even before the footnote, Agee's presence in this list is apparent, in its rhythms, in its jokes and puns ("You Owe"), and particularly in the absurdity of most of its images, both in themselves and next to each other and on the Rickettses' wall ("young couples admiring newly acquired brown and brocade davenports").

Although Evans' photographs are never as subjective as Agee's text, these lists approach the objectivity of the photographs, 166 at the same time that they are indicative of Agee's radical subjectivity in selecting what to describe. 167 As Heisenberg presaged, such radical subjectivity is now recognized to be necessary to any sort of accurate description of "how things are." Dewey indicates that examining existence in terms of a strict dualism is unfruitful, since we have no choice but to look at it from our own individual points of view, "subjectively." Of course, the problem is complicated when I try to show you something I have seen; especially when I try to get you to

164 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 200.
165 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 201.
166 Puckett, 135.
167 Ohlin, 36.
see it by (your) replicating my experience. Agee tries to persuade us to replicate not only his experience of looking, but also the tenants' experience, which he has observed. We are at a third remove.

Evans utilizes several types of subjective techniques, even though his photographs appear at first glance to be entirely "objective." His choice of lens, for instance, affects the depth of field and focal point in the final print. He usually used a triple convertible,\textsuperscript{168} a single combination lens with the three possibilities of normal focal length, long focus, and even longer focus. Without adjusting the position of the camera, Evans could choose from a variety of options which photographic shot to make. In addition, in some uses, the long lens flattened the perspective of the shot, bringing background and foreground closer together. Evans also often used filters to emphasize clouds.\textsuperscript{169} In these cases choice of equipment affects the final art product in a "subjective" way. Besides altering his photographs technically, Evans includes references to himself within them. His reflection appears in his photographic subjects' eyes\textsuperscript{170} and in windows,\textsuperscript{171} and in one case, he incorporates within the frame a shadow of himself making the photograph.\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{168} Jerry L. Thompson, essay, \textit{Walker Evans at Work}, Evans, 11.
\textsuperscript{169} Thompson, essay, \textit{Walker Evans at Work}, Evans, 13.
\textsuperscript{170} Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, Book One, ii.
\textsuperscript{171} Evans, \textit{Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938}, catalog number 245.
\textsuperscript{172} Evans, \textit{Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938}.
The portrait of Bud Fields with a cotton sack includes what seems to be Agee and Evans' car behind him.\(^{173}\) These allusions to himself, if not conscious, indicate at least Evans' non-removal of self-reference.

After the photographs have been made, Evans continues to practice "subjective" techniques. A comparison of different cropplings of the portrait of Lucille Burroughs,\(^{174}\) for instance, reveals the difference between a grave being with a straw halo and a kid backed up against a wall. His editorial placement of this photograph three pages after the portrait of her mother encourages the viewer to recognize the mirrored wooden backdrops. Evans' post-production techniques both manipulate and stimulate us to participate actively in reconstructing reality. In each case, Evans, in processes similar to those Agee uses in the text, captures "objectively" "what was really there" at the same time that he "subjectively" affects the scene in his manner of showing it.

Both Agee and Evans want to bridge subject-object-style gaps such as life and work, art and science, aesthetic piece and social documentary,\(^{175}\) and in a way that Dewey would prescribe, both of them use a mixture of subjective and objective processes to attempt this bridging. However,

\(^{173}\) Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, Book One, xxv.


\(^{175}\) Trachtenberg, \textit{Reading American Photographs}, 257.
particularly in Agee's text, problems with experience, such as the ethical perception error, and community, as in the social reform error, are not overcome by this technique. What Agee and Evans do accomplish is presentation of a portrait of a time and of a place, a portrait that requires the participation of its viewer to make sense.
VI. PORTRAITURE

She knew now to look slowly and carefully at a face; she was convinced that it was impossible to see it all at once. The first thing she discovered about a face was always that she had never seen it before. When she began to look at people's actual countenances there was no more familiarity in the world for her. The most profound, the most moving sight in the whole world must be a face.

—Eudora Welty

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* may be considered to be a portrait of a place and of a time. It is clear that the photographs are meant to be individual portraits and that Book One results in a composite portrait; George Santayana emphasizes that the primary task of early photography was portraiture,¹ and the idea of photography as preserver of images is a familiar one. That the text also results in single descriptive portraits and a composite portrait in Book Two is a difficult concept only if images presented in words are not allowed within the definition of "portrait." The mental jump to word-portraits present in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is made easy by the fact that Agee's descriptions are so visually rich at the same time that they concern themselves with the rhythms and mellifluousness of sound, especially in patterns of speech. According to Richard Bernstein, the task of philosophy approximates the task of art in its neverending goal of reconstructing the "material

that is taken into something that has greater form and order [...]." 2 Like the photographer or the writer making a portrait, the philosopher also recreates the raw material of experience in its representation. Agee and Evans in making portraits approximate the philosophical task of reconstruction, and in this task both of them address the issue of their own subjectivity.

Flannery O'Connor told of a major difference in her immediate family and her Northern cousins—"the Southerners 'told stories,' while the Northerners 'discussed problems.'" 3 Agee understands the distinction, favoring the telling of stories. 4 Both the storyteller and the portrait maker differ from the discusser of problems in a major respect, the awareness of subjectivity. All three thinkers are subjective, whether they realize it or not, but especially the storyteller and portrait maker are cognizant of the need to address their own intrusion and contribution to the thing or event that they reconstruct. In Agee's case, the desire to integrate subject and object manifests itself in an overwhelming admission of the presence of the author; in Evans' case, the desire results in a drawing back of the author, to the point of apparent absence. Evans' wish to be

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4 Kramer, Agee & Actuality, 161.
invisible\textsuperscript{5} brings up the question of point of view.

By choosing what we will see, both in framing the individual photograph and in editing Book One later---in short, by making the difference between a snapshot and a portrait---Evans consciously affects our point of view. William Stott comments, "Radio was such an effective documentary medium, a central medium in the 1930s, because it inextricably joined the two methods of persuasion, direct and vicarious. The listener witnessed firsthand, yet through another's eyes. . . . And though the listener did not have the experience firsthand, he had another: his experience of the speaker."\textsuperscript{6} The same effect occurs in Evans' work, and to a lesser extent in Agee's. That is, because Evans seems to be less obtrusive, we are surprised to find that we indeed see the scene as much through his eyes as through Agee's. The camera lens becomes the eye of the observer.\textsuperscript{7} By affecting our point of view, Evans as subject appropriates our participatory role, affecting in addition our ability to choose which part of the scene to concentrate upon. However, as Paula Rabinowitz notes, "photographs are themselves objects of the gaze as well as purveyors of images."\textsuperscript{8} Thus, the issue becomes a two-way street. Evans affects which part of the scene we focus on, but we choose which part of Evans' 

\textsuperscript{5} Alex Harris in To Render a Life and Mora, essay, Evans, Walker Evans: Havana 1933, 12.
\textsuperscript{6} Stott, 90, 91.
\textsuperscript{7} Arthur Rothstein, qtd. in Stott, 29.
\textsuperscript{8} Rabinowitz, 146.
Neither Agee nor Evans is a discusser of problems. Both of them are aware of the issue of subjectivity in presenting a fair picture of the object in front of them, and both of them address the topic in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In a review of *Sunset Boulevard* Agee delineates two types of artist. "I can only say that in my opinion there are two main kinds of life in art, not just one. The warmer, richer kind comes, invariably, from the kind of artist who works far inside himself and his creatures. For the other kind, we can thank the good observer." Both Agee and Evans display strains of each type of artist.

Agee is particularly interested in the problems of the gaze and looking. Indicating in his movie reviews that the eyes are of utmost importance in film, Agee himself composes many passages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "for the eyes." For example, in a word-portrait of his intrusion into the Gudger household during a thunderstorm, he writes,

[T]he personality of a room, and of a group of creatures, has undergone change, as if of two different techniques or mediums; what began as 'rembrandt,' delighted in gold, in each integer colossally heavily planted, has become a photograph, a record in clean,

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staring, colorless light, almost without shadow, of two iron sheeted beds which stand a little away from the walls; of dislocated chairs; within cube of nailed housewood; a family of tenant farmers, late in a sunday afternoon, in a certain fold of country, in a certain part of the south, and of the lives of each of them, confronted by a person strange to them. . . .

Agee mentions the difference between a painting and a photograph, and his sentence mirrors this difference, changing from "colossally heavily planted" images to a black-and-white inventory of objects in a room, yet, he remains painfully aware that he is intruding, never indicating that as photograph-maker he has gone unnoticed either by the tenants or by us.

The text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* contains many, many examples of Agee's use of eyes and looking among those whom he represents in order to demonstrate his awareness of the issue of the gaze and of his intrusive efforts. For instance, he writes, "I was watching for your eyes, and whenever they turned upon me, trying through my own and through a friendly and tender smiling (which sickens me to disgust to think of) to store into your eyes some knowledge of this, some warmth, some reassurance, that might at least a little relax you, that might conceivably bring you to warmth,

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12 For example, there are at least twenty separate references to eyes and looking in the forty-three pages 361-404 of Book Two.
to any ease or hope of smiling; but your eyes upon me, time after time, held nothing but the same terror."13 Although he knows to watch the gaze of the other in alleviating the intrusiveness of his own, Agee continues to imprint his own consciousness onto that of the other; how can he be sure it is terror that the other's eyes hold? In another section, he writes, "Her eyes are at once searching, shy, excited, and hopelessly sad. . . . I can see that she is thinking of it."14 In this combination of eye images, Agee privileges his own vision over hers; again, how does he know that she is feeling shy, excited, and sad? Can he really see what she is thinking?

The issue of interpreting what another feels seems to be more clear cut in the photographs, but it still exists there as well. The photograph of Allie Mae Burroughs, for example, makes us question what Allie Mae thinks and feels, particularly when we compare the photograph of her in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men15 to the one in American Photographs.16 In the first, she frowns slightly, questioning us with her stare, while in the second she approximates Agee's description of the dead Gauguin in his 1953 film script Noa. Noa: "the slight smile is at least as enigmatic as that of Mona Lisa."17 (One of the lines that Agee gives to Gauguin

13 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 365.
14 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 259.
15 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, iii.
16 Evans, American Photographs, Part One, photograph 14.
17 James Agee, Agee on Film, Volume Two: Five Film Scripts by James
which could also be applied to Allie Mae is "The ugly can be beautiful, Madame; the pretty, never."18) We should not expect to be able to tell exactly what she feels. In addition, this photograph walks the thin line between fact and symbol in documentary photography. Evans makes a subjective statement by backing Allie Mae up against a weatherbeaten wood-plank wall whose boards reflect the strong horizontal lines of her shoulders, collarbone, collar, mouth, eyebrows, and the top of her head. Although he did not invent the comparison of weathered wall and weathered woman, how he managed to persuade her to stand just exactly like that is a mystery. The result is that in addition to being a portrait of an individual, the photograph makes a social comment on what the tenant farming lifestyle can do to a young human being. There is definitely as much of Evans in this photograph as of Allie Mae.

In a review of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Lionel Trilling writes, "In this picture, Mrs. Gudger, with all her misery and perhaps with her touch of pity for herself, simply refuses to be an object of your 'social consciousness'; she refuses to be an object at all--everything in the picture proclaims her to be all subject. And this is true of all of Evans' pictures of the Gudger, Woods and Ricketts families."19

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18 Agee, Agee on Film, Volume Two, 98.
In his very statement that she is a subject, Trilling is also guilty of not allowing the object to participate. Who are we to decide that Allie Mae feels a "touch of pity for herself"? At the same time, Trilling's point is valid; Evans' portraits do seem to approximate more closely than those of other FSA photographers the participation of the photographic subjects, with their gaze directed out at us.

Frank Lentricchia writes of pragmatism, quoting Dewey, "'The real object is so fixed in its regal aloofness that it is a king to any beholding mind that may gaze upon it.' Pragmatism is a rejection of hierarchical structure itself, of the stabilizing (kingly) forces of structure, which would always stand safely outside structure--outside the game, but ruling the game."20 In a pragmatic attempt to circumvent the problems of being privileged to be subjects, both Agee and Evans, with their different methods of attacking this topic, must fail. Although they would like to reject hierarchical structure, the situation on which they report is itself a hierarchy, and their own relationships with the tenants, particularly in the economic, educational, and social realms are also hierarchical. The tenants feel indebted to them for such small favors as a ride to work,21 and although Agee, at least, would wish to erase this positioning of himself as higher on the ladder than, say, George Gudger, merely

Positing that hierarchies do not exist will not solve the problem. Agee is aware of the impossibility of his task. The only way for him as subject to merge with these objects is to be a tenant farmer, which he cannot be. It is also impossible for him to represent exactly what he has observed of the farmers with whom he has lived.

A continuum related to that of subject and object is that of time and space. In Art as Experience time and space, specifically rhythm and symmetry, coexist in harmony, rather than existing as two separate attributes. As a portrait of a time and place both in Evans’ photographs and in Agee’s text, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men approximates Dewey’s discussion of the time-space continuum. Dewey writes, "While the emphasis of the plastic arts is upon the spatial aspects of change and that of music and the literary arts upon the temporal, the difference is only one of emphasis within a common substance."22 Usually, Agee’s text is considered to focus on movement in time,23 while Evans’ photographs are called representative of a sense of place24 (space), but there are also elements of place in Agee’s temporal prose and of time in Evans’ spatial photographs. Dewey claims, "Symmetry and rhythm are the same thing felt with the difference of emphasis that is due to attentive interest."25 Agee and Evans

22 Dewey, Art As Experience, 212.
23 Fitzgerald, introd., Collected Poems, Agee, xi; Kramer, James Agee, 158.
24 O’Neal, 60; Evans, qtd. in O’Neal, 61.
25 Dewey, Art as Experience, 183.
employ both temporal rhythm and spatial symmetry in their text and photography.

Agee writes,

... and when the women are through, they may or may not come out too, with their dresses wet in front with the dishwashing and their hard hands softened and seamed as if withered with water, and sit a little while with the man or the men: and if they do, it is not for long, for everyone is much too tired, and has been awake and at work since daylight whitened a little behind the trees on the hill, and it is now very close to dark, with daylight scarcely more than a sort of tincture on the air, and this diminishing, and the loudening frogs, and the locusts, the crickets, and the birds of night, tentative, tuning, in that great realm of hazy and drowned dew, who shall so royally embroider the giant night's fragrant cloud of earthshade: and so, too, the talking is sporadic, and sinks into long unembarrassed silences; the sentences, the comments, the monosyllables, drawn up from deepest within them without thought and with faint creaking of weight as if they were wells, and spilled out in a cool flat drawl, and quietly answered; and a silence; and again, some words: and it is not really talking, or meaning, but another and profounder kind of communication, a rhythm to be completed by answer and made whole by silence, a
lyric song . . . 26

Sentences or parts of sentences of Agee's such as this one illustrate his uses of rhythm to produce a lyric song similar to the one that he describes. This effect becomes especially apparent when the passages are read aloud. In this particular passage, there is virtually no pause until the comparison is made between the noises of nature changing at twilight and the conversation of the tenants preparing for bed ("... and so, too"). A longer silence occurs directly following the statement about embarrassed silences, and there is no pause in the section about comments made without thought. In uses of rhythm Agee mirrors the type of sound that he describes. For example, there is a semicolon after "quietly answered," and another after "silence," setting the phrase "and a silence" off by itself, flanked on either side by silent pauses. The rhythm of a phrase like "and so, too, the talking is sporadic" is also sporadic, echoing the action that it depicts.

In addition to rhythm, Agee utilizes symmetry in Book Two of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, particularly in his structuring of the material he presents. For instance, the book's many beginnings prefigure its several endings. Upon opening Let Us Now Praise Famous Men the reader finds Book One (the photographs, without caption, explanation, or even numbers), permissions, the half-title, the title page, the

26 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 70-71.
copyright page, the dedication, Evans' foreword, Agee's preface, the table of contents, three epigraphs from *King Lear*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and Louise Gudger's third-grade geography book, another table comprising the cast of characters, a section heading announcing Book Two, the table of contents for Book Two, a dedicatory poem to Evans, Agee's preamble, and another section heading, before the "text" begins after 104 pages of beginnings. Similarly, Agee claims that the last words of the book have been spoken27 ("amen," on p. 439), thirty-two pages before the end of the text, the remainder of which consists of "two images," the title statement, a section of notes and appendices, and the final section of "On the Porch." The book remains uncertain of reaching a specific conclusion, as it is unsure of where to begin. Instead of a specific linear argument, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* presents a portrait of time and place in a whirl of specific political, economic, cultural, and social problems demanding our attention.

Symmetry and rhythm also appear in Evans' portrait of place and time. In the photograph of the Burroughses' kitchen,28 for example, the door frame mirrors the picture frame, making a "picture within a picture" that is so strong in its depth that it is at first not apparent that the white towel on the door is in the exact center of the frame of the

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28 Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Book One, x.
photograph, a position that would in most cases be disruptive. With the exception of the line created by the table's foreleg in conjunction with the back of the hutch, none of the verticals or horizontals in the photograph is true; the strong "vertical" of the side of the door as well as the "horizontals" of the wall at the right are skewed to diagonals. The focal lines of this photograph are also diagonal, originating in the dishpan closest to us, traveling against the diagonal of the table to the lamp, and then shifting to trace the diagonal of the table edge past the tilted chair whose angle extends our view to the crock on the hutch. Our view originates in one source of reflected natural light, the inside of the dishpan, to another, the lamp of which Agee writes, to a third, the crock. In his uses of composition, Evans causes us to recognize three-dimensional space within a two-dimensional format, "rounding the corner" of the doorway. All of the action of our point of focus centers around the white towel hanging down the center of the photograph frame.

Evans also utilizes rhythm in his work. In the photographs of Bud Fields sitting on his bed, the placement of the photographs emphasizes the continuity of the bars of the bedframe, resulting in a felt message that "Bud Fields is in jail," since approximately one-third of the frame involves our viewing of Fields through the bars. (The portrait of his

son on the following page\textsuperscript{30} reiterates this sentiment.) The continuity of the bars occurs when one bar in the lower photograph is lined up exactly with a different one in the upper photograph. This portion of the photograph remains static from one shot to the next, with the exception of Evans' shifting of the photographs to an offset position, a shifting which results in more apparent movement on Bud Fields' part than he has actually made. We get a sense of motion through time; the horizontals of the clapboard walls and the verticals of the iron bedstead remain static, while Fields moves; moreover, the motion is not particularly overt. The triangles composed by his right arm and knee and the diagonals of his exposed ribs remain in almost the same position in the lower photograph, while the triangle formed by his right arm in the upper photograph has shifted to a different triangle in the lower one. In addition, the only other conspicuous difference in placement involves his shift of head position. Now, instead of the triangle of his mustache, we see his face mirrored in the shadowy cloth on the wall behind him. That the changes in position are slight and that the photographs follow one beneath the other suggest the type of changes in spatial picture provided by the temporal medium of movie film. The image is reinforced by the "sprocket holes" provided by the rungs of a chair to our left.

\textsuperscript{30} Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, Book One, xxiii.
Both of these pages of photographs contain temporal and spatial elements. Dewey states, "Space and time—or rather space-time—are found in the matter of every art product. In the arts, they are neither the empty containers nor the formal relations that schools of philosophy have sometimes represented them to be. They are substantial; they are properties of every kind of material employed in artistic expression and esthetic realization."\(^{31}\) Both Agee and Evans make use of space-time. Agee writes of the church Evans is preparing to photograph,

It lost nothing at all in stasis, but even more powerfully strove in through the eyes its paralyzing classicism: stood from scoured clay, a light lift above us, no trees near, and few weeds; every grain, each nailhead, distinct; the subtle almost strangling strong asymmetries of that which has been hand wrought toward symmetry (as if it were an earnest description, better than the intended object): so intensely sprung against so scarcely eccentric a balance that my hands of themselves spread out their bones, trying to regiment on air between their strengths its tensions and their mutual structures as they stood subject to the only scarcely eccentric, almost annihilating stress, of the serene, wild, rigorous light: empty, shut, bolted, of all that was now withdrawn from it

upon the fields the utter statement, God's mask and wooden skull and home stood empty in the meditation of the sun: and this light upon it was strengthening still further its imposal and embrace, and in about a quarter of an hour would have trained itself ready, and there would be a triple convergence in the keen historic spasm of the shutter.32

This passage presents at the same time a strong image of spatial and extended qualities of the building and one of time passing and gone by. Both of these uses of technique contribute to the portrait Agee makes; images like those of a church as God's mask, a façade of what divinity means, as God's wooden skull, the dead remainder of a once-vibrant collection of ideas, and as God's empty home, the void of organized religion as well as the empty building at mid-week, signify the passing of time at the same moment that they represent spatial impressions. Along with his extremely concrete descriptions ("each nailhead distinct"), Agee includes a discussion of sunlight ("serene, wild, rigorous"), the reason for his and Evans' interest in the church. This discussion, as well as the use of the term "historic," introduces the idea of the passing of time. Indeed, Agee is describing the hurry to set up the equipment before the light changes. The "spasm of the shutter," a pun on the word "shudder" will involve capturing the image of a place at a

specific time.

Agee approximates Dewey on temporal and spatial art in another way, as well. Dewey writes, "There is another significant involution of time and movement in space. It is constituted not only by directional tendencies--up and down, for example--but by mutual approaches and retreatings." The entire form of Agee's text, both in its very different types of sections and in its repeated attempts at one type of discourse only to shift to another, is illustrative of approaching and retreating. Agee and Evans display uses of space and time that are opposite from the usual "obvious" temporal narrative and spatial photograph stereotypes. Evans' work, for instance, utilizes qualities of duration as well as of extension. William Stott claims that in viewing the people in Evans' portraits "we must commit ourselves to a kind of relationship over time" and, moreover, that Evans' actual subject is time, seen in the beauties of the fallen world." Evans' interest in deserted architectural forms often embraces structures that are neglected and decaying. For example, his photograph of a dilapidated antebellum plantation house in juxtaposition with one of mules and a poster on a brick wall indicates the passing of time, not only in its own decay, but in its lack of human inhabitants.

33 Dewey, Art as Experience, 211.
34 Stott, 278.
35 Stott, 288.
36 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, lviii.
37 Evans Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, lix.
A way of life is indeed "gone with the wind," replaced by one featuring hard work relieved only by the occasional minstrel show. The grandeur of the big house has been replaced by a flat prisonlike wall.

In the first two photographs of the town section of Book One, Evans presents a grouping of two disparate images with common threads. The top photograph is populated and busy, whereas the bottom one is deserted, yet both implore us to "Drink Coca-Cola," and with their mirrored Romanesque windows and canopies, they suggest the same image before and after a passing of time. Evans also emphasizes the passing of time by combining vital and bygone within the same photograph. In general, Evans' photographs of buildings have a timeless quality with reminders of time added; in the one of storefronts sporting signs for 666 cold medicine, the buildings are leaning and their overhangs are literally falling down. It is possible to look for some seconds at this photograph before realizing that it contains a person, one who is even less intrusive than the cartoon-hydrant figure at the lower center of the frame. In addition, the delicate web of telephone lines in the upper third of the photograph reminds us that communication continues, although it has bypassed this particular venue. The addition of human photographic subjects to studies of specific buildings,

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38 Evans, _Let Us Now Praise Famous Men_, Book One, xlvi, xlvii.
39 Evans, _Let Us Now Praise Famous Men_, Book One, lii.
especially evident in Evans' photographs on porches of public buildings such as the store in bright sunlight\textsuperscript{40} or the post office with its crowd of loitering farmers,\textsuperscript{41} has the effect of a stopping of time, of capturing a moment in progress or freezing an instant in the flow.

This action occurs from a different perspective in Agee. Samuel Hynes claims that since \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} "is one enormous now," time is not a "significant dimension" in it.\textsuperscript{42} That is, time is a factor but during the experience of reading the book, time is forgotten or put aside. The text of \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} reads like a movie. In Agee's interest in the meeting points of time, space, and consciousness,\textsuperscript{43} he approaches film, which Herbert Read calls "the art of space-time . . . a space-time continuum."\textsuperscript{44} Like a film, the text of \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} displays apparent freedom from both spatial and temporal restriction at the same time that it obeys laws pertaining to time and space. R.E. Jones indicates that motion pictures "have the rhythm of the thought-stream and the same uncanny ability to move forward or backward in space or time";\textsuperscript{45} this characterization also holds for Agee's

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, Book One, liii.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Evans, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, Book One, lxii.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Hynes, 338.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Victor A. Kramer, "'Religion at its Deepest Intensity': The Stasis of Agee's \textit{The Morning Watch}," \textit{Renaissance} 27 (1975): 221, and \textit{James Agee}, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Herbert Read, "Towards a Film Aesthetic," \textit{Film: A Montage of Theories}, ed. Richard Dyer MacCann (New York: Dutton, 1966) 165.
\item \textsuperscript{45} R.E. Jones, qtd. in Susanne Langer, "A Note on the Film," MacCann, 203.
\end{itemize}
prose.

Agee's text is not all a portrait in time, just as Evans' photographs are not all a portrait in space. Like the scientist who views atoms while remaining mindful of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, both Agee and Evans choose how to represent the experiences and communities that they describe, sometimes opting for a portrait in space and sometimes for one in time. Dewey emphasizes that space-time is a continuum or a spectrum like the one we utilize to describe color.46 Stressing the idea of process in the choice of what proportions of space and time to represent, he claims, "Time as empty does not exist; time as an entity does not exist. What exists are things acting and changing, and a constant quality of their behavior is temporal."47 In other words, temporality exists not in itself but as a function of how we treat experiences.

Dewey wants to claim a similar spectrum for the functions of subject and object and for subjective and objective treatments of experience. However, although examples in Agee and Evans indicate that his point is well taken, there is a problem. As Heisenberg's principle suggests, a thing can never be both subject and object at the same instant. Agee desperately wants to accomplish the goal of integration of subject and object, selecting from the

47 Dewey, Art as Experience, 214.
range of subjective and objective techniques along Dewey's spectrum, but finally must admit that a conjunction of subject and object remains impossible, particularly in light of his need to select specific examples to report. Dewey also understands this point. When a color is removed from its context on the spectrum, he reminds us, it is no longer the same color. However, his point is that space and time, as well as subject and object, are artificial constructs that we apply after the fact to what are in reality our differing processes of treating experiences. Rather than being viewed as a void, space is "an enclosed scene" containing man's experiences, and time is neither a point nor a flow, but forward and backward motion on a continuum. Talking in singular terms of space and time or of subjectivity and objectivity, claims Dewey, is not useful, since art employs both elements of each set of categories, on a spectrum of spatial to temporal or subjective to objective. Both Agee and Evans illustrate this point.

In his description of porcelain portraits on tombstones, Agee explores the motivation behind wanting to preserve past experience. He also describes the tenants' practice of decorating new graves, particularly new graves of small children, with dishes, light bulbs, toys, and other

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objects of daily life. Evans' penultimate photograph shows such a grave. Juxtaposed with a photograph of a cluster of people on the porch of a post office, the image of the grave is strikingly lonely. The issue of communication appears both in the desire to send messages by post and in the wish to communicate with or about the dead by leaving as symbols their favorite belongings on their graves. Several of the members of the community on the porch appear to be anxious or worried, perhaps because of reflection on the event symbolized on the facing page, the most individual experience that any of us will ever face. Death, in addition to erasing the possibility of community and communication, also eradicates experience altogether.

Evans' last photograph, of martin houses made from gourds, may be read as an evocation of spirit, with its filtered clouds, its connection to birds, and its position following the grave photograph; it may also be seen as elevation of practical folk art, with its oddly angled point of view, as an example of a community dwelling, reflecting the community depicted at the beginning of the section, and as an example of an environment, illustrating yet again Evans' fondness for still-life architecture shots. This photograph has even been called an allusion to Joan Miró.

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52 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 437-38.
53 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, lxiii.
54 Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Book One, lxiv.
55 Reed, Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers, 47.
No matter how we choose to read it, the image, puzzling as it seems at first glance, in some way sums up the tenants' experience. From this single image following the others in Book One, we can learn much about the tenants' way of life and about Evans' commentary on it.

Agee's text ends with a series of endings, as it has begun with a series of beginnings. Although the book's "last words" occur with the description of a child's grave and the Lord's Prayer, the final words of the text involve the story of Agee and Evans on the Gudgers' porch listening to an unidentifiable animal call. The two of them end by lying in silent thought about the present and the past and the merging of the past into the present, and then they fall asleep, echoing one of the book's several beginnings, "All over Alabama the lamps are out." For Agee, the work remains both unconcluded and inconclusive. Having attempted in a vast number of ways to reconcile the demands of experience and community, of subject and object, he realizes that the only answer is to continue to record. Agee and Evans, in their portraits of a time and of a place, come together in many ways. Evans differs from other documentary photographers of the 1930s principally in his interest in defining reality, studying man rather than his circumstances, and to some

58 O'Neal, 63.
degree Agee shares these goals. Appreciating the lyricism\textsuperscript{60} that many associate only with Agee, Evans presents us with images filled with ideas,\textsuperscript{61} to match Agee's text filled with images.

Mead writes of the experience of watching a film, "We do our thinking in the form of conversation,"\textsuperscript{62} and this statement applies to the experience of reading Agee's writing, as well. Even in his film reviews, Agee writes by piling images endlessly upon one another\textsuperscript{63} to form a holistic picture, much as Evans presents photographs. Combining emotion and intellect,\textsuperscript{64} Agee's writing is difficult to pinpoint; for example, Robert Coles emphasizes its mixture of lyrical description and analysis,\textsuperscript{65} and W.M. Frohock claims that it "is prose meant to register through two or three senses at once."\textsuperscript{66} Agee takes the position not only of looking at photographs but also of arranging them.\textsuperscript{67} Like Evans, Agee is composing a portrait album, and his aesthetic involves a mixture of poetry and realism.\textsuperscript{68} Robert Fitzgerald

\textsuperscript{60} Evans ["Lyric Documentary" lecture at Yale, 3 Nov. 1964], \textit{Walker Evans at Work}, 238.

\textsuperscript{61} Kirstein, essay, \textit{American Photographs}, Evans, 197.

\textsuperscript{62} Mead, "The Nature of the Aesthetic Experience, 391.

\textsuperscript{63} Simon, 271.

\textsuperscript{64} Stott, 294; Dwight Macdonald, \textit{Dwight Macdonald on Movies}, 8.


\textsuperscript{66} Frohock, 225.

\textsuperscript{67} Ward, \textit{American Silences}, 140, 142, 143.

\textsuperscript{68} Neil Sinyard, \textit{Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation} (New York: St. Martin's, 1986) 86; Kramer, "James Agee's 'Dissonant Prologue,'" 58; Murray, 8-9.
states, "[H]e insisted upon respect for the real, for a reality conceived not as one belonging to a school of realists, but as a religious man would feel toward the real. ... This, above all, was what he loved, and truth in this sense was his desire. To be true to things as they were." 69 Agee aspires to the type of realism that Evans does, the type of realism that J.A. Ward defines in the statement, "The poetic of photography is an absolute poetic of realism: an acknowledgement of the presence and visibility of depth in surface." 70 Both Agee and Evans, by making us consider the surfaces they present, expect us to come to conclusions about the depths existing beneath them. They do not tell us what to think about these depths, nor do they expect us to come to the same conclusions that they have. Both of them realize the problems inherent in positing the thoughts, feelings, situations, and circumstances of others. Their composite portraits are an attempt to alleviate these problems.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men encourages the reader to participate, 71 particularly in its presentation of separate images for the reader to combine. Richard H. King emphasizes that encouraging the reader to cooperate with the artist in such a fashion "is central to Eisenstein's concept of montage (the production of an image) as superior to mere

69 Qtd. in Spears and Cassidy, 113.
70 Ward, American Silences, 162.
71 Puckett, 142; Paul Ashdown, introd., James Agee: Selected Journalism, Agee, xxx; King, 218.
representation." Both Agee and Evans use this concept in their presentation of individual episodes and images to make a composite portrait of time and place. Their goal in urging the reader to participate is to approximate "truth" as best they can.

72 King, 325.
AFTERWORD

It is one way of telling the truth: the only possible way of telling the kind of truth I am here most interested to tell.

--Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Although at first glance Agee and Evans seem to be unusual partners in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, they are, as an examination of Dewey's Art as Experience shows, indeed quite well suited to each other. Sharing concerns for experience, perception, community, democracy, subject-object dichotomy, and portraiture, they complement each others' presences. Agee and Evans have in common an interest in what goes on in the individual experience and in the project of replicating that process in another consciousness. Both of them agree that the function of art is communication, and they hope that Let Us Now Praise Famous Men will result in social improvement of communities, both of the communities it depicts and of the ones reading it. Finally, in their ultimately unsuccessful attempt to integrate subject and object, both Agee and Evans utilize a mixture of subjective and objective techniques, each of them arriving at a composite portrait of time and place. In all of these uses of Deweyan methods (consummatory experience, communication, combination of subjective and objective techniques) and goals (art of the everyday, art for purposes of implementing social
change, art as means of approximating pragmatic "truth"),¹
Agee and Evans approach both Art as Experience and each
other.

The issues of participation that Agee and Evans
addressed in 1936 are still current. The most recent
installment in the British 7 Up documentary series, 35 Up,²
for example, indicates that the problem of the documentarian
affecting the documented continues to be an issue. Some of
the photographic subjects rather look forward to every
seventh year rolling around, while others dread it, view it
as a chore, decline to appear, and call it "a poison pill."
Being in the series, however, has affected every participant
on an ongoing basis for some twenty-eight years, regardless
of his or her reaction to being more or less forced to
participate.

In addition, the political and economic problems that
Agee and Evans examined are also still topical. Ross Spears' 
film To Render a Life, for instance, features a family living
in the vicinity of the families' homes in Let Us Now Praise
Famous Men. As of the late 1980s, this family had no running
water, no plumbing, no paint on their house, no substantial
jobs, no Medicare, no Social Security, "no health insurance,
no life insurance, no sick leave, no vacation time, and no

¹ Dewey would emphasize that these methods and goals are integrated and
unified, existing on a means-ends continuum rather than as strict means-ends
divisions.
retirement plan."\(^3\) The social problems depicted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* have yet to be solved; sadly, therefore, the book, in addition to its aesthetic value as a portrait of a time gone by and an examination of the processes of consciousness, maintains its relevance as a social document.

Although *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* seems to have failed as a pragmatic combination of aesthetic and social art product, since these problems of participation in art and society remain relevant, the book does point out pertinent topics for study in our time. In addition, of course, it remains unparalleled as an attempt to discuss these problems. Agee and Evans sought to reveal truth as best they could, caught in their own subjective human consciousnesses. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a noble and beautiful attempt at this unsolvable problem. Robert Fitzgerald writes, "Photographs and text alike are bitten out by the very juices of the men who made them, and at the same time they have the piteous monumentality of the things and souls represented."\(^4\) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* exists somewhere between subject and object on the spectrum of representation, containing elements of Agee and Evans as well as of the tenants represented. Nevertheless, the tenants' world does not by any means integrate with Agee's or Evans' or ours.

\(^3\) Ross Spears in *To Render a Life.*
Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., point out that "modern literature has elevated individual existence over social man, unconscious feeling over self-conscious perception, passion and will over intellecction and systematic morals, dynamic vision over the static image, dense actuality over practical reality." In each of these cases, at first glance it would seem that Let Us Now Praise Famous Men reacts against the modern tendency, privileging the second choice. In fact, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men has been termed "postmodern." Actually, however, rather than reacting against the set of modern tendencies, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men combines them with their opposites. That is, instead of elevating social man over individual, for example, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men elevates both social and individual man, in its examination of a far-flung problem in terms of individual examples in the text as well as in its presentation of the universal qualities of individuals in the photographs. Dewey also emphasizes that none of these sets of choices is a strict dilemma, but rather a range, such as more passionate vs. less intellectual, rather than simply passionate or intellectual. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men exemplifies this point, since both Agee and Evans utilize a range of choices rather than simple stereotypical opposites. It would thus be more correct to say that on a scale of

5 Ellmann and Feidelson, vi.
passionate to intellectual, Agee usually falls more toward the passionate end and Evans more toward the intellectual, rather than to say, as many have, simply that Agee is passionate and Evans intellectual.

Both Agee and Evans seem to utilize what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as "adductive reasoning"; that is, proceeding not deductively from generals to particulars or inductively from particulars to generals, but from particulars to particulars.7 This type of "reasoning" is perhaps even more apparent in Evans' work than in Agee's; Gilles Mora claims that Evans thinks that "photography has never had to do with generality, even less with essence or a symbolic system; it has everything to do with the particular."8 The effect also exists in American Photographs, the sense of which is dependent on the viewer's process of connecting its images. Alan Trachtenberg writes that the America presented in the book is "not a finished thesis but a continuous process, less an idea than a method," emphasizing perception "(in Dewey's sense)" as essential to this process.9 The same could be said of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Clearly, in his use of the particular and in his interest in process, Evans approaches Dewey.

Agee also approaches Dewey, especially in his interest

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8 Mora, essay, Walker Evans: Havana 1933, Evans, 19.
9 Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 284.
in relating "truth" and in his realization of the difficulty of that task, since "truth" is a relative value. He writes, "... 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."

His answer to this problem parallels that of the pragmatists; he writes, "It will probably be necessary to make unsupported statements, and to raise problems rather than to try to answer them."

However, the inability to present "truth" is not necessarily a negative fact for Agee. He realizes that this deficiency is inevitable, stating about Gudger,

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. But of course it will be only a relative truth.

Name me one truth within human range that is not relative and I will feel a shade more apologetic of that.

At the same time he claims, "Everything possible to be

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12 Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 239.
believed is an image of truth"\textsuperscript{13} and "Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believed."\textsuperscript{14} Agee realizes that he has done the best that he can in attempting to present "truth" and that the attempt in his case is both doomed and inescapable.

On the function of art in philosophy, Dewey writes, In art, as in experience, actuality and possibility or ideality, the new and the old, objective material and personal response, the individual and the universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning, are integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection. . . . Of art as experience it is also true that nature has neither subjective nor objective being; it is neither individual nor universal, sensuous nor rational. The significance of art as experience is, therefore, incomparable for the adventure of philosophic thought.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men} is an exceptional example of all of these traits, examining the question of participation both of Agee and Evans with the scene that they observe and of us as readers with the art product that they have presented. In addition, Agee and Evans heed the pragmatic call for a fresh approach to social problems; the type of art that they

\textsuperscript{13} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 459.
\textsuperscript{14} Agee, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, 459.
\textsuperscript{15} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 301.
produce is innovative, both in its treatment of subject matter and in its techniques. The significance of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men lies not only in its embodiment of a pragmatic convergence of the genres of history, art, literature, and sociology but also in the fact that it is a valuable example of what a philosophical conversation should be.
NOTES TO EPIGRAPHS

Introduction


Chapter One


Chapter Two


Chapter Three


Chapter Four


Chapter Five

Werner Heisenberg, "Non-Objective Science and Uncertainty," Ellmann and Feidelson, 446.


Chapter Six


Afterword

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