

SPIES AND AGENTS: DOCUMENTARY MODERNISM AND THE SHAME OF
LOOKING IN *JOURNEY TO A WAR* AND *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

by

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(Under the Direction of SUSAN ROSENBAUM)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *Journey to a War* and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* deploy the metaphor of the writer as spy to understand the inherently shameful, voyeuristic experience of creating a documentary text. The spy functions to navigate essential tensions between the impulse to produce an objective, realist representation for a middle-class, liberal readership and the alternative impulse to foreground the documentarian's individual and subjective experience, including the powers of vision and authorship. This tension manifests itself in the form of hybrid phototexts that invoke competing and collaborative points of view, encoded in the character of the spy, as represented via realist and modernist styles. As modernist documentary projects, both texts revise and blur distinctions between realism and modernism in order to establish multivalent representations of reality that highlight perspective and position with respect to power dynamics between subject and object.

INDEX WORDS: documentary modernism, espionage, spy, Journey to a War, Let Us
Now Praise Famous Men, realism, shame, voyeurism,
photography, representation, perception, 1930s, objectivity,
subjectivity

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To Vyvian, who, by violent necessity, forced order upon chaos, which is already another name for form. And you too, James.

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Thank you to everyone.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden's *Journey to a War* and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* constitute significant entries in the 1930s tradition of documentary text. Written in 1938 and published in 1939, *Journey to a War* takes Isherwood and Auden to Southeast and Northeast China to report on the Second Sino-Japanese War for Faber and Faber and Random House publishers. Alternatively, Agee and Evans's 1936 documentary text, unpublished until 1941, depicts the poverty of Alabama cotton tenant farmers amidst FDR's agricultural policies for *Fortune* magazine. While the projects clearly differ – Isherwood and Auden, for example, are non-journalistic writers working in a foreign country, reporting from an active war front – both texts align and harmonize in significant ways that ultimately elucidate certain patterns of modernist documentary projects. These patterns of documentary modernism necessarily critique ostensibly documentary, realist, and objective forms of perception and representation. Tyrus Miller posits that documentary modernist projects coherently combine “formally innovative experimentalism and naturalistic explorations of everyday life...not so much opposed as instead *complementary* moments of a broader modernist poetics” (“Documentary/Modernist” 226). Extending Miller's line of argument, Jeff Allred claims that Depression-era documentary highlights “the outlines of a modernism to emerge in which form can no longer master content, dispelling, on the one hand, realism's claims to represent a knowable social totality and, on the other, the aura of

transcendence and self-sufficiency that often attaches to high modernist artworks” (*American Modernism and Depression Documentary* 13). Similarly, Marsha Bryant proposes that Auden’s texts “employ documentary frameworks while calling those frameworks into question” (*Auden and Documentary in the 1930s* 8). My thesis examines the ways in which *Journey to a War* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* deploy the writer-as-spy figure to perform these ostensibly opposed aesthetic moves, the simultaneous enactment of multiple modes of representation to generate multifaceted coherence. The spy, as a duplicitous character, provides the means for narrative doubling; thus, Isherwood, Auden, Agee, and Evans effectively mix objective, traditionally documentary material with textual forms that suggest interiority, subjectivity, and experimentation. The resulting hybrid form of representation records then, according to Allred, the “real-as-trace...embedded in narrative” (19). My reading of these two texts supports these positions as each book’s modernist modification of the documentary project suggests a diminished or alternative form of perception that constitutes subjective truth. This intersection of subjective mediation with objective documentation “implies that documentary arose in close relation to the later development of modernism in the late 1920s and 1930s” (Miller 226). As such, the collaborations between Isherwood and Auden, Agee and Evans, and text and image, enact a fragmentary, modernist sense of coherence because they decenter traditionally realist modes of perception and representation. This coherence implies an uneasy alliance between the individual artist and a commitment to (or requirement of) a socially aware aesthetic suited to the global crises of the 1930s.

In terms of formal similarities, both projects feature collaborative text: *Journey to a War* mixes Isherwood's prose, Auden's poetry, and Auden's photography whereas *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* opens with Evans's stark imagery of Alabama tenantry, before giving way to Agee's dense and multi-form prose. Rather than serving to verify disparate perspectives, this 'collaboration,' which is fundamental to the modernist challenge to realism¹, inevitably underscores the inescapable subjectivity nested in any documentary² project, both in terms of the observer's perception and the observer's representation of the subject. *Journey to a War* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* articulate problems related to power dynamics between the observer, whether the observer is the objective camera lens or the subjective writer's eye, and the subject to expose the inadequacy of so-called documentary realism -- insofar as documentary realism is also aesthetically realist -- with respect to human individuality, an approaching world war, and/or modernist aesthetics. The metaphor of the writer as spy, a metaphor which Isherwood, Auden, and Agee deploy intentionally to critique and understand their roles as both observers of their subjects and narrative fabricators of so-called truth, makes salient the challenges and intersections of objectivity, power, and observation – three concepts which necessarily inform a documentary project.

Both texts play with and exploit the concept of the journalist as a spy to undercut their assigned documentary task. While spies form a natural part of the almost-cosmopolitan war scene of Shanghai, Agee narratively positions himself as an agent explicitly in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*'s *dramatis personae* (XVI). As we specify

¹ While collaboration, by definition, suggests mutual construction, the collaborations in both texts – between each artist, between each artist's mode of representation – imply individual and subjective perspectives, contrary to documentary realism's desire to produce a single, objective perspective.

² “factual, realistic; applied esp. to a film or literary work, etc., based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes” (OED, *documentary*, adj.)

terms, we find that ‘journalist’ and ‘spy’ are linguistically-allied words. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the journal is “A book or record” kept for “private or public use”, “of daily events or travel” (journal, n.). The title of the British text, being a “Journey,” appears to be at least an implicit recognition of this fundamental usage of journalism. Moreover, the spy is defined as “one who spies upon or watches a person or persons secretly; a secret agent whose business it is to keep a person, place, etc., under close observation.” Indeed, the root of spy, ‘espy,’ further suggests observation, certainty, and one who “examines closely.” A final term of espionage germane to this project is surveillance, defined as “watch[ing]...over a person, etc., esp. over a suspected person, a prisoner, or the like; often, spying.” This sense of clandestine observation additionally invites the concept of voyeurism, useful in understanding the implicit power of the gaze, as the authors intrude upon their objects of the documentaries: the Chinese people and cotton tenant farmers. Thus, in terms of observation, examination, and record-keeping, the spy and journalist occupy similar roles and linguistic positions, a phenomenon which accounts for spy featuring frequently as the title of various periodicals³ (spy, n.).

As journalists, the authors work to produce documentary text, which aims to inform, which means, of course, “to educate,” but also “to give accusatory or incriminatory evidence against a person,” and, “To give form to, put into form or shape” (inform, v.). Thus, the terms of the discussion, by definition, invoke connotations both objective and subjective; the writer as spy informs readers of factual evidence, testifies against/violates the subjects (be they Chinese citizens or cotton farmers), and shape truth itself by nature of textual form. Isherwood, Auden, and Agee implicitly understand the

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers “The Spie, communicating Intelligence from Oxford” (1644), “The Universal Spy, or London Weekly Magazine” (1739), and “The Spy. A periodical paper of literary amusement and instruction” (1810) as examples of “spy” in this context.

spy's ability to maintain objective and subjective perspectives, as a metaphor for understanding truth, denying truth, and constructing relative truth. Paula Rabinowitz argues that "Documentary, no matter how experimental its narrative resort to interiority [what I have referred to simply as an emphasis on subjectivity], deconstruction, and self-disclosure, could never fully escape the invasive quality it had had since Jacob Riis rushed into the tenement homes of astonished workers..." ("Social Representations within American Modernism" 269). I will argue, though, that both texts implicitly acknowledge this invasive element of documentaries and, rather than attempting to "escape" invasiveness and voyeurism, instead make voyeurism and shame, as understood through espionage metaphors, features and determinants of narrative structure and form that privilege subjective experience over objective reportage.

CHAPTER 2

JOURNEY TO A WAR

This chapter explores the ways in which Isherwood and Auden deploy the language and metaphor of espionage in order to characterize and reflect upon their ethical position as documentary writers. In grappling with essentially voyeuristic or surveillant activities, these authors pursue certain aesthetic and narrative distinctions by way of the spy figure, eschewing objective reproduction and reportage of the documentary mode, in an effort to underline the inherently subjective basis of modern text, documentary or otherwise.

Spy Games: Intelligence and Expertise

While the highly-international Second Sino-Japanese War necessarily implies the presence of spies, Isherwood and Auden employ the spy as a metaphor to understand their position as writers documenting an ongoing war and occupation in China. Thus, while they are warned to not walk alone for chance of being mistaken as spies (18) – a statement that itself questions the basic distinction between spying and observing – the spy, beyond a mere practical reality of warfare, best embodies Isherwood and Auden’s individual experience of documentary surveillance, which is to say observation. The spy, then, combines Isherwood’s requirement, as a documentary writer, for objective observation with the consequent element of subjective mediation to evince Isherwood’s location of that truth via “some impression” of what the reader who has never been to China “would be likely to see” (6).

After stating the presence of innumerable spies in the city of Hankow, Isherwood avers: “Hidden here are all the clues which would enable an expert, if he could only find them, to predict the events of the next fifty years. History, grown weary of Shanghai, bored with Barcelona, has fixed her capricious interest upon Hankow” (40). Still early in the journey, he expresses confidence that the spy can reveal information or gather the clues that elucidate historical trends, claiming even prognostication. Being a writer only performing as a spy, Isherwood does not assert his own knowledge of History’s location. Still, Isherwood affirms the possibility of objectivity through his reference to the teleological expert. Auden’s allegorical poet shares this capacity to read and construct reality; however, Auden emphasizes more explicitly the fallibility of the writer-spy’s perspective:

He watched the stars and noted birds in flight;
A river flooded or a fortress fell:
He made predictions that were sometimes right;
His lucky guesses were rewarded well (*In Time of War*, VI 1-4).

Describing the poet’s “predictions” as “lucky,” Auden conflates documentary surveillance with astrology and augury in order to highlight the poet spy’s potential to err as further challenge to documentary’s claim to objectivity on the part of subjectivity.

Isherwood’s depiction of the party’s first air-raid, being representative of the book’s documentary mode, captures “the dull, punching thud of bombs falling...guns [and] tracer-bullets” (61). Moreover, Isherwood shades his prose with surrealist and impressionistic elements, calling the six airplanes “the bacilli of a fatal disease” and concluding on a point of uncertainty: “I don’t know if I was frightened” (61). Thus, the spy represents the writer’s documentary impulse for verisimilitude foregrounded against inevitable subjectivity, selection, and narrative construction. In a less dramatized passage

that situates Isherwood and Auden, as writers, within the purview of espionage and actions of propaganda, Isherwood records the recent history of Siaofeng, as reported via the propaganda wing known as the “‘Anti-Japanese Corpse’ [sic]”:

[It] had been occupied by the Japanese three times: in December, in February, and in March. When the regular Chinese troops had been forced to retire the local anti-Japanese corps had remained. Apparently harmless farmers and peasants, they were, in reality, dangerous enemies of the invader. They had a highly-organized intelligence service, which co-operated with the Chinese General Staff. At night the Japanese were sniped at (for the irregulars had hidden stores of arms), bridges were blown up, cars were damaged. The Japanese, of course, had made terrible reprisals. Whole villages had been burnt. There had been mass-executions of men, women, and children. (207)

Noting this to be the more convincing part of the Siaofeng delegates’ report, Isherwood evaluates their propaganda while reproducing some degree of detail, thus demonstrating his balancing of objective and subjective material. For instance, with respect to objective information, we learn the chain of command and ‘irregulars,’ a term of military art, suggests some technical specificity. Isherwood also cites insurgent actions – actions that depend on an efficient “intelligence service.” Still, by interacting with the intelligence service and even advancing their narrative by virtue of including their activity report in the text, Isherwood places himself within the service of the Siaofeng intelligence corps’ propaganda efforts as a mediator of narrative. Isherwood, thus, becomes a mediating point of broadcast for Siaofeng propaganda to an international audience -- a highly-organized intelligence service, indeed. Furthermore, by verifying to the best of his ability the Siaofeng report, Isherwood critiques objective reporting by tempering the Siaofeng’s claims to truth, an act which Isherwood already recognizes as propagandistic and therefore non-objective.

In understanding his role as that of a journalist undertaking surveillance with respect to historical events and moreover, as that of a spy who may possess the ability to separate or distill objective truth from subjective impressions by way of narrative construction,⁴ Isherwood positions his travel diary as delivering, by way of impressions, hearsay, and reports, some of the expert's clues to readers. With respect to the other half of the collaboration, Auden's attention to historical understanding (even by way of error) juxtaposed with Isherwood's allegorical History located, somewhere, in the present ultimately implies that a discerning individual – a spy, an expert, a poet, in the 'espy' sense – may attain historical truth.⁵ This idea, that the text's prose, poems, and photographs document certain intelligence that may be used to construct a predictive model of history, is further strengthened by a passage in which Auden gently renounces their historical misjudgment in "Second Thoughts:"

Though for obvious reasons it is not overtly stated in our book, already in 1938 Isherwood and I had the hunch that the future of China lay with Mao and the Communists, not with Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang. We were fools, of course, to swallow the propaganda, so zealously spread by certain Western journalists, that Chinese communism would be different and innocuous, a sort of non-totalitarian rural democracy, but our hunch proved correct... It is, surely, the first maxim of *real-politik* that, whatever one's ideological preferences, one must never back a certain loser. (8)

Because the text remains ambiguous with respect to evincing this "hunch," Auden provides explanation to amend the original text's possible historical error (i.e. backing a loser in the Kuomintang) in order to validate *Journey to a War's* documentary portrayal of historical events and trends. If Isherwood and Auden did, indeed, suspect that the future rested with the communists, then they conceal this fact during numerous meetings.

⁴ Writing from 1973, Isherwood maintains that a reader "can pick up a surprisingly varied assortment of information from him about the country and the period" (8).

⁵ Historical truth being an act of interpretation, the validity of which is confirmed or denied by future events.

Of course, as guests of the British consulate, Auden and Isherwood's impression of China necessarily over-emphasizes the republican faction by virtue of established diplomatic ties. Nonetheless, Auden's purportedly obvious, but still withheld, reasons may instead retroactively repudiate our readerly perception of the writers' focus on the republicans at the expense of the communists. Auden's amendment adjusts how we perceive the text's historical validity, though the text compiles clues, hints, and semi-verifiable reports. However, Isherwood and Auden constantly temper this claim toward historical truth by relying on impressionistic and relative perspectives and forms.

Isherwood and Auden most value the spy, then, not as a figure who necessarily understands history or a society, but as a tool for understanding their position as writers engaged in acts of surveillance and reporting, as subjective recorders and imperfect verifiers, in order to challenge documentary realist modes and claims to objective truth value. Such a challenge to realism and objectivity on the part of modernism promotes relativistic, composite, and fragmentary conceptions of truth value. The simultaneous competition and collaboration between the text and the camera, as representative of similar interactions in other documentary modernist phototexts, further suggests the role of perspective and framing in establishing potentially contradictory realities. Bryant describes a "long shot titled 'Japanese front line,' taken in the daytime when no fighting took place" (136). She argues that this peaceful image, "evoking nothing of the war...clashes with its arresting caption" (136). As such, the image counter-acts its textual frame. Isherwood and Auden linguistically encode this relativism in the language of intrigue and espionage. Writing in the preface, Isherwood postures: "we cannot vouch for the accuracy of many statements in the book" (6). In another display of the uncertainty of

reportage, Isherwood adopts the language of state secrets: “Some people will tell you that the British troops in their pill-box...returned the Japanese fire...This is officially denied” (233). Auden deploys the same language describing “Now...a world that has no localized events, / where not a tribe exists without its dossier,” mixing dossier, a word of spycraft or statecraft, with tribe, a word connoting a different, pre-national, historical scale, in order to simultaneously highlight the requirement for individualized, i.e. subjective, dossiers, despite a global, i.e. objective, historical narrative. While events are not “localized,” Auden’s poet locates significance in the creation of the dossier, which is a narrative interpretation, pertaining to each tribe (*Commentary* 263). Likewise, Isherwood makes numerous references to unnamed ‘informants’;⁶ his frequent usage almost suggests an active network of information accumulation: “Some of our informants may have been unreliable” (6), “most of our informants had led us to expect...” (45), “our informant concluded...” (179). Isherwood’s deliberately skeptical language – “unreliable” and “had led us to expect” – reminds readers that the core of his documentation, consisting of reported speech, rumors, and “stories [one] would be likely to hear,” rests on Isherwood and Auden’s own imperfect verification (6). Furthermore, Isherwood’s choice to document certain scenes over others constitutes an ethical choice of inclusion and exclusion as an act of narrative construction that challenges the text’s documentary claim to represent reality, despite any veracity of Isherwood’s reporting. In overtly presenting their journalistic project through the faux disguise of the metaphorical spy, Isherwood and Auden expose the flaws or limits of the realist mode underpinning supposedly objective documentary projects.

⁶ Compare to the more journalistic ‘source.’

(Dis)Information: Discerning Realities and Eschewing Objectivity

Insinuating that objective truth is elusive or even impossible, Isherwood describes the Front as a place “where one saw nothing and where all information was withheld” (214). Isherwood identifies a two-pronged problem with respect to verifying truth: first, from the unreliable position of one’s own perception, and secondly, as mediated through communication with unreliable informants or sources. However, the writers’ visit to the Front also presents an experience of active opposition or sabotage, which finds clearest expression in Isherwood and Auden’s antagonism toward the Chinese journalist, A.W. Kao. While waiting at the Front, Isherwood begrudges A.W. Kao for “getting information which he wouldn’t transmit” (215). As a rival agent, A.W. Kao limits Isherwood and Auden’s observational capacity, though he often enables their travel (and, importantly, translates for them), frequently taking advantage of their access to generals and locations. In a scene that again places Isherwood in the service of propaganda, Isherwood and Auden address students studying “as teachers and propagandists” (186). Although both Englishmen present nuanced political points in their speeches – Auden speaks of structural problems and Isherwood appeals to international solidarity -- they require “Mr. Liu or the chief of police” to translate “at the end of every five or six sentences” (186). Isherwood recognizes the appropriation of their voices, noting that the Chinese interpreters “were making quite a different speech, much longer, all on their own” (186).

With similar awareness of his own possibly exploited position as a fabricator of truth, narrative, and propaganda, Auden evaluates his and Isherwood’s interactions with China’s various propaganda wings rather negatively in his *Commentary*:

By wire and wireless, in a score of bad translations,
They give their simple message to the world of man.

.....
Leave Truth to the police and us; we know the Good;
.....

And all who passed deception of the People
.....

Or hum of printing-pressed turning forests into lies; (266-67, 271)

Auden capitalizes truth and good to ironically emphasize the constructed nature of these traditionally objective concepts. Auden, then, understands that truth, though initially constructed, contrived, and possibly arbitrary as “lies,” gains power in the public sphere of mass consumption and reification.

Indeed, this complex interaction among objectivity and subjectivity, truth and lies, knowledge and ignorance, manifests itself in metaphors of blindness and obscurity.

Auden crystallizes these concerns in the poet, who “was their servant (some say he was blind) / Who moved among their faces and their things” (*In Time of War*, VII 1-2).

Despite references to blindness, Auden’s placement of the poet among “faces” and “things” recalls the spy as expert seeking clues. Though he is possibly blind, Auden’s poet’s talent earns him recognition, which results in his position as a “person set apart” (line 5). Auden translates the poet’s blindness into the audience’s interpretative deafness: “they...mistook for personal song / The petty tremors of his mind or heart / At each domestic wrong” (6-8). In being separated from the social body at large, the individualized poet becomes subject to the reactions of the audience-crowd: he “glared at men because he did not like them, / But trembled if one passed with a frown” (13-14). In a possible commentary on the experience of touring China with Isherwood, Auden diminishes artistic agency by subordinating the poet’s limited subjectivity to the public’s need for an external verifier: “a God that sings...” (line 4). Seeking truth and realism, the public audience appropriates the poet’s unique experience for generalized, but ostensibly

objective, truth. The poet's reaction against this tendency, becoming subject to the crowd's whims, merely confirms that control of interpretive truth exists beyond the author and is located in the audience.

Isherwood, in a scene of figurative aerial surveillance, eschews the documentary realist style in favor of an impressionistic sense of blindness and obscurity in order to challenge realism's pretensions to truth and objectivity. From the top of a pass, he reports:

...we looked down on War as a bird might – seeing only a kind of sinister agriculture or anti-agriculture. Immediately below us peasants were digging in the fertile, productive plain. Further on there would be more peasants, in uniform, also digging – the unproductive, sterile trench. Beyond them, to the north, still more peasants; and, once again, the fertile fields. This is how war must seem to the neutral, unjudging bird – merely the Bad Earth, the tiny, dead patch in the immense flowering field of luxuriant China. (97)

This alternative position of observation, elevation, and distance – aerial surveillance via the bird rather than the airplane – abstracts the land, the people, and the entire war to a point of near obscurity. Individuals blur into the mass, a homogenous whole, “in uniform” (97). In order to homogenize the human mass, Isherwood collapses distinctions between function and role by making all soldiers into farmers -- thereby adopting an observational perspective that intentionally obscures essential differences by way of ignoring nuance. This perspective, while total, should appear reductive and insufficient to the task of representing truth or even reality: “merely...the tiny, dead patch” (97). Indeed, while both the spy and the bird metaphors admit inadequacy of sight – whether through blindness or abstraction -- the “neutral, unjudging bird” affirms the utility of the metaphorical spy to embody subjective documentation by virtue of the bird's inadequacy as metaphor for evaluative observation. That is to say, because the bird understands

“only” simplistically, dichotomously in terms of “agriculture or anti-agriculture,” the spy provides an alternative metaphor or observational method predicated upon more immersed engagement with complexity, a complexity that must accommodate elements of uncertainty, speculation and narrative construction. The spy, being neither neutral nor unjudging, affords Isherwood and Auden sufficient proximity to the documentary subject while maintaining, most importantly, an implicitly subjective and limited perspective. Such a model suggests, then, that truth may emerge as contingent upon multiple perspectives and that the spy is a figure who necessarily integrates potentially competing perspectives, with or without a unified resolution of meaning. Objectivity becomes attainable only as a composite image of multiple, subjective, and/or partial perspectives⁷.

While Isherwood and Auden represent the primary voices in the text, Isherwood positions Chiang, their “servant,” as the book’s third ‘character’ in order to commemorate his service, to foreground the individual against the crowd of his compatriots, and to highlight the role of narrative construction as a function of a fundamentally subjective understanding of reality (62). Auden and Isherwood’s continued intrusion into Chinese society underscores their separation from the Chinese population: as travelers, as non-participants of the war, as British, as English speakers. Being Chinese and not alien, Chiang avoids association with spies, literary or otherwise. However, as he is represented by Isherwood, Chiang appears to intuit reality and social interaction as matters of constructed narrative and performance predicated upon subjective experience – a form of consciousness and experience that Isherwood and Auden derive from the spy. Chiang reveals his penchant for narrative fabrication upon encountering a captured spy. He

⁷ Perhaps it is exactly this sense of multivalent unity that modernism can offer in light of challenges to objectivity, as in the manner of Cubist painting, collage, or Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

reports a Japanese prisoner as having “been a tailor in civil life” even though the “prisoner spoke only his native language, and no one present [including Chiang] could understand it” (87). Likewise, Chiang understands his own identity, at least while touring, as constructed and mutable. Frequently representing and executing Isherwood and Auden’s implicit power in China, Chiang conducts “intrigues” (108), demonstrates “diplomacy” (106), and “isn’t above editing our requests and the Chinese replies” (101). Chiang, like Auden’s poetic speaker or the spy, performs as “the creature who creates, communicates, and / chooses” (*Commentary* 263). Far from the militaristic or institutional nature of a spy or spying journalist, Isherwood’s portrayal of Chiang nonetheless suggests another mode of spying predicated upon managing interactions with unknown individuals in public, the crowd. Chiang’s mutable identity and editorial authority suggest a tacit recognition that our understanding of society is composed of numerous competing narratives, each requiring a shift in one’s stance or identity, a disguise derived from one’s conception of reality as a momentary intersection of narratives in flux.

Auden’s poet figure furnishes the best metaphor – that of the paper spy – for Isherwood and Auden’s appropriation of the spy character. The speaker in Sonnet VIII, *In Time of War*, describes a series of performative, identity-shifting exercises, in which he “turned his field into a meeting-place / Evolved a tolerant ironic eye / Put on a mobile money-changer’s face” (1-3). At the culmination of the poet’s public-oriented changes:

Strangers were hailed as brothers by his clocks,
 With roof and spire he built a human sky,
 Stored random facts in a museum box,
 To watch his treasure set a paper spy. (5-8)

The paper spy, already a duplicitous figure by virtue of espionage, is rendered doubly elusive by virtue of being counterfeit. As such, this metaphor delineates Isherwood and Auden's figurative espionage play. In addition to the poet's masquerading spy, the above strophe describes the construction and design of ideas, of society, of poetry, of narrative, and of truth. In Sonnet III, Auden's poet-spy controls the very narrative environment they inhabit: "found / That he could send a servant to chop wood / ... / A creature to his own creation subject" (6-7, 11). While Chiang is no operator among the crowd, he is certainly more capable when compared to Isherwood and Auden. Isherwood and Auden, denied direct access to the Chinese people, the crowd, and culture, assume self-consciously ostracized identities. Their position as outsiders observing and reporting returns us to the prominence of espionage tropes in the text as ways of signifying the outsider, who, seeking knowledge, must infiltrate and expose. This feeling of infiltration elicits shame, which reinforces Isherwood's and Auden's reliance upon the spy as a figure of intrusion.

"We gape, then go uneasily away": Voyeurism, Shame, Empire

As voyeur and agent of surveillance, the spy is brought into service of the literary project as a way of reconciling Isherwood's feelings of shame, which become more pronounced as the journey progresses. Any documentary project, as a matter of observing and recording, necessarily invokes questions and problems of viewership, audience, and voyeurism as extensions of the intersection between objective and subjective representation. Isherwood and Auden capture two 'layers' of intrusion: one is personal and individual, and is most directly a function of voyeurism, while the other is related to national identity and influence. While I have argued that Isherwood and Auden use the spy to understand their subjective position as alleged documentary writers, their

identification with the British state and establishment further informs their decision to code their activity as espionage, which traditionally is a function of state intelligence services. By aligning their intrusion upon and into Chinese lives (through their penetrating observation) with state intelligence services, Isherwood and Auden highlight the power dynamics that drive any documentary project by nature of the subject's power over the object, simply through the act of looking or not looking.

Isherwood locates the voyeuristic impulse that produces this first sense of intrusion, that of the individual, in Hankey, "a newcomer to China," who is fascinated by "everything...bomb-craters, pagodas, stomach-wounds, the faces of old beggars: he was perpetually whipping out his camera for a photograph" (67). In what is probably self-conscious commentary, Isherwood implies his own habit of narratively recording the journey via his description of Hankey's incessant photography. Following a report of "some bandits...executed," Isherwood and Auden themselves search for decapitated heads, "[hunting] about for some time but [finding] nothing" (79). In order to capture the macabre experience of visiting a warfront, Isherwood and Auden immerse themselves in death. In an equally opportunistic and intrusive scene, Isherwood and Auden take "the opportunity of examining [the] feet [of a] patient [who] had a vaginal-urethral fistula, sustained in childbirth" (78). Isherwood exploits the woman's incapacitation to document the vanishing "custom of foot-binding" (78). This compulsion to document depravity and atrocity additionally causes Isherwood, a homosexual, to follow a young boy's offer of "Nice girl?" (113). "Curious to see how the nice girl would be produced...From one of the huts," Isherwood discovers "a child of ten. She beckoned invitingly" (114). Isherwood's reaction is that of laughter and quick departure for the train (114). Perhaps

the unsettling truth of that scenario – a pre-pubescent girl offered to a man – is reason for it to be left alone in Isherwood's narrative, dismissed awkwardly with a laugh. Perhaps it simply needs no further commentary, but Isherwood includes this scene as yet another atrocity to be represented. The intersection of eroticism in the child prostitute and Isherwood's curiosity "to see" imply voyeurism as a necessary facet of documentary fieldwork.

Both Isherwood and Auden register the active, rather than passive, nature of their observation. As the journey draws to a close in the wartime capital, Isherwood writes "if you tire of inspecting one kind of misery there are plenty of others" (236). Auden, in *The Sphinx*, succinctly describes their reaction to the entire spectacle of wartime China: "We gape, then go uneasily away" (line 5). In a section that captures this cognitive dissonance, Isherwood and Auden gaze at the coolies' "bulging calves and straining thighs, and rehearse every dishonest excuse for allowing ourselves to be carried by human beings: they are used to it, it's giving them employment, they don't feel... But I *have* got the cash. Oh, dear. I'm so heavy..." (216). The personal feeling of shame, however, in addition to triple wages, is evidently an acceptable price to pay to avoid further walking. Isherwood's qualms over exploiting the coolie, which include voyeurism as a type of exploitation, result in him feeling shame.

The second configuration of shame experienced by Isherwood and Auden emerges from their association with the British state, a political and economic force, as public figures. Confronted by soldiers and police upon exiting a train, Isherwood and Auden consider briefly that they face arrest. "The truth, of course, proved to be far less dramatic," writes Isherwood in the next paragraph (182). In fact, the police distinguish

Isherwood and Auden as “people of importance...[with] a special constable...permanently at [their] disposal” (182). This quick reversal, from being discovered to celebrated, highlights the irony that Isherwood and Auden identify with the spy despite leading public lives in China. In the final passage of the narrative, Isherwood claims “There can be no compromise [between Shanghai’s two halves]” and that he and Auden “though [they] wear out shoes walking the slums, though [they] take notes, though [they] are genuinely shocked and indignant, belong, unescapably, to the other world. [They] return, always, to Number One House for lunch” (242). Echoing these sentiments, *Commentary*’s speaker admits:

Below the monuments of an acquisitive society,
 With friends and books and money and the traveller’s
 freedom,
 We are compelled to realize that our refuge is a sham. (262)

Auden’s poet clearly recognizes his own implication in the “acquisitive society,” with the text again balancing agency (“traveller’s freedom”) and compulsion. The speaker of *In Time of War* similarly comprehends himself to be a narrator of “a global story” – whether he wishes to be or not (XVI line 1). Confirming this failure to escape one’s constructed identity, to penetrate into Chinese culture or global society, and to escape the shame of voyeurism and deception, in order to document, record, or infiltrate, Isherwood writes that the “well-meaning tourist, the liberal and humanitarian intellectual, can only wring his hands...and exclaim: One doesn’t know where to start” (243). Isherwood, as an individual, relegates his own activities to hang-wringing.

In subsuming his personal identity to his national identity via “Number One House,” Isherwood’s travel-diary, framed as personal and private, alludes to the Western political and economic forces that control and structure China. Isherwood and Auden

express shame partially because they themselves are reduced to an association with the global political and economic influence of the British Empire. Moreover, Bryant argues that Isherwood and Auden's application of "theatrical tropes" in various scenes of cultural observation suggest that "Auden and Isherwood impose European frameworks on China and her people" (158). In a scene of allegorical significance with respect to national identity and shame, Isherwood and Auden meet with four "distinguished...civilians," including a consular official, who attempt to gain information from the writers' travels: "They wanted to know about the morale in Hankow. Was there much enthusiasm? Enormous enthusiasm, we replied" (235). Isherwood and Auden's response to the Hankow question is something of a tactical lie, as they overstate the positivity in Hankow. This political talk prompts Isherwood to remark on Japan's interest in "Western trade competition," but his point is rendered moot as "the gun-turrets of H.M.S. *Birmingham* slid quietly into view, moving upstream" (235). "In this city," Isherwood asserts simply, "the visual statements of power-politics are more brutal than any words" (235). This scene suggests then that politics operate visually, rather than textually, and this connection between sight and power extends to Auden and Isherwood as documentarians (and photographer in the case of Auden). The intrusive image, representative of the global system of projected military and economic power, catches the eyes of the Japanese too, causing the lunch "[to end] in a moment of thoughtful and slightly embarrassed silence" (235). By ending this scene in silence, Isherwood highlights his own identification with British hegemony as a further instance of shame induced by his participation in the documentary project.

Form: Distortion or Failure

Isherwood and Auden associate with the spy as a means of understanding the inherently subjective, voyeuristic nature of their documentary project, as well as their roles in necessarily representing British ‘interests’ as war correspondents. Their inevitable association and identification with the British state and British economic interest in China generates disquietude, which extends into tacit and explicit recognition that their selected literary forms are inadequate to the task of documenting in a reliable fashion the Second-Sino Japanese War – or any modern war for that matter. Isherwood spans distinctions between realist and non-realist, or modernist, literary styles to challenge objectivity, whereas Auden’s poems suggest blindness, uncertainty, and a distortion of traditional forms. These implicit challenges to the truth of perception and of representation require the character of the spy, a figure capable of narrative control who can trust nothing and verify but little.

Taken comprehensively, Isherwood’s prose vacillates between documentary realist and modernist prose – at times surrealist, at times impressionistic, at times fantastic – suggesting the shifting balance between objectivity and subjectivity. Although Isherwood uses the spy to understand the experience of navigating an environment in which truth is elusive or impossible, in the final chapter, he shifts his style toward social realism, a mode which usually *assumes* truth value in writing. This shift in style may function as a last attempt at objective documentation to the best of Isherwood’s ability, or a desire to include the sort of political and labor material appropriate for a liberal reader interested in writing that is socially aware. If Isherwood accepts, with reluctance, his position as British humanitarian intellectual – for he is certainly no revolutionary like Agnes Smedley (50) – then his reluctance may manifest in his non-realist attempts at

subverting the documentary mode he is pressured to adopt for the purposes of exposing atrocity, destruction, and misery for British and American leisure reading. Alternatively, by momentarily abandoning impressionistic techniques (e.g. the framing of the journey as a dream-like, surrealistic experience) and transitioning back into the objective, documentary mode in the final chapter, Isherwood accepts his association with British Imperial power, along with a realist documentary objective and a possible need for him to confess his own actions, a function of his persistent surveillance. This acceptance informs his selection of the conventional travel-diary form. In the final section, Isherwood, far from the impressionistic and surrealistic mode, records Shanghai's economic and industrial situation with greater exactitude and quantification, in the so-called objective mode: "A single hut will hold about five hundred people...the minimum sleeping-space on a floor may cost one dollar sixty cents a month...The coolie may expect a profit of from thirty to sixty cents: this, if he is sharing his rickshaw, must keep him alive for two days" (237-238). Isherwood aligns his most significant political commentary with the person of "Mr. Rewi Alley...a factory inspector and official of Public Works Department" who reports that "There is a cotton mill where the dust in the air makes T.B. almost a certainty" and that he "has had its owner into court three times but he has always managed to square the judge...There is no compensation and no insurance" (235-236).

Much of Isherwood's realist material comes via way of Alley who, with the inherent objectivity of a bureaucrat, claims that the "The Chinese Government...has had great success in developing the agricultural co-operative movement—consumers, marketing, and credit co-operatives" (240). Moreover, Isherwood defers to Alley for the conclusion of his own text, thereby implicitly recapitulating three problems inherent to

the documentary mode: first, that of reportage, because Isherwood's diary is largely a collection of quotation, paraphrase, and rumor; secondly, that of agency, because Isherwood observes whereas Alley organizes; and, thirdly, that of foreign influence and perspective, because Isherwood, who is British, relies on Alley, who is from New Zealand, for information on China. The narrative experience of navigating this constellation – reportage, agency, nationality -- results in the adoption of the spy character. Moreover, attempting to resolve these problems (to some extent, the problem of performing as a spy) influences Isherwood's formal variation between and across realist and non-realist modes as a way of accepting his national identity and mediating his voyeuristic shame. Isherwood, through the dream's distortion, the eye's impression, and the spy's deception, subtly renders the objective assumption of truth value suspect, and therefore, along with it, the entire textual project as documentary.

Auden's sonnet sequences, *A Voyage* and *In Time of War*, and the long, free verse poem, *Commentary*, maintain this skepticism of documentary projects. Auden's use of poetry, compared to his use of photography, implies subjectivity as the poems focus on the poet's personal experience rendered public. Auden's "Whither?" begins *Journey to a War* with uncertainty and questions: "Where does the journey look... / Does it promise a / juster life?" (*A Voyage* 1, 5). The poet ultimately "discovers nothing" (14) and awaits a vague, possibly impossible, "future reign of happiness and peace" (*A Major Port* 14). Furthermore, Auden's use of two distinct poetic forms parallels the collaborative and antagonistic interactions between multiple perspectives, whether his and Isherwood's or those of photography and writing, at work generally in *Journey to a War* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In separating the poetic sections, Auden creates diverse poetic

voices and perspectives. *Commentary*, by title, serves to modify, expand, and challenge the content first developed in the sonnet sequences, thereby undercutting unified or stable documentary readings. In moving between sonnets, free verse poems, and images, Auden uses multiple formal frames to highlight the instability of truth, as each disparate textual form creates a distinct impression of the journey to China. This sense of framing – literally in the context of photography or rhetorically in *Commentary* – brings into focus the power and primacy of observation in the documentarian and spy. Moreover, Auden’s possibly paradoxical relationship with truth, that truth is contingent upon individual perspective but also able to be identified, informs his specific ethics of observation, presented in *Commentary*:

Evil is always personal and spectacular,
But goodness needs the evidence of all our lives,

And, even to exist, it must be shared as truth,
As freedom or as happiness. (For what is happiness
If not to witness joy upon the features of another?) (268)

Because evil is always a spectacle to be gaped at, the poet, journalist, spy must seek out goodness; the documentary impulse – chasing atrocity and photographing misery – is to be actively resisted, according to *Commentary*. Paradoxically, the poet suggests that the products of that resistance should be shared as truth. In defining one’s happiness as watching happiness in another, Auden indicates that personal feeling requires external verification. *Commentary* places the allegorical poet / man into “the universe of which he is both judge and victim” (260). In this way, the poet functions as an evaluator, but his status also as a victim of causality negates potential claims to external truth value. Positioning the poet as both judge and victim necessarily questions the idea of impartiality or objectivity. Likewise, were the poet to claim an ability to validate even a

provincial reality, any significant change in perspective (which is evidence that the poet's position is not truly external, anyway) – whether spatial, as in travel, or temporal, as in history – would obliterate “his tribe and truth” into “nothing” (260). Invoking nature, Auden calls “the unfenced sky / To all our failures... a taciturn unsmiling witness” (261). Auden personifies the sky, in ironic continuity with the Romantic natural tradition, as silent to deny verification, to emphasize sight without action.

Moving from external verification to an internally-validated structure of meaning, Auden writes:

Here war is harmless like a monument:
A telephone is talking to a man;
Flags on a map declare that troops were sent;
A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan
For living men in terror of their lives,
Who thirst at night who were to thirst at noon,
Who can be lost and are, who miss their wives
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.
Yet ideas can be true, although men die:
For we have seen a myriad faces
Ecstatic from one lie,
And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now.
Nanking. Dachau. (XII, *In Time of War*)

In converting war into literature, Auden constructs a “harmless monument” – joining other “monuments of an acquisitive society” – in the sonnet form. His poetic construction parallels the false certainty of the statement “Flags on a map declare that troops were sent,” as if the command being issued were proof of its execution and the writing of a sonnet a formal declaration of truth. Moreover, his form implies an absurd misalignment of communicative modes in producing documentary sonnets: “A telephone is talking to a man.” In terms of established literary form, the sonnet is predicated upon structural

regularity: a fixed rhythm, rhyme scheme, and rhetoric. However, in Isherwood's prose⁸, Auden decries A.W. Kao's insistence that he can "explain the general strategic situation...with a simple map...[where warfare is made] lucid and tidy and false" (192). "War," Auden maintains, "is untidy, inefficient, obscure, and largely a matter of chance" (192). Clearly written with A.W. Kao's "false" map in mind, Sonnet XII occupies a middle position between clarity and obscurity, agreeing that "maps can really point" while creating a different, falsified image of war, specifically as "harmless."

This oscillation between objective and subjective representation manifests itself in the form of a distorted sonnet, which functions as a "diminished"⁹ monument, by virtue of Auden varying his meter considerably. While ostensibly an English sonnet, Sonnet XII slips into a more ballad-like rhythm, concluding with a four-syllable line comprised of two disyllabic locutions, both of which feature stress patterns unsuited to English versification in the form of the sonnet.¹⁰ These metrical and rhythmical variations, as well as an emphasis on internal rhythms and rhymes, suggest that the sonnet form, insofar as it is a monument to a previous literary and historical tradition, undergoes diminishment or distortion to reflect modern reality. This altered sonnet therefore functions as an intentionally anachronistic form in the face of modern warfare on a global scale¹¹.

Furthermore, this poem prognosticates -- unlike Auden's note about backing a political loser -- as it makes reference to Dachau's association with death already in the

⁸ Furthermore, Isherwood's own description of A.W. Kao's "mathematical precision" in the diary combines with Auden's sonnet on the same subject as collaborative to produce a composite perspective while, at the same time, modifying, and, therefore, critiquing, the other's representation of reality.

⁹ Recalling Frost, Auden's sonnet in light of modern warfare may consider also "what to make of a diminished thing" ("The Oven Bird," 1916).

¹⁰ Nanking, especially, the pronunciation of which rises and then stays flat and high.

¹¹ Similarly, ee cummings's 1926 "'next of course to god america i'" modifies the sonnet form to both activate and diminish the effect of the initial speaker's bombastic and jingoistic rhetoric. As well, "i sing of Olaf glad and big" (1931), fuses modernist style (and content) with epic tropes in an ironic, anachronistic fashion.

1939 first edition. If Auden had been using the poet spy to suggest factual ambiguity and moral relativism – “Flags...declare” – he retreats from this position, admitting that “maps can really point to places / Where life is evil now,” which ultimately suggests, not that evil has proliferated, rather that it has simply become clearly located, if not fully defined. The termination of the sonnet with these two locations, unbound by grammatical conventions, further implies a failure or distortion of the sonnet form. Thus, while the poem makes objective claims about evil through the poet’s naming of Nanking, Auden’s inclusion of Dachau in 1939 is speculative or proleptic. Moreover, he makes distinction between the map that points and the poem that names. If the map can locate objective evil, then the poem possibly de-locates evil in that the poem positions warfare as “harmless,” a function of the poet’s subjective experience of the war. Auden’s momentary relapse to clear significance, via absolute violence in Nanjing and Dachau, complicates the poetic cycles’ indefinite relationship with stable and “certain knowledge,” a position that, again, subverts the documentary objective (*Commentary* 264).

“So an age ended, and its last deliverer died,” Sonnet X concludes as it begins (line 1). Without deliverers of truth, culture has “sapped belief; / Put in its place a neutral dying star” (*Commentary* 264). *In Time of War* moves from consideration of external verification to a denial of that very concept through the inversion of the permanence and confidence of the pole star, or Christ, or a variety of meanings that could be derived from this image, which functions as a general shape, an empty container -- perhaps like the sonnet form itself. Specifying the anguish of this “sapped belief,” *Commentary*’s speaker writes that:

We wander on the earth, or err from bed to bed
In search of home, and fail, and weep for the lost ages
Before Because became As If, or rigid Certainty

The Chances Are. (265)

Accepting that certainty has given way to speculation or mere chance, Sonnet XIV

recapitulates ideas of blindness, ignorance and incomplete knowledge:¹²

They are and suffer; that is all they do:
A bandage hides the place where each is living,
His knowledge of the world restricted to
A treatment metal instruments are giving.
They lie apart like epochs from each other
(Truth in their sense is how much they can bear;
It is not talk like ours but groans they smother),
From us remote as plants: we stand elsewhere.
For who when healthy can become a foot?
Even a scratch we can't recall when cured,
But are boisterous in a moment and believe
Reality is never injured, cannot
Imagine isolation: joy can be shared,
And anger, and the idea of love. (255)

The obscuring nature of the bandage conveys uncertainty and figurative blindness, an interpretation strengthened by the line: "His knowledge of the world restricted to / A treatment metal instruments are giving." While the poet, as separate, describes injured soldiers, Auden's poet aligns himself with this blindness by individualizing "Truth" as "their sense...not talk like ours." Thus, Auden suggests a multiplicity of truths: the truth of sensation contrasted with the truth of talk. Likewise, Auden's poet loses the capacity for intuitive understanding of the world and relies on apparatuses and quantification of "Data" to generate meaning (265). While such a shift possibly implies objectivity through quantification, the capitalization of data renders that potential certainty ironic. Moreover,

¹² This scene may be derived from a visit to a Chinese military hospital. Isherwood writes: "The wounded lay in their uniforms, on straw—three men often beneath a single blanket...In one hut the sweet stench of gas-gangrene from a rotting leg was so violent that I had to step outside to avoid vomiting" (83).

the poet associates the move toward “Data” with the translation of “Because” into “As if,” such that a surfeit of data produces speculation, rather than certainty, because it requires subjective (narrative) interpretation.

Auden further separates the poet from reality in Sonnet XIV, placing the patients or “those who suffer...apart like epochs,” while he and Isherwood “stand elsewhere,” seemingly outside of the poetic scene of suffering – the separation underlined by Auden’s poetic pun: “For who when healthy can become a foot?” Although Auden implies that he and Isherwood exist outside of this exact structure of significance (the suffering, poem, the hospital, the war in China), they are included in the fallacy that is believing “Reality is never injured,” themselves being designers of narrative reality. The spy’s separation of himself from the constant narrative manipulation, in order to maintain control of the story, further promotes an experience of blindness, ignorance, and approximation. These elements pervade and structure Auden’s sonnets, which feature variable and distinct rhyme schemes that challenge traditional sonnet structures; some of the sonnets are sonnets in name alone. Auden’s departures from sonnet conventions signify experiences of ignorance, incompleteness, and subjectivity. Bryant writes that “Instead of shedding light on what they observe, Auden and Isherwood *cast their shadows* on it” (163). These ideas – the authorial shadow, the formal limit of the sonnet, and the historical associations of the form -- contribute to Auden’s experience of “failure,” a regular trope of his poetry, exemplified by his reworking of the sonnets and eventual removal of the verse *Commentary*. Indeed, Auden’s poet of the deleted *Commentary* notes: “This is the epoch of the Third Great Disappointment / ... / United by a common sense of human failure” (264). Charged with a documentary project among a mysterious and foreign

people, Auden and Isherwood adopt and experiment with the metaphor of the spy to understand their voyeuristic entry into an enigma. The constant mistranslations of Chinese language (deceptions by the enemy), the inscrutability of the crowd, and the unresolvable tension between perception and representation lead Auden's poet, wringing his hands, to accept inevitable failure, even while the sonnet persists as a diminished, modern monument that blends representations of reality with the multivalent subjectivity of the modernist observer(s):

When all our apparatus of report
Confirms the triumph of our enemies,
Our frontier crossed, our forces in retreat,
Violence pandemic like a new disease,
And Wrong a charmer everywhere invited,
When Generosity gets nothing done,
Let us remember those who looked deserted... (XIX)

CHAPTER 3

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

Just as Isherwood and Auden associate with the “paper” spy figure by virtue of surveillance, the war, and the liminal space between journalist and spy, Agee overtly claims the espionage metaphor by positioning himself explicitly in the *dramatis personae*, “Persons and Places,” through an invented narrative, as “a spy, traveling as a journalist” and denoting “Walker Evans: a counter-spy, traveling as a photographer” (XVI). In casting himself and Evans as distinct classes of spies, Agee recalls our introductory discussion of vocabulary, function, and watching. The spy and counter-spy, as a pair, suggest dual modes of perception: that of the objective watcher and of the subjective narrator. The unmodified spy implies again observation and reporting, i.e. the documentary mode of the spy who “examines closely” (*espy* v.). The dramatic tension of counter-espionage may even suggest that Agee’s and Evans’s documentary positions contradict, question, or modify each other -- an antagonism that necessarily challenges objectivity. Challenges to objectivity are further developed via the specific function of the counter-spy, a character that, by virtue of detecting *other* clandestine actors, must move beyond examination and understand subjective experiences in order to move toward synthesizing relative truths into narrative reality. By designating the photographer, associated with an ostensibly objective apparatus, as counter-spy, the character who controls narratives in order to detect those who themselves manipulate narratives, Agee uses the collaborative antagonism to develop the subjectivity that

permeates *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and disrupts the text's documentary purpose. Agee's interchange between potentially opposed forms of the spy enacts *both* the objective and subjective observational process, insofar as the spy's surveillance suggests factual reportage while the spy's inherent deception implies control of fictions. Narratively disguising themselves as agents of espionage allows Agee to characterize their intrusive and voyeuristic role in documenting cotton tenant farmers for *Fortune* magazine. In addition to class and educational differences, the bellicose nature of espionage subtly implies residual regional division between the North and the South by virtue of Agee's Harvard education and career in New York. Moreover, the spy provides a metaphor to understand the implicitly subjective aspect of documentary production. By highlighting this inherent subjectivity, a function of perspective and who looks at whom, the writer as spy necessarily undercuts the assumed documentary realist impulse by virtue of its position of skepticism, interpretation, and narrative fabrication. This sense of fabrication extends to the fragmentary nature of Agee's experimental prose, which requires mutual construction on the part of the reader. By distributing the burden of textual construction between himself and reader, Agee mitigates his shame by underscoring the reader's position as voyeur-spy, by proxy.

The Spy Who Examines Objectively

Like *Journey to a War*, this documentary text developed from a commissioned assignment: "our business [was] to prepare, for a New York magazine, an article on cotton tenantry in the United States, in the form of a photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers" (IX). The New York magazine was *Fortune*, and Agee adds, via footnote, that "Evans was on loan

from the Federal Government” in order to underscore the fact that both artists functioned as contracted agents for a specific purpose. While Isherwood and Auden appear to maintain some sense of artistic control over their project, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as an article, was rejected by *Fortune*. Its initial rejection further evinces the contractual nature of Agee’s involvement with the project, which induces his adoption of the spy as a figure who intrudes as a condition of employment.

With respect to the terms of the commissioned realist documentary project, Agee’s objective prose tends to take the form of extensive catalogues. Writing of the Gudger’s kitchen, Agee lists with minimal description:

The stove stands in the corner between them, the ‘cupboard’ stands against the front wall beyond the door to the storeroom, the table along the front wall between the door and the hall, the meal bin and foot basin in the corner made between the rear and hall walls; the woodbox stands along the near side of the stove; under the stove is the dishpan; the coffee-pot and a kettle stand on it, set back; pots are hung on nails along the walls of the stove-corner... (157).

Agee’s account of the kitchen begins and continues in such a fashion for a number of paragraphs. While there are numerous passages of Agee’s prose that do nothing beyond list items or arrangements of rooms and furniture, when recording the Wood’s house, Agee states that “the walls” show “what you may see in one of the photographs” (167). That is, instead of providing denotational names or listing, as in Auden’s “Nanking. Dachau,” Agee directs us to the photographs, therefore positing equivalence of representational capacity between himself and Evans, and between text and image.

In this way, the spy and counter-spy, or journalist and photographer, are allied figures who collaborate to produce a more comprehensive or representative rendering of cotton tenantry. The preface informs us quite plainly that “The immediate instruments are

two: the motionless camera, and the printed word” (X). Furthermore, Agee notes, “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are co-equal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative” (XI). By virtually combining the impression derived from each half, each mode of representation, the reader may, according to Agee, assemble or approach a more comprehensive, or illustrative, depiction of tenantry via the families or individuals.

Agee himself suggests how this collaboration may function when looking at the Rickettses’ fireplace: “the fireplace is sprung a few inches off center within its large white framing; yet, since it still has so strong a central focus in its wall, a powerful vibration is set up between the two centers” (151). Agee and Evans each represent a center. As such, Agee suggests that a dyad of spies, each monitoring the other, producing two similar but slightly decentered perspectives, could provide a sufficiently objective verification of reality. The printed word will reveal what the photographs cannot, which reveal what the printed word does not: “like the exchange of two mirrors laid face to face”...“we now engaged in mutual listening and in analysis of what we heard”...“each of us became all one hollowed and listening ear” (410). Agee mixes the visual metaphor of the mirror with the “listening ear,” resulting in synesthetic, inter-disciplinary union. In this configuration, Agee interfaces with Evans to work together toward objective documentation.

Further affirming the camera’s role as conducive to documentary realist representation, Agee writes:

One reason I so deeply care for the camera is just this. So far as it goes (which is, in its own realm, as absolute anyhow as the traveling distance of words and sound), and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the

phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth. (206)

Agee expresses interest in the camera from the point of objective technological reproduction because it brings the “ice-cold” exactitude of the apparatus – as specifically non-human and capable of seeing more objectively than human eyes -- into the “leverage of art.” Upon discovering a particularly photogenic church, Agee and Evans wait for the sun’s position to change in order to record “a triple convergence [of light] in the keen historic spasm of the shutter” (36). The camera, through the image, records a spatial-temporal construct – “a triple convergence.” Agee, however, does not ascribe this ability or advantage solely to photography. After helping Evans “get the camera ready,” a process which suggests Evans’s own subjective framing of the ostensibly objective image, Agee stood “away and...watched what would be trapped, possessed, fertilized: searching out and registering in myself all its lines, planes, stresses of relationship, along diagonals withdrawn and approached, and vertical to the slightly off-centered door...” (36). This passage continues with Agee recording mentally, verbally, what will be recorded photographically. Confronted with the camera, Agee’s consciousness tests itself against what he understands photography’s capacity for representation to be. Agee’s prose attempts to render its own version of “absolute, dry truth.” In doing so while Evans frames his photographs, Agee subtly suggests that the camera, while capable of recording truth, records a truth that is determined by a specific, and mutable, perspectival frame.

As in *Journey to a War*, a voyeuristic excursion into a foreign region or culture requires a surveillant consciousness, which encourages the narrative adoption of the spy’s stance and mask. Even in repose, Agee and Evans, monitor and record: “We lay on our

backs about two feet apart in silence, our eyes open, listening” (202). This sense of persistent monitoring, whether by eye or ear, is necessary because it is impossible to know when valuable information will present itself. With respect to speech, Agee claims there are “words a careful man will be watchful of, and by whose use and inflection he may take clear measurement of the nature, and the stature, and the causes, and the timbre, of the enemy” (403).¹³ At any moment, Agee suggests, perception may present deeply-coded information. While Agee highlights the importance of tracking dialogue for political or class markers, he makes metaphysical claims too. Watching the sunrise, Agee describes himself and Evans as “privileged by stealth to behold” and as lacking “the pride to seek to decipher it” (164). In what is a rather complicated scene, Agee, seemingly affirming the spy’s creeping, indicates that stealth gains the secret view, but the very power of “this legend” causes them to refuse to “decipher it” – deciphering being a primary function of the spy. Such a refusal perhaps represents an ethical decision on Agee’s part to exercise restraint, therefore denying the reader access to certain elements of tenant lives.

The spy’s capacity to descry, to develop understanding and meaning, has been considered in *Journey to a War* through the expert tracking History in Hankow. While Agee averts the spy’s gaze from the sunrise before he may decipher it, elsewhere, he confirms the observer’s capacity to derive objective meaning from material items. In “Education,” Agee delivers a systemic diagnosis of Alabama’s disastrous education system, based on the families’ limited textbooks. His ability to assess and construct relationships of influence directly maps to *Journey to a War*’s sense of

¹³ Such language suggests an additional parallel between this text and *Journey to a War* in terms of the genre of war journalism.

historical/sociological “expertise.” Agee reproduces the titles and contents of some textbooks “which were at the Gudger house,” cautioning us to remember that these books “imply the far reaches of the book-knowledge of any average adult tenant” (263). Thus, through analysis of a material artifact, Agee divines the governing social and economic structures, which themselves cripple or embrace consciousness: “the page of geography text...tells so much about education that this chapter is probably unnecessary” (265).

The Counter-Spy Who Constructs Subjectively

Agee ultimately calls such objectivity – the “who, what, where, when, and why (or how)” – “the primal cliché and complacency of journalism” (206). I would argue that the previous quotations of Agee’s writing, themselves representative of the numerous paragraphs devoted to cataloguing items or qualities of light or so on, repudiate, resist, or subvert, as best as they can, the journalistic clichés that Agee and Evans’s *Fortune* magazine editor and readers would have expected. Agee and Evans ultimately eschew such documentary realist modes, instead highlighting the subjective nature of perception and, consequently, suggesting ethical implications resulting from their position as voyeuristic observers, via more subjective, non-realist forms. By creating a hybridized phototextual documentary, Agee and Evans also blur divisions between representational modes, between image and text, between realism and modernism.

Agee and Evans confirm their status as outsiders when describing aesthetic allegiances and a network of fellow artistic and political spies, “those who at least were also spies, and enemies of our enemies,” being “a New Deal architect [of] goodness and understanding” and “some communists...in Tarrant City” (329). While such a description invokes objective binaries of ally and enemy through the language of war, these very

binaries are constructs of Agee's narrative spy game. Moreover, Evans's role as "counter-spy" subtly suggests that these ally contacts were exposed by virtue of narrative interpretation – for how else is a spy discovered?

By placing Evans as a "counter-spy," Agee also supposes an adversarial relationship, a relationship further strengthened by Agee's connection of espionage and counter-espionage to different modes of representation. In this non-collaborative reading, Agee's written word opposes the photographic work of Evans – as if their chosen media necessarily biases their worldview. In the preface, Agee admits that the photographs offer utility while cautioning that "By their fewness, and by the impotence of the reader's eye, this will be misunderstood by most of that minority which does not wholly ignore it" (XI). Thus, rather than functioning as a synesthetic and unified point of perception, Agee and Evans may each represent separate, relative truths. These relative truths, via text and image separately, by virtue of their difference, may then render some composite reality.

With respect to ideal or perfectly objective representations, Agee writes of George Gudger, "it would be our business to show how through every instant of every day of every year of his existence alive he is from all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that enormous sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small no matter" (97). Agee describes a system of total and perfect surveillance – every instant – that captures invisible and intangible relationships, causes, and motivations. Clearly, at this point of comprehensive observation or representation of how objects affect a human subject at every instant, the documentary mode of objective description or photographic reproduction fails. Instead, in the face of such a monumental task, Agee elects the character of the spy to understand the subjective experience of

intruding upon individuals to document human life. The spy uniquely combines the act of perception, an inherently subjective act, with the fabrication of narrative, in which perception is synthesized as interpretable reality – in the case of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, to be presented to readers of *Fortune*.

While Agee writes that the camera and writing constitute the immediate instruments for the completion of their documentary task, he clarifies that “the governing instrument – which is also one of the centers of the subject – is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness” as a means of understanding subjectivity and other non-visible, internal, and emotional facets of the experience (X). According to Agee, the goal of the book is to “record....[any] detail...within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in” (X). By shifting the focus of the project from concrete reality (the material of objective documentaries) to memory, perception, and spirit, Agee further cements the utility of the spy by virtue of its capacities for narrative construction (memory), surveillance (perception), and shameful voyeurism (spirit). Indeed, writing of “a certain form of the truth about” George Gudger, Agee admits, “of course it will be only a relative truth” (211). Thus, Agee confirms that he and Evans approach the system of tenantry “not as journalists, sociologists, politicians...” but instead as spies, being the appropriate figure for infiltration and the assembly of relative truths (XI).

Returning again to Agee’s use of the catalogue, we notice that his narrative intervention and invention provides a stark contrast to the documentary mode of cataloguing. The impulse to catalogue then appears to be in fact a capitulation to *Fortune* readers clichéd expectations. Writing of the wash basin and towels, Agee promises “a

few notes of discrimination” that “may be helpful,” even though his notes contain not much more than speculation: “I expect, but am not sure, that this is a few cents cheaper” (133). While Agee’s estimation of Mrs. Gudger’s thrift perhaps should be read only as ‘investigative journalism,’ I think it signals a shift toward a speculative, subjective, and anti-authoritarian documentary position, one that can record without confirming, or one that can narrativize relative truths. Looking into a bureau, Agee decides that he “shall not fully list the contents of the bureau drawers,” therefore denying to the reader full access to his perception and denying even superficial access to the Gudgers’ lives (142). More to the point of narrative fabrication, Agee concludes a list of items in the “storage house” via footnote to indicate that the list was “invention” as he “did not make inventory” (116). He then appends an additional catalogue of the items he “could remember for certain” (116). This moment, fluctuating between certainty and invention, implies a lack of essential difference between reality and what consciousness records, via memory, as reality. Moreover, this moment demonstrates Agee’s recognition of his power of narrative or interpretive control, an essential function of the spy, as he navigates the tension between the imperative to report faithfully the experience of making the documentary and the imperative to interest and satisfy readers

Agee even extends this sense of narrative control, which in a documentary is the capacity to record, to moments beyond those of his own experience. In the concluding passage of “Clothing,” Agee introduces a fabricated narrative, framed as memory, based on his encounter with Mrs. Gudger’s hat, “ruined yet saved in a table drawer” (252). In terms of documentary, he derives meaning from a material object, but this meaning, being a fabricated narrative, is “fantast,” to use the language of Agee, and therefore

beyond the purview of documentary realism (339). However, this passage, in contrast to the rest of the “Clothing” chapter, which treats each individual’s daily wear as representative, does not pretend to be journalistic. Agee’s story from Annie Mae Gudger’s past evokes, instead, the spy’s role of generating and maintaining narrative in the face of relative or subjective truth, because Agee presents as a “poem” a memory that is fabricated by himself (252). His ability to generate a narrative that synthesizes the object of the hat with his understanding of Annie Mae demonstrates the spy’s role in making relative truth from and providing access to subjective, felt realities. Seemingly affirming his right to invent narrative, frame relative truths, and include or exclude, Agee argues that “‘Description’ is a word to suspect” (210). Thus, subjectivity, the process of fabricating narrative, provides the material and tools for any documentary project based on depicting human lives, as in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Journey to a War*, while ultimately undermining the potential for documentary realist records. These modernist documentary projects, therefore, claim subjective, felt truths at the expense of unified and objective truth. Nonetheless, as commissioned works aimed at a middle-class readership for the purpose of documentary, both texts necessarily engage with objectivity and apparently objective representations, even if this objective material is ultimately challenged by more subjective content or forms in the texts.

In recognizing the subjective nature of the documentary, focused in his and Evans’s power over the tenants by virtue of the authors’ position as subject and watcher, Agee calls attention to the necessarily invasive nature of his position as author of the documentary article. He describes the empty Gudger house, empty in order to accommodate his and Evans’s survey of the home, as “left open and defenseless to a

reverent and cold-laboring spy..." (117). Agee allows this guilty sense of meta-perception to permeate his language as he positions Evans as conducting a "firing squad," by virtue of his photography shoot (322). As possibly opposed agents of espionage, antagonism pervades Agee's depiction of Evans, suggesting, at best, an impersonal agent or, at worst, a sinister presence. Attempting to gain access to a possibly empty church, Agee insinuates that Evans will "do what he want[s]," and break into the church (37). Later, in what seems a particularly harsh depiction of Evans (or a facetious play on inter-spy rivalry), Agee describes Walker making photographs surreptitiously, and states "the meaning of a camera" to be "a weapon, a stealer of images, and souls, a gun, an evil eye" (320). In this way, the writer qualifies the photographic record, with Agee capturing shame that Evans misses or generates via his camera's presence.

By functioning as a recording device, a point of permanent and mobile human surveillance, Agee internalizes the surveillant, voyeuristic observational mode, itself being a product of habituating one's consciousness via constant observation. Various semi-surrealist or absurdist passages elucidate Agee's unstable, subjective perspective. His visit to "Gaffney's Lunch" already evinces this sense of automatic visual capture and catalogue. As a result, Agee projects or notices habits of observation in elements of nature. In the deserted Gudger house, "spiders here...[watch] you with a poison sharpness of eye," producing yet another moment of mutual surveillance, though it is between different species in this text (130). "In the room," Agee locates, "up in the high roof...a wasp...stricken now and then by sunlight; at such instants he is an electric spark" (163). The wasp, in its position of aerial observation and through its potential for stinging assault, signifies the spying presence of Agee and Evans. Agee's paranoia – a symptom

of his own interminable visual consumption – culminates in a vision of “broad affronted eyes...a black and jade and golden bullfrog [watching] with scarcely controllable outrage” (347).

Appearing toward the end of the text and weeks into the project, Agee’s drive to Cherokee City further suggests surveillance, suspicion, and antagonism: “[The townspeople] looked at me with immediate and inevitable enmity. I looked back impersonally, almost wishing there might for their sake and mine be a fight, though I was unable to hate them and am not yet fully over my physical cowardice” (336-337). Still demonstrating an attention to the power of his gaze while taking a break from fieldwork, Agee measures and evaluates the Cherokee City youth in instant visual exchange. Similarly, the cotton farmer’s family is subject to perpetual observation: “On the big plantations, where a good deal of picking...is done by day labor and is watched over by riding bosses” (301). Like Agee, the tenant families have also internalized surveillance habits, watching each other for maximum efficiency, for “there is nearly always, in the tenant’s family, the exceedingly sharp need of cottonseed money” (301).

Highlighting the ethical problem of his power as documentarian over the tenants as objects, Agee characterizes the voyeuristic intrusions into the Rickettses’, Woodses’, and Gudgers’ lives as acts of espionage, which induce guilt. Agee writes that these acts of spying overcast “your very existence, in your own mind, with a complexion of guilt, stealth, and danger” (68). This paranoid culture of ubiquitous observation encourages deception, disguise, and clandestine movements – the performance of espionage.

Writing in 1960, Walker Evans describes “James Agee in 1936,” as “elaborately masked,” “conspiring,” with “unplacable accent,” and generally “in the deceptive way”

(V-VI). Looking to discuss the Sharecropper's Union with George Gudger – “possible that he had at least heard of the union” -- Agee adopts a pattern of concealment and stealth: “I slowed the car a little and lifted my foot and tried to coast by quietly” (340). However, this scene, in which Agee conceals his motives, functions as a textual confession because Agee reveals his interest in agitating and organizing. Hugh Davis writes that Agee possessed:

knowledge of tenant farming in terms of union organizing, referring to the Communist-backed Sharecroppers Union, which was a largely underground operation based in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, and the Socialist-led Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which was not active in the state.....Agee's original plan [included] a three-part series consisting of a piece on tenant families, an expose of cotton economics and “Governmental efforts to Do Something about It,” and a history of union organizing... (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men As Surrealist Ethnography* 145)

Agee talks with Gudger, in a manner “very carefully keyed, chiefly about what the tenant farmer could do to help himself out of the hole he is in” (380). Thus, Agee incriminates himself as a double agent. He works as a spy for the middle-class through *Fortune* magazine. However, in using the middle-class establishment's exploitative assignment to agitate, educate, and possibly organize the cotton farmer, the target of his observation, Agee perpetrates a second deception, this time upon his *Fortune* handler: a true double agent¹⁴. Agee's identification with the cotton farmer, with George, with the marginalized rather than the enfranchised, is confirmed through Agee's adoption of George's dialect at the end of part three: “I told him I sure was obliged to him for taking me in last night and he said he was glad to have help me” (380). Though Agee may merely modulate his own

¹⁴ Allred maintains that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* explores the opposition between “the rooted ‘folk’ [and] (auto)mobile metropolitans” (95). Allred locates privilege on the part of the documentarian in his or her automobility, expressed as social mobility and/or physical mobility in the car. This scene, in which Agee's Chevrolet functions as a democratized space, beyond the eyes and ears of company men, proves exception to the privilege of mobility that the car grants Agee in rural Alabama.

speech to further allay George's suspicions, Agee's appropriation of George's dialect connotes solidarity and mutual identification with, not exploitation of -- to borrow Auden's terms -- the "tribe and truth."

Agee uses the spy to understand his complicit role as documentarian, an active observer who selects and constructs the record, and to consider who may benefit from the document in ways that his subjects will not. The passages detailing the Gudger House, in which Agee recounts "being made witness to matters no human being may see," crystallize most saliently Agee's multi-purposed deployment of the spy: firstly, as a figure for objective observation, secondly, as a figure for subjective narrativizing, and thirdly, as a figure for shameful infiltration. The sense of compulsion, "being made witness," joined with isolation produces in Agee a distinct sense of guilt for exposing and infiltrating human lives. Agee, as the sole intruder, observes the unobservable -- an act that therefore requires the interpretive finesse of the spy.

"An ugly and puzzling grimace:" Voyeurism, Shame, Power

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men's simultaneous enactment of objective modes of cataloguing and more duplicitous (subjective) modes of spying and record-keeping allow Agee to explore numerous iterations and manifestations of shame -- his shame, the tenants' shame, the middle-class' lack of shame. Deindividualized as their initials, "J.A." and "W.E." dedicate their titanic volume "To those of whom the record is made. / In gratefulness and in love" (IV). Agee highlights what is fundamentally a humanist, ethical, moral problem through his treatment of work and the subject of the work: "To come devotedly into the depths of a subject, your respect for it [will increase] in every step and your whole heart [will weaken] apart with shame upon yourself in your dealing with it"

(280). Thus, while Agee insists that he possess only love for the tenants, his work, of merely orbiting the impossibly bright or hot individual center of human actuality that is George, inevitably fills him with shame because he must represent George and the others for *Fortune*'s editors and readers, despite Agee's skepticism of the possibility of fully representing any human individual or center.

To represent another human being textually is to reduce, compress, and distort him: "[George Gudger] is not some artist's or journalist's or propagandist's invention: he is a human being: and to what degree I am able it is my business to reproduce him as the human being he is; not just to amalgamate him into some invented, literary imitation of a human being" (205). Agee's sense of shame responds to his complicit role in creating "invented, literary imitation[s]"; after all, George Gudger, like the other names, is a pseudonym. With respect to representing humans artistically, Agee offers, instead, that "if, anti-artistically, you desire not only to present but to talk about what you present and how you try to present it, then one of your first anxieties, in advance of failure foreseen, is to make clear that a sin is a sin" (210). Agee, admitting his sin, describes "let[ting]...loose...any control...[to show]...just what and all [he] felt for [the Ricketts] and of [himself]" in a moment of sincere and genuine and undeceived humanity (323). Combining his shame and love in a simultaneous facial representation of his sentiment toward Mrs. Ricketts, Agee admits "it must have been an ugly and puzzling grimace" (323).

Agee renders his own involvement in the documentary shamefully and with guilt, feelings which are understood and coded as the deceptions of the spy. After rifling through the Gudger household, Agee recomposes his posture, arranges his writing

materials and notes that “It is not going to be easy to look into their eyes” (165). Merely moving unsupervised within the house and among the Gudger’s possessions induces guilt and a desire to disguise that shame. As an extension of his own shame, Agee likewise records Mrs. Ricketts and “the cold absorption of the camera in all your shame and pitableness to be pried into and laughed at; and your eyes...wild with fury and shame and fear...” (321). Mrs. Ricketts’ shame in being photographed anticipates the judgment of the audience that views the photographs, such that the observational power that shames Mrs. Ricketts extends to the audience. Though Agee claims, “even then we knew you were wonderful,” he cannot disentangle the threads of love and shame, instead understanding them together. After describing the Gudger family in terms of “steady shame and insult of discomforts, insecurities, and inferiorities,” Agee portrays Mrs. Gudger’s embarrassment, her feelings of inadequacy, “with the tears coming to her eyes,” proclaiming, “oh, I do *hate* this house *so bad!*” (184). Agee’s representation of the Gudgers’ or Ricketts’ shame in being exposed amplifies the shame he feels for playing voyeur.

Two moments in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* stand out for their comprehensive representation and depiction of Agee’s consummate shame. It is unlikely mere coincidence that these two scenes, together, include Agee’s most direct interactions with “negroes” in the book. Aside from a few select moments, black people are represented as shutters drawn tight (67). Agee reproduces Alabama’s marginalization of blacks by hiding and placing them on the periphery of the text. Although the assigned *Fortune* task is to detail “three representative white tenant families,” Agee covertly introduces the topic of race into the document (X). “At the foreman’s home,” Agee

further reports “an interruption that filled [him] with regret” (25). After recording the way in which the black men “watch carefully to catch the landowner’s eyes, should they be glanced after, so that they might nod, smile, and touch their foreheads, as in fact they did, before they disappeared,” Agee describes how three people were “summoned to sing for Walker and for me, to show us what nigger music is like (though we had done all we felt we were able to spare them and ourselves this summons)” (25). The landowner’s presence controls the black men’s actions, forcing them to sing and interact according to his desire, but the landowner also limits Agee’s behavior: “Meanwhile, and during all this singing, I had been sick in the knowledge that they felt they were here at our demand, mine and Walker’s, and that I could communicate nothing otherwise” (28). Agee does not explain or clarify why he cannot communicate, though it is likely due to the presence of the landowner. Agee’s silent participation as audience belies his private revolt and hatred of the scene: “in a perversion of self-torture, I played my part” as an observer whose very act of watching implies a position of racially-inscribed power (28). However, had Agee revealed his own politics, he would have been identified as an enemy of the landlord. Agee resigns himself to witnessing this uncomfortable performance in order to maintain his cover. Following this performance, he responds sincerely with a gesture that affirms the power of the word and image: “I looked them in the eyes with full and open respect and said, that was fine” (27).

“Near a Church” refigures this intersection of race, power, and eye contact. Agee and Evans stop to photograph the church for its special quality of beauty. Hoping to avoid Evans’s breaking into the church, Agee seeks a minister or someone else with access. Agee, failing to anticipate the inherent danger of his power as a white male, approaches a

“young negro couple” and startles the woman, causing her to: “nearly [fall], like a kicked cow scrambling out a creek, eyes crazy, chin stretched tight, she sprang forward into the first motions of a running not human but that of a suddenly terrified wild animal” (38). In failing to understand this potential response to his presence, Agee confirms that he is ignorant of the system and its distribution of power, a system that he claims to be complicit in perpetuating, by virtue of his class and educational position. Agee offers an insufficient verbal apology, then considers “throw[ing himself] flat [to] embrace and kiss their feet” (38). Fearing that that would only “have frightened them still worse,” Agee finally “stood and looked into their eyes and loved them, and wished to God [he] was dead” (39). Agee renders each phenomenological phase of his multivalent shame, as if he were cataloguing items in the Gudger household. In making explicit the response of the “negro couple” to his presence and gaze, Agee renders salient the power dynamics underlying race relationships in Alabama.

However, to call oneself “spy” or “counter-spy,” an act driven by the shame of voyeurism and exploitation, inevitably fuels that very feeling of penetration and deception. This feedback loop, the interaction between shame and deception, produces a sincerity within Agee that effectively abandons the spy’s disguise or confirms its utility through confession, itself a formal element of espionage and spycraft. Agee accepts culpability, without artifice, deception, or irony, for the “poor lives I have already so betrayed...so destroyed” (386). “The last words of this book,” as Agee identifies them, claim an “end to it, whose beginnings are long begun, and in slow agonies and all deceptions clearing...” (387). Such an apocalyptic moment will, Agee posits, clear and reveal “all deceptions...by upmost meanings” (387). Moving from the spy’s tenuous

construction of reality, suspended without form between truth and narrative, to certainty and absolution in the Lord's Prayer, Agee exorcises, finally, the spy from his consciousness: "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (387).

Form: Experimentation and Transference

Unlike *Journey to a War*, Agee explicitly positions the textual form as "rudely experimental" in an effort to eschew documentary realist modes, partially as recognition of his subjective control of an allegedly objective project and partially in recognition of documentary's necessary voyeurism (217). These concepts align in the spy's behaviors of infiltration and surveillance. Agee's textual form, which intentionally challenges readers, extends the ethical problems of spying and relative truth onto the reader, which in effect mitigates and multiplies Agee's own shame. Agee maintains that a truly documentary work cannot be realist, in the journalistic sense, because "The very blood and semen of journalism," he writes, "is a broad and successful form of lying. Remove that form of lying and you no longer have journalism" (207). Thus, the claim of objective truth is in fact a form of deception. Agee argues, instead, that stable significance is to be found only in "the relative truth...perceived and intended" (210). In my treatment of *Journey to a War*, I argue that Isherwood and Auden associate themselves with the British State and therefore select relatively conventional forms, with possible irony in doing so. Isherwood's travel-diary provides him the opportunity to record objectively with surrealistic and impressionistic experimentation. Similarly, Agee entertains the objective, documentary impulse -- much of the prose consists of Agee's lists and catalogues. However, lists that span multiple pages and frequent narrative intervention within these

lists ultimately complicate any claim to objectivity, as does the significantly more experimental form of Agee's text.

Agee's experimental form, which interrupts, contradicts, and repeats itself, highlights his own ethical concerns as writer. He demonstrates his concern for the power of text when he insists that "Words could, I believe, be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit" (209). Moreover, he reveals that "some of the better [writers] use you, but you don't know it: you think you are using them" (313). *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as a highly complex and dis-assembled text that must be operated and re-constructed in consciousness, instructs readers in its consumption so as to not poison their consciousness – the absolute evil of education or journalism, as Agee argues. Resigned to the form of the book "only by necessity," Agee claims that the project is "an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell" (XI). To represent human actuality, for Agee, is truly a divine task because the component parts of the phrase, "human," "actuality," require separate (at times, opposed, at times, collaborative, and always, illustrative) ways of seeing, modes of recording, and forms of expression. In addition to the photographs, Agee draws from a variety of textual forms: poems, lists, prose, reproduced text, outlines. This anthology of literary types suggests discrete perspectives that possibly combine into a coherent whole, thus returning us to Agee and Evans as inter-disciplinary collaborators.

Uniting his anti-authoritarian aesthetic and existential position, Agee states that the text consists of "tentative, rudely experimental, and fragmentary renderings of some of the salient aspects of a real experience seen and remembered in its own terms" (217). To this extent, Agee positions the various parts of the volume as "flashbacks, foretastes,

illuminations and contradictions” to “On the Porch,”¹⁵ thereby creating a text that occupies simultaneous temporal-spatial locations (217). By disrupting traditional narrative sequence, Agee forces readers to produce a more coherent document within his or her own consciousness; the text, therefore, enacts the process of subjective narrative construction (Agee’s own experience) because it is constructed independently by each reader. Through a fragmentary textual form, Agee more directly transmits to the reader “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” (97). Recalling Agee’s use of the colon to at once connect and separate, the text creates an unresolved burden in the reader’s consciousness intentionally because the volume “is a human effort which must require human co-operation” (98). Such an idea of “human co-operation” further suggests synthesis between Agee’s text and Evans’s image. In recognizing that, among a number of physical entities, “each is itself: and how each is a shapener,” the reader embraces his or her position as independent – “each is itself.” By virtue of arriving at this

¹⁵ “On the Porch” consists of three sections, which are equally spaced throughout the text. Each section, technically presented as unresolved parenthetical statements, presents Agee’s reflections on the process of creating the documentary: “problems of recording; which, too, are an organic part of the experience as a whole” (215). Each section ‘occurs’ on the eponymous porch at night. Section one details the end of the day and the tenant family’s descent into sleep. Section two focuses more on Agee’s own subjective experience. Lastly, section three concludes the text and moves Agee and Evans, themselves, toward sleep. While these sections appear to come from a continuous moment of reflection, they are divided across the text. Moreover, the apparent narrative position in time of each section further suggests the fragmentation of singular experience. Section two, located two hundred pages after section one, begins as the first section concludes, with the phrase: “We lay on the front porch” (19, 198). It is in these passages that Agee most fully entertains his own consciousness within the text, reflecting on “consciousness alone, in the end, that we have to thank for joy” and the “illusion of personal wholeness or integrity” (200). Section two includes Agee’s apparent plans or speculations for the text: “I will be trying to write...I shall digress...” (213). Indeed, section three, and the book itself, concludes with Agee’s shift away from introspective reflection toward the task of creating the document he “shall now try to give [the reader].” Because these moments are likely a single narrative sequence that has been separated across the text, the reader’s task of assembling them and recognizing their temporal and spatial location, together, as the moment in which Agee and Evans approach sleep “On the Porch” suggests the primacy of Agee’s reflections on creating the documentary project as compared to a focus on the documentary material itself. Concluding the text with this moment (or collection of moments) of reflection challenges the text’s initial claim to objectivity at the start of the book via Evans’s photographs.

position through “co-operation” with Agee’s text, the reader becomes mutual “shapener” and author. In light of the reader’s involvement in the text, Agee desires that the reader’s experience of the book mirrors a “performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony...as loud as you can get it...If it hurts you, be glad of it” (13). He argues that this experience of pain enables one to move “inside the music” and one’s body to gain “the shape and substance of the music” (13). Thus, Agee’s experimental design attempts to enact and transfer the material of the book directly to the reader, such that the reader, like Agee, may “live inside the subject” (VII).

In order to protect the reader’s consciousness against detrimental effects of his text -- while activating, modifying, and reforming consciousness like any good artist, which is to say any “deadly enemy of society,” -- Agee de-centralizes his own authority as the writer/documentarian (314). This de-centralization of authorial authority establishes narrative space for the reader to more actively involve himself or herself in the reading process, an effect of Agee’s desire for “human co-operation” with the text. In “Part One,” Agee’s narrative voice disappears while recording tenant speech. Two narrative voices then appear to struggle for control, one in normal prose, mixing in tenant dialect speech, perhaps that of a tenant, and the other voice, claiming “*it* is young,” in a parenthetical statement, therefore suggesting a lack of stable perspective, even within the narrator/documentarian. Agee also uses humor to challenge his own narrative authority in order to accommodate the equal center of the reader, so that both may co-operate in Agee’s experiment in human actuality. His catalogue of snakes is a joke on himself and the realist mode. Of snakes, he notes: “Milk snakes hang around barns and suck the cows’ tits; hoop snakes take their tails in their mouths and run off like hoops; bull snakes

swell up and roar like a bull when they are cornered” (191). Agee makes fun of his mechanical cataloguing, as well as the entire concept of “Description...a word to suspect” (210). These facetious descriptions possibly suggest “the cleansing and rectification of language, the breakdown of the identification of word and object,” a breakdown which Agee identifies as “very important, and very possibly more important things will come of it...” (209). Such a breakdown between object and word, perhaps a product of his collaboration of word and image, would render Agee’s portion of the documentary project impossible. However, such a breakdown also allows for greater authorial intervention upon or readerly construction of meaning. In light of such a breakdown, modernism may then supplant realism’s “Description” with alternative modes of seeing, such as “imagination” or “incarnation.”

Although *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* presents certain challenges, Agee provides the method by which the text must be read: thus, he transfers the ethical problem of spying and assembling relative truth onto the reader. Moreover, Agee’s prescribed reading anticipates regional division, undercutting the Northeastern or middle-class reader’s potential assumptions of superiority. Like *Journey to a War*, Agee and Evans’s text, being a collaboration of text and images and having interest in non-documentary, alternative documentary, or documentary modernist methods, takes up the problem of representation – specifically the problem of representing, textually or otherwise, the nominal subject, the cotton tenant; the actual subject, unimagined existence; and the essential subject, human divinity. Declaring “the forms of the text...chiefly those of music, of motion pictures, of improvisations and recordings of states of emotion, and of belief,” Agee experiments with iterative “shadows of pattern” to structure his text and to

represent individuals and individuals in systems (215, 126). The “Preface” encourages “serious readers...to proceed to the book-proper after finishing the first section of the Preface. A later return will do no harm” (IX). Agee eschews narrative sequence in suggesting that readers advance prematurely and return later. Considering text in every connotation, Agee writes that “taking even a single center” is impossible because the humans and animals “live in an immediate and most elaborate texture of other forms of existence” (187). I believe that this “texture of other forms of existence” forms the essence of “human actuality”: for Agee, representations of the textual nature of existence must themselves be intertextual, and collaborative through interactions with Evans and the reader, to capture “the shape and beauty of his induplicable body” (236) or “the one annihilating chord [to] make a new beginning” (283).

Agee’s opening poem for Walker Evans brings into focus the relationships between authorship, espionage, and resistance, and it summarizes the general belligerence of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*:

Against time and the damages of the brain
Sharpen and calibrate. Not yet in full,
Yet in some arbitrated part
Order the façade of the listless summer.

Spies, moving delicately among the enemy,
The younger sons, the fools,
Set somewhat aside the dialects and the stained skins of feigned
madness,
Ambiguously signal, baffle, the eluded sentinel.

Edgar, weeping for pity, to the shelf of that sick bluff,
Bring your blind father, and describe a little;
Behold him, part wakened, fallen among field flowers shallow
But undisclosed, withdraw.

Not yet that naked hour when armed,
Disguise flung flat, squarely we challenge the fiend.

Still, comrade, the running of beasts and the ruining heaven
Still captive the old wild king. (4)

Confirming their roles as spies among the enemy, Agee and Evans delude the sentinel in order to “describe a little,” suggesting an imperfect ability to represent. Although this poem retreats from the revolutionary moment, “that naked hour when armed, / disguise flung flat, squarely we challenge the fiend,” Agee’s activity as a union agitator and organizer, tactically withheld until the conclusion of the volume, suggests his commitment to action against the possible “fiend” of class exploitation. Agee ultimately emphasizes action – not *his* actions, but the actions that “the tenant farmer could do to help himself out of the hole he is in.” By this same pattern, Agee’s fragmentary text requires the reader to actively assume the position of spy, by watching, constructing narrative, and feeling shame. Thus, James Agee accepts and transfers the shame he inscribes onto the writer as spy, asking of us: “[in] this human sphere...all one such interlocked and marvelously variegated and prehensile a disease and madness, what man in ten million shall dare to presume he is cleansed of it or more so than another?” (95).

It is the task of the reader, as a spy by proxy, the spy that watches Agee and Evans, to assemble the patterns and threads into a coherent text. Agee, “in only a few words,” merely suggests “what is textured within any one of these silent and simple-appearing horizons: wasps...spiders...frogs...the hens...the rats...sleep...dinner...spring...lamp of consciousness... room,...and above it a grizzling literal darkness of flies” (193). Each of these terms pervades the text as leitmotif, combining as textual harmony in the reader’s consciousness. The reader’s ability to combine these scattered threads – or clues – parallels the spy’s ability to navigate and fabricate narrative. Ultimately, this highly fragmentary mode – at times “fantast” and

surrealistic, and always experimental – creates an inherently subjective documentary that reduces the author’s authority in place of the reader’s own. The first movement of “Part One” concludes in such a textually-constructed scene. Spending the night with the Gudger family, Agee records a repeating and looping chorus:

a silence, and a slow and constrained twisting on springs and extension of a body, and silence; and a long silence in the darkness of the peopled room that is chambered in the darkness of the continent before the unwatching stars; and Louise says, Good night Immer, and Emma says, Good night Louise; and Louise says, Good night mamma; and Annie Mae says, Good night Louise; and Louise says, Good night daddy; and George says, Good night Louise; good night George; night, Immer; night, Annie Mae; night, George; night, Immer; night, Annie Mae; night, Louise; night; good night, good night: (65)

As night approaches, returning Agee, Evans, and us back to sleep, the initial and terminal state of the volume, Agee’s stentorian voice vanishes in woven patterns of speech, leaving only the tenants, their words, and the intruding, voyeuristic reader.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In considering the advent of the twentieth-century professional intellectual, Bruce Robbins offers “the spy (or professional)...[as] the figure, who, continuing to respond to solidarities that have grown distant or invisible, continues to invest work with public, political meaning, to hold public and private together” (*Secular Vocations* 140). Likewise locating a relationship between the intellectual writer and the spy, Rabinowitz calls “the spy...a (wo)man of leisure, whose work is always disguised as something else, crossing borders between legitimacy and illegitimate behavior...[a] fitting emblem for the intellectual and most spectacularly for the documentarian...[because] s/he calls forth suspicions that what you see is not what you get” (75). Such categorizations necessarily focus on *public* actions of the intellectual and, therefore, stress an engagement with documentary modes. Recalling Miller’s position that documentary modes and modernist modes “converge” with and “complement” each other, however, I argue that the spy and other related espionage metaphors emphasize specifically modernist modifications of documentary, by virtue of the spy’s association with subjectivity, through narrative manipulation, and emphasis on the power of the observer. Furthermore, the spy offers a complex association with the concept of nation, as well as the potential threat to national identity created by immersion in another nation or culture. Thus, while Rabinowitz is correct to note that Agee performs a “balancing act as a public intellectual, between [the] people’s self-effacing spokesmen, lone visionary truth-teller, and writer for the popular Luce empire,” I believe the spy underlines the private, subjective, and interior experience

of the public intellectual as they attempt to perform socially oriented writing (75). In this way, the figure of the spy provides a key to understanding “modernist documentary,” insofar as modernist documentary, although oriented toward the public, develops from the documentarian’s recognition of his or her private subjectivity and the power of his or her vision. Ultimately, these texts document the subjective experience of the documentarian’s engagement with his or her subject, as a means to documenting the subject itself. The foregrounding of subjectivity in both texts ultimately challenges and changes the perception, representation, and even nature of truth and reality.

Such recognition of subjectivity’s implicit presence in all documentary, coupled with the power dynamic of the observer’s gaze over the subject, manifests itself in the metaphor of the writer as spy in both *Journey to a War* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Alongside espionage, both texts share a marked sense of shame. For both texts, this shame comes largely as a reaction to the voyeurism and intrusion concomitant with documentation. In *Journey to a War*, it is understood further as a function of national identity. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, alternatively, locates guilt in class exploitation and attempts to enact and transfer this shame to the reader. In order to process and represent these disparate, but related, senses of shame, each author, drawing from the stance of the spy, revises realist documentary projects. Isherwood’s variation between impressionistic and realist text, Auden’s diminished sonnets and verse commentary juxtaposed with photographs, Agee’s fragmented, symphonic form, and Evans’s photographs, ostensibly objective but always framed, are all informed by the authors’ respective identifications with the spy’s position as a subjective watcher who is charged with identifying and producing truth.

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