

The ethnography of James Agee: the moral and existential accountability of knowledge*

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Le souci de transmettre des connaissances moralement et existentiellement bien fondées, fidèles à l'expérience de la vie de tous les jours, est sous-jacent aux écrits "ethnographiques" de James Agee. Les thèmes évoqués sont la traduction de la réalité sociale, la sociologie de la description, la création et la découverte de la signification, la dialectique entre le chercheur et le répondant, et la portée de l'anthropologie "d'action."

Underlying the "ethnographic" writings of James Agee is the production of morally and existentially reliable knowledge, true to experience of the everyday world. Some themes evoked are the translation of social reality, the sociology of description, the creation and discovery of meaning, the dialectic between researcher and respondent, and the import of "action" anthropology.

Anthropology has developed its own culture of reflexivity. In constructing this culture anthropologists have paid heed to the voices raised in the last decade or so calling for the discipline to turn its methods of ethnography and analysis upon itself. It is no longer considered either epistemologically or morally appropriate to produce an ethnography innocent of a set of questions and reflections on the motivations, assumptions, and the underlying organization of the knowledge put forth.

Much of what has been revealed about the discipline through this reflexivity has been inevitably distasteful, causing a crop of declarations about the state of the profession as being "in crisis," or at the very best, in "malaise." Secure through decades in the seemingly humanistic substance and import of their endeavours, anthropologists now have had to contemplate accusations of anthropological imperialism and academic exploitation (Gough, 1968; Berreman, et al., 1968; Lewis, 1973). If a misbegotten aura of ethical neutrality, or a clear conscience of value freeness, or some mystique of scientific

purity ever hung over members of the profession, these became effectively banished in the Jensen-Schockley era of political consciousness. There is an unrelenting awareness that anthropological knowledge is ideologically situated, socially organized, and epistemologically determined.

Another facet of the culture of reflexivity, although seldom identified as belonging to this genre, is an epistemic exercise which evokes reflection by examining how knowledge is produced in other disciplines. This leads to the intellectual borrowing of a model here, a theory there, an assumptional basis elsewhere. These borrowed modes are then either incorporated or used as a mirror to enlightenment about anthropology itself. Science has long served in this capacity, and so has philosophy. This paper, however, turns to what appears to be an emerging subfield, namely that of anthropology and literature, and attempts to indicate how the work of one member of that endeavour, James Agee, casts a revealing light upon some of the issues raised by reflexive anthropology.

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The works of literature are by no means foreign to the habitual pursuits of anthropologists (Finnegan, 1972; Spradley and McDonough, 1973). They are used frequently, for example, to lend their own particular lustre and elegance to the stilted and turgid prose of anthropologists, to convince readers of an anthropologist's erudition and facile imagination, or to supplement the offerings of traditional ethnography by enriching the portrayal of a particular cultural consciousness. It is as if the texture of ordinary lives and the emotions of everyday existence, woven without embarrassment into the very substance of a literary work, needed recognition in the idiom of anthropology. The apparent implication is that anthropology, the proclaimed study of human experience, required a boost to give this very quality greater poignancy and visibility. Hence it is common to find the work of a novelist among the required readings for anthropology courses. This idea presumes that in the expressive symbolism of various "works of art," cultural sensibilities are more fully revealed or anthropological omissions in the name of cool impartiality are more effectively covered. The ethnography of Ireland is enriched by a volume of plays by John Millington Synge, that of women by the pen of Margaret Atwood or Doris Lessing, and that of North American life by Tom Wolfe (Sommer, 1975) or Norman Mailer. Further, existential realities are more sensitively explored by Rilke or Pirandello.

James Agee wrote almost as if he had studied anthropological portrayals and, having studied them, found them wanting. Although his own contributions to the description of everyday life and experience were noteworthy, his work reaches beyond this to pose some haunting questions about the very construction of knowledge and about field work and its methods. Agee not only did field work in the style known to anthropologists, but also reflected continually upon it as a moral product shaped by his own position and realities.

Glimpses of this inner dialogue on method, juxtaposing the dilemmas of the craftsman against those of the moralist, appear in most of Agee's writings. From the time of his graduation from Harvard in 1932 until his untimely death in 1955, Agee produced poetry, screenplays, short stories, film reviews, a novella entitled *Morning Watch* (1950), the novel, *A Death in the Family* (1957) printed posthumously, letters, writings for *Fortune*, *Nation*, and *Time*, and a rather unique volume appropriately entitled, in bibli-

cal fashion, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). The latter piece defies ready categorization. Each successive possibility—journalism, poetry and prose, ethnography, stream of consciousness literature, economic treatise, Marxist explication—can only be rejected as being a taxonomy too confined to contain so variable an experience in words and imagination.

As an ethnography, the book meets the usual dicta presupposed in the writing of one. It involves, for example, some months of field work by Agee in Alabama as participant-observer with three tenant farm families. It involves, in addition, interviewing and observing landowners, county officials, and black and white tenants throughout a 6,000 square mile area. Within an intellectual ambience which to an anthropologist suggests cultural ecology, economic organization, and world view, Agee creates with unrelenting specificity and careful reverence the everyday world of depression poverty experienced by the cotton sharecropper in the rural south.

Despite all surface suggestions, the claim that he had produced "a book" appears to embarrass Agee and he declares it a book "only by necessity." With the self-depreciatory, liberal conscience so characteristic of him, he sees it as the result of his work as "spy, traveling as journalist" and that of his colleague Walker Evans as "counter-spy, traveling as a photographer" (1960:xxii). The book's form is reminiscent of the field notes of an anthropologist of enriched and moral imagination. This apparent and rather studied lack of formality permits the author to intersperse prose with verse and word picture descriptions with reflections. Agee reflects not only on the process of creation, but also on himself reflecting upon it. Such asides have a tendency to become prominent in the reader's mind. In them Agee recreates the experience of being a field worker, an experience which some have described as a "shattering encounter," and then reflects upon some of the epistemological and moral issues central to the doing and the writing of ethnography. The rest of this paper will deal with Agee's perusal of these matters.

One of the recognizable themes is Agee's repeated agonizing over the manifold problems in the translation of social and human reality. He seems suspicious of interpretive paradigms, yet inevitably unable to escape them. He emanates a sense of being imprisoned by words, of the poverty of words in conveying the subtleties and intricacies of experience. Thus he observes

in an application for a Guggenheim Fellowship that "any body of experience is sufficiently complex and ramified to require . . . more than one mode of reproduction" (1969:134). His book, therefore, attempts to evoke the movements, variations, and themes of a symphony, the scenario of a play, the visual impact of photography. The language of reality, he writes, would "impart the deftness, keenness, immediacy, speed and subtlety of the 'reality' it tries to reproduce" (1960:236). He suggests that language is the "most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums," providing a construction he sees akin to a "Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes." His unorthodox solution to the inevitable falsification of reality is to diversify the interpretive mode:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art. . . (1960:13)

This sense of reproductive impotence, verbal ineptitude, and the infinitely elusive nature of reality is an experience common to all ethnographers. Agee seems to imply that a possible way of minimizing interpretations which create distance between the event and the reader would be to develop modes by which the integrity of the experience could be conveyed without the meddlesome faithlessness imposed by the writer. After all, he argues that of Jesus Christ "you have managed to make a dirty gentile."

This leads to a salient ethnographic issue which might be labelled the *sociology of description*. Despite the calls for an "ethnography of ethnography" (Berreman, 1966; Scholte, 1972), description is a matter yet to be widely reflected upon in anthropology. Obviously it must be the very core of the ethnographic enterprise and therefore, the assumptional bases and social organizational premises from which it arises, the selections and emphases it encourages, are matters of the gravest importance. Agee asserts that most young writers "roll around in description like honeymooners on a bed" but, thankfully, eventually discipline themselves.

The seemingly necessary subjectivism of description, even knowledge removed from its

producer by "objectification," becomes situated and perceptual after all.

'Description' is a word to suspect.

Words cannot embody; they can only describe. . .

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.

I am confident of being able to get at a certain form of the truth about him But of course it will be only a relative truth (1960:238-39).

Putting aside all notions of absolute or value-free knowledge, he notes that he will write of "nothing whatever which did not in physical actuality or in the mind happen or appear. . . . *to give them as they were and as in my memory and regard they are*" (1960:242). He displays a wholesome appreciation of the contingent nature of knowledge, that what is the past must always be defined in terms of the present, that it can only be recorded as it appears in recall.

Although this existential nature of knowledge is well within his grasp, he remains uninformed of the more rigorous contributions to the sociology of knowledge from the perspective of interpretive anthropology and phenomenological social science (Schutz, 1962; Sederberg, 1972). Hence what he provides for the reader is his version of the life situation of the man Gudger. The actual voice of Gudger is not heard at all. Yet perhaps all of this remains irrelevant, for Agee's work is informed by a special purpose. This special intent is only possible because his work is not based on a single epistemological allegiance, such as interpretive perspectives. The latter, while satisfying the need for groundedness, have been accused by some of perpetuating a status quo (McNall and Johnson, 1975).

Much of Agee's description is guided by a respect for some kind of groundedness. He feels that his ethnography should take upon itself the task of showing how on every day the sharecroppers' lives are bombarded, maligned, imposed upon and destroyed. While this is how he would like to construct his work, he admits such faithfulness lies beyond human ability. "The most I can do—the most I can hope to do—is to make a number of physical entities as plain and

vivid as possible, and to make a few guesses, a few conjectures; and to leave to you much of the burden of realizing in each of them what I have wanted to make clear of them as a whole: how each is itself; and how each is a shapener” (1960:110).

The substance of his description rests then upon everyday experience. His consciousness of this experience is structured culturally and molded by a strong sense of who the reader is and what the reader must know. In this case the notion of *Fortune* magazine and its comfortable consumer become part of the basic conceptualization. He declares quite early that he intends to work not as “journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but *seriously*” (1960:xv, italics added). These implications hardly give confidence to the academic. His groundedness takes the form of describing the festering disease on the back of a mule; house odors such as fresh and stale sweat, fried salt pork, cooked corn, wood smoke, ammonia, and sleep; the condition of every item of clothing in the wardrobe, and the language of human faces. The richness of his description of a table drawer and its contents exemplifies his style:

A delicate insect odor of pine, closed sweated cloth, and mildew. . . .

A broad and stiff-brimmed soft-crowned hat, the brim broken in several places, the fabrics stained and moldered. The crown is gold, of thin plush or the cheapest velvet. The ribbon is wide plaid woodsilk weltering lights of orange and of pearl. It is striped white at the edges and the stripes are edged in gold thread. The brim is bordered an inch wide with gold brocade. The underbrim is creamcolored mercerized cotton, marked in one place by an indelible pencil. Through a tear the pasteboard brim is visible: it was cut out of a shoe-box. The stitching throughout is patient, devoted and diminutive. The hat is one broken, half-moist, moldered chunk (1960:165-66).

This painstaking appeal to the visual is then topped with a description of other objects ending with a recital of the disjointed and meaningless words on a scissor-cut hexagon of newspaper. All of this careful description ends

with: “In a split in the bottom of the drawer, a small bright needle, pointed north. . . .” What he manages with such description is to tap cultural consciousness, tacit knowledge, *gestalts* of the past and flood experience into the reader’s recall. Thus, he seems to imply, cultural imagination and intersubjectivity overcome the necessary selectivity and its attendant limitations in description.

Integral to description is the question of the creation and recreation of meaning. Agee wishes to portray what he calls an “unimagined consciousness,” to do it in ways that would have wide social significance. This becomes not merely a matter of accurate understanding and reasonable interpretation, but rather a moral issue whose consequences extend beyond the world he creates.

In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger (1960:12).

As every ethnographer must admit, every description, like every epistemological choice, is a “self-betrayal in print” (1969:137), a form of intellectual nakedness. *Famous Men* is not only an ethnography by Agee, but also an ethnography about Agee or about all of us of his class, education, and culture (if not of his talent). Not having a healthy respect for so-called objectivity, Agee seems not at all embarrassed by this nakedness. Every “objective” ethnography is of course an ethnography of the anthropological idiom.¹ What happens then to the shape of ethnographies derived from anthropological conceptualizations? What knowledge is created by notions such as that of self-contained communities? What understandings result from an idea like the encroaching extinction of cultures (Gruber, 1970), or by perceptions that place some humans on the very margins of credible behaviour (Turnbull, 1972; Barth, 1974)? And what comes from categorization devices so common to the enterprise as “primitive,” “poverty,” “underdevelopment,” and other such classifications?

¹ Polanyi has made many powerful statements on this matter. “The participation of the knower in shaping his knowledge, which had hitherto been tolerated only as a flaw—a shortcoming to be eliminated from perfect knowledge—is now recognized as the true guide and master of our cognitive powers. . . . The ideal of knowledge embodied in strictly impersonal statements now appears self-contradictory, meaningless, a fit subject for ridicule. We must learn to accept as our ideal a knowledge that is manifestly personal” (1959:26-27).

Like all ethnographers, Agee is conscious of the *dialectic between field worker and respondent* where meanings and knowledge are mediated interactionally (Olesen and Whittaker, 1967, 1968). He writes about fronting or impression management, about informed consent, about the building of a common reality with the sharecropper families, and about parts of their world which will forever remain hidden from strangers like himself. That the very process of the research is part of the shaping of knowledge and needs scrutiny and that the human instrument itself needs examination, are undoubtedly in the forefront of Agee's mind.

Thus, he evokes a series of experiences common to all field workers. Firstly, he seems aware that the position of a field worker is never explicit and self-explanatory, but is continually in need of explanation and interpretation.

I got slowly out and walked back towards them, watching them quietly and carefully, and preparing my demeanors and my words for the two hundredth time (1960:32).

It is obvious to him that field work is outside the range of everyday experience. Hence it is viewed with suspicion and in the light of available definitions of strangers of the appearance and comportment of Agee (Nash, 1963; Meintel, 1973):

There was in their eyes so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves None of them relieved me for an instant of their eyes; at the intersection of those three tones of force I was transfixed as between spearheads. As I asked my questions, and told my purposes, and what I was looking for, it seemed to me they relaxed a little toward me . . . yet even at its best this remained so suspended, so conditional The qualities of their eyes did not in the least alter, nor anything visible or audible about them, and their speaking was as if I was almost certainly a spy sent to betray them through trust, whom they would show they had neither trust nor fear of (1960:33-34).

Secondly, in all field situations there is an underworld of experience and knowledge which always evades the ethnographer given his inevitably marginal identity.

These two sat as if formally, . . . and constantly watched me, all the while communicating thoroughly with each other by no outward sign of word or glance or turning, but by emanation (1960:34).

Thirdly, the events of the field are often so removed from the ethnographer's experience and expectation that periodic situations of apparent social anomaly and confusion ensue for the researcher. Fully cognizant of a need for impression management and superficial "normality," and continually aware of his or her pointed interference in the ordinary course of events, the field worker is frequently in the position of attempting to infuse cultural competence into such situations.

The older man came up suddenly behind me, jamming my elbow with his concave chest and saying fiercely *Awnk, awnk*, while he glared at me with enraged and terrified eyes. Caught so abruptly off balance, my reflexes went silly and I turned toward him questioning "politely" with my face, as if he wanted to say something, and could, which I had not quite heard (1960:35).

Fourthly, like all field workers he is caught in the world of individual persons and views his knowledge and experience in these terms. He has an inordinate respect for the individual and because of this assumptional bias he wonders how he would be able to speak of them as tenant farmers, as representatives of a social class, as "social integers in a criminal economy" instead of as fathers, wives, sons, and friends (1960:100).

Like most ethnographers, Agee recognizes those interactional components of feeling, sentiment, and emotion which permit life in the field to be a human possibility. "I am much too vulnerable to human relationships . . . and in turn much too dependent in my work on 'feeling' as against 'intellect.'" Unlike anthropological field workers, however, he does not see the necessity of eliminating sentiment from his report.² This emotionality, he seems to imply, is equally a part of the construction of field work knowledge, shaping of description, and directing of intent.

The individualistic bias, the world of living, real persons in which he works, leads Agee to yet another field working stance, namely that of reciprocity (Wax, 1952; Glazer, 1972). The sense

² I am indebted to my graduate seminar in Interpretive and Critical Methods for a perceptive discussion of the seeming ineptitude of the anthropological idiom in handling the matter of human emotionality.

of exploitation hangs heavily upon him as indicated earlier, and he seriously considers writing an account which would speak only to the people he knew.

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 (1963:105).

Yet despite such sentiments, Agee's work is planned for wider impact. He seemed to be driven by a liberal leftist conscience, a rebellion even, an intent to reform, and has been described as working "in what looked like a rush and a rage" (Evans, 1960:xi). His ideological stance is clear enough in the title he gives to his ethnography, taken from Ecclesiasticus 44:1-2,³ and in the frontispiece quote, "Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win." It seems a timely ideology for the seventh decade of this century and for anthropology at this point in its moral history.⁴

While it might not yet be appropriate to label his work as *action anthropology*, given that the boundaries of that endeavour are yet being sketched by those who are working in its name (Tax, 1952; Schlesier, 1974), advocacy or partisan ethnography does not seem amiss.⁵ It is obvious that he finds morally reprehensible the detachment, the *laissez-faire* objectivity engendered by a scientific culture. He continually rails against intellectual imperialism, his criticism approaching in intensity not only the calls for "relevance" once widely heard in Academe, but also the more critical questions of "knowledge for whom?" raised by radical social scientists (Lynd, 1939; Colfax, 1970).

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings

drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science. . . of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money. . . and in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval (1960:7).

Some anthropologists are viewing the existential agonies of their colleagues with barely contained impatience, asserting that surely the time has arrived for "ineffectual bleating" to end. They seem to suggest that whatever residual guilt anthropologists may feel for what has been labelled their colonialism and exploitation could be transformed either into the shaping of the culture of reflexive anthropology so necessary to any knowledge production enterprise, or into viable decisions about where anthropology should position itself epistemologically and morally. Agee's answer to this seems simple enough. He recognizes his own "inverted snobbery," namely "an innate and automatic respect and humility toward all who are very poor and toward all the unassuming and non-pompous who are old" (1963:102). Accepting this bias, he yet intends to make clear his individual revolution which, in the words of one of his colleagues, was "deeply principled, infinitely costly, and ultimately priceless" (Evans, 1960:xii). To do it he takes up his weapons of surging and unrelenting prose, involving the reader as much as the author in bearing witness on other lives. The measure of the readers' conscience is known, and Agee's act of expert witnessing can only suggest the kind of advocacy he intends. His readers are captive ones, imprisoned not as much by Agee's merciless weapons as by their own vulnerability.

³ It seems likely that Agee's intent in using the title, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," was probably not to evoke the loose paraphrase introduced by the Greeks, but rather the meaning implied in the old Hebrew text: "Let us now praise *favoured* men," namely, those reflecting God's grace.

⁴ Perhaps the timeliness and relevance of Agee's stance and work is mirrored in the plethora of books about him in the recent past: Barson, 1972; Coles, 1974; Kramer, 1975; Madden, 1974; Moreau, 1977; Ohlin, 1966; Seib, 1968.

⁵ A good contemporary example of this kind of work is that of Elliott Leyton (1975; 1977).

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