Ethnography and the novel: persuasion, proclivity, register

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COUNTER-THEOLOGY

> 'To take the ethnographic route is to step off a narrow path in which alternatives to our own phrasings of reality are simply meaningless or merely poetic.' (Gay y Blasco & Wardle 2007: 197)

The final sentence of *How to Read Ethnography* compels the reader to accept a mandate. Either, you walk the 'ethnographic route' or you take the narrow path of meaninglessness or waxy poeticism. Ethnography, the authors argue, 'transforms everyday relations into social relations,' where in order to get 'as close as possible to the way in which the people concerned themselves live it,' we must build upon ethnographic knowledge that is 'established through the creation of levels of analysis which are the product of these processes of filtering and organizing' (2007: 70). By using 'ethnographic concepts' (108), we approach 'ethnographic concerns' (3) through 'ethnographic writing' (19) to achieve 'ethnographic knowledge' (70). This knowledge is 'the heart of ethnographic enterprise' (64), and it is by learning this knowledge encoded in 'concerns and techniques [that] play out in specific texts that you will learn how to read ethnography' (2).

Indeed, if that were all that ethnography consisted of, there would be little debate as to what ethnography was in the first place (see, of course, Clifford & Marcus 1986). The gravitational centrality of ethnography gleaned from this definition, with its lowest common denominator of ethnographic knowledge, is dangerous to assume, as it immediately reduces any and all ethnographic texts to a single line of theological meaning: 'the "message" of the Author-God' (Barthes 1977: 146). This operation imposes 'a stop clause' which, seals the texts with a 'final signification, to close the writing' (Barthes 1977: 147). In doing so, the authors' intentions are 'found out,'

whereby 'the text is 'explained;' the critic has conquered' (147). This act of subjugation is how any foundationalist, universalised definition of ethnography – like the one presented here – functions.

Without the author, every text dissolves into a plurality of meanings, situated in conflicting dimensions and supported neither by stable deductive support nor primordial building blocks. As Barthes argues,

> In a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, "threaded" (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated […] (1977: 147)

Like a stocking that has run, the text can be travelled, but not represented – not signified with final meaning. As Tyler has argued, 'the whole point of "evoking" rather than "representing" is that it frees ethnography from *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric' (1986: 136). This rhetoric entails exactly the kind of 'underlying' typologies present in *How to Read Ethnography*: 'facts,' (191), 'knowledge' (70), 'evidence' (105), 'material' (69), 'currency' (105), and (worst of all), 'ethnography as true knowledge' (195). These and all similar concepts, 'except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies' (Tyler 1986: 136).

Thus, in a move that is 'counter-theological' (Barthes 1977: 147) I here abandon debate of classifying signs (this is 'ethnography') and signifying classes (ethnography is 'x, y, z') – nostalgic of Sisyphean incessancy – to ask a much more valuable (and feasible) question: '*how do we read ethnography?*' '[T]o refute God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law' (Barthes 1977: 147), I ask this to place the burden of proof not upon some final signification, but upon the experience of the reader. The reader, always already taking-in text, is the source of integration; she is 'the very space in which are

inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of, the unity of a text is not its origin, it is in its destination' (Barthes 1977: 6).

ETHNOGRAPHY AS PROCLIVITY

To answer how we read ethnography, we need to understand our expectations of ethnography as readers and, more importantly, we need to understand what informs those expectations in the first place. For the reader, it is merely our convictions that set up those expectations (not 'facts' or 'truths;' merely belief): convictions driven by the persuasive power of a textual object. Ethnography seems peculiar in this regard, as Geertz reminds us that

> so much of it consists in incorrigible assertion. The highly situated nature of ethnographic description – this ethnographer, in this time, in this place, with these informants, these commitments, and these experiences, a representative of a particular culture, a member of a certain class – gives to the bulk of what is said a rather take-it-or-leave-it quality. (1988: 5)

I don't know anything about the Nuer. I've never seen a Nuer, I've never been to South Sudan or western Ethiopia, and even if I go to these places, I will probably never see a Nuer. But what makes me (indeed, any reader who hasn't been in the author's shoes) believe Evans-Pritchards' account of them in *The Nuer*? It surely isn't fact. There's nothing I can point to in the text and say, 'that is true' or 'that is false.' I have neither the empirical information to prove 'true' his observations nor the deductive capabilities to confirm his trails of argument. Thus I again ask – '*how do we read this*?' What textual strategies present in ethnographic texts make us believe that what we are reading is ethnography? The answer lies in the rhetoric used.

As readers, all we have to go on is rhetoric. We read ethnography not as a set of facts, or truths, or theological meanings, as there is no basis for these 'empty

invocations' (Tyler 1986: 136). We read, and contend we are reading, ethnography based solely on the persuasiveness of a certain kind of textual organisation: 'ethnography' is a proclivity – an inclination – toward a specific type of textual organisation informed by 'rhetorical accomplishment' (Geertz 1988: 26). I contend that this specific textual organisation is based upon the combination and juxtaposition of different authorial registers within a text that persuades the reader to believe that what they are reading is, indeed, ethnography. This is because multiple authorial registers construct a mutually supporting textual interface of conflicting voices that produces a convincingness of 'this is ethnography' for the reader, on account of the all-too-human experience of fieldwork and write-up that are incapable of being reduced to one vocal register.

Geertz continues that, '"Being There" authorially, palpably on the page, is in any case as difficult a trick to bring off as "being there" personally' (1988: 24). The exacting requirements of reproducing so many dimensions of one's "being there" personally, from the friendships, fears, joys, triumphs, and disappointments of the field, to the smell of food cooking, palpable condensation in the air, sounds of a friend singing, and the prick-prack of rain falling on a tin roof; even feelings of one's 'willingness to endure a certain amount of loneliness, invasion of privacy, and physical discomfort' or one's 'relaxed way with odd growths and unexplained fevers' (1988: 24) – not to mention the scribbles, notes, recordings, transcriptions, videos, word documents, spell-checks, emailed drafts, edits, and frustrations of losing data – all in total require the 'Olympianism of the unauthorial physicist and the sovereign consciousness of the hyperauthorial novelist' (1988: 10).

These epic proportions of coding all aspects of one's life-experience into text demand a certain complex type of textual organisation. It demands a certain kind of rhetorical alacrity and compositional gusto to achieve just this type: one of multivocal competition and conflict, as different registers of voice convey different types of information, with different intentions and contradictory means of conveyance.

AUTHOR-FUNCTION

These tactics move the reader to take a book's-worth of 'incorrigible assertion' (Geertz 1988: 5) as believable. But why? In the process of reading, we become disoriented by competing authorial registers, and we force ourselves to tune to the frequency of one, united voice. This is the voice of 'the author,' here asserting 'a classificatory function' that 'permits one to group together a certain number of texts' (in this case a certain number of registers within a text) in a way that 'serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse' (Foucault 1991: 107). In reading, we collapse Barthes' 'multiple writing' to a coherent singularity (1977: 147). We 'hear' the voice of 'Evans-Pritchard.' The author-function operates here, Foucault argues, as 'the principle of a certain unity of writing […] a point where contradictions are resolved' (1991: 111). By resolving the logically inconclusive, we, as readers, exercise the author-function to make imaginative leaps around the different authorial registers, which reifies the notion that the text is really 'something of a fiction' (Geertz, in Olson 1991).

THESIS

With fiction in mind, I again rephrase the question of analysis, from '*how do we read ethnography?*' to '*how do we read the novel?*' In doing so, we find that we *read* the novel the same way we *read* ethnography. We find the stuff of all works of fiction is the same stuff of all works of ethnography: bundles of 'incorrigible assertion' (Geertz 1988: 5) spun from several different authorial registers, all wound tightly back to the author-function where 'incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction' (Foucault 1991: 111) – all coordinated by the reader in the temporality of reading.

Thus, in the act of reading, *ethnography* and *the novel* are both proclivities towards a specific type of textual organisation that is achieved through 'rhetorical accomplishment.' In this sense, the novel is ethnography because it can be read as ethnography, and vice-versa: each composed of authorial registers writing only

assertions; each compelling the reader to weave both registers and assertions into the voice of one author.

REGISTERS

Below I demonstrate this theory of persuasion through analysing strategic deployment of these registers in one ethnography: Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, and one novel: Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. Each of these texts engages with four similar distinct registers, which fit to Geertz's thematic analysis of *Tristes Tropiques* (1988: 35-39) that I reproduce here:

(a). Travel Book

(b). Ethnography

(c). Philosophical Treatise

(d). Reformist Critique

(a). TRAVEL BOOK

i. ADVENTURE

The first register conveys a thrilling sense of 'the adventure' with temporality established from the outset.

> But, on that evening of the Franco-American dinner, neither my colleagues nor I … had any idea of the role which we were to play, however involuntarily, in the evolution of Brazilian society. […] George Dumas had just warned us that we must be prepared to lead the same life as our new masters: the life, that is to say, of Automobile Club, casino, and race-course. […] 'Above all,' Dumas had said, 'you *must* be well dressed.' (Lévi-Strauss 21-22)

> Listen:
> When I was a younger man – two wives ago, 250,000 cigarettes ago, 3,000 quarts of booze ago…
> When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book called *The Day the World Ended*.
> The book was to be factual. […]
> It was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then.
> I am a Bokonist now.
> (Vonnegut 1-2)

We are enveloped with reminiscence that, from the beginning of each text, incites us to prepare for the scale of the journey ahead. Lévi-Strauss teases us with the sheer gravity of his role to play in Brazilian society, and we are taunted by Dumas's promises of luxury and upper class lifestyle. Jonah (the first-person narrator of Vonnegut) takes a sardonic approach, using abrasive material means to measure his journey. Instead of taunting, he grabs us with the command to listen, and with his quick move from Christian to Bokonist, we are led on wanting to know what events prompt this dramatic conversion.

These passages give away the register we're dealing with because of how the authors scale themselves temporally to look back on square one as wiser, worldlier, and changed men. We are made aware of the durational character of what is to come, and we are further made aware of the change to anticipate in the author himself. This author is not a static, objective, foreign observer. He will inhabit, travel, walk, drive, drink, smoke, marry, divorce, and dress sharply. The presence of the author is established as immediate and integral to dimensions of the text-to-come, as an ageing traveller.

ii. SUBJUGATION

Further, this register expresses the feeling of subjugation that each author has, pitted against myriad forces of his travels.

> In Fort de France I had been treated as a Jew and a Freemason in the pay of the Americans. Here, in Porto Rico, I was taken for an emissary of Vichy – if not, indeed, of the Germans. […] the F.B.I. was asked to send a French-speaking specialist to examine my papers. (I trembled to think how long it would take to find a specialist who could decipher my notes, since these mostly related to the almost entirely unknown dialects of central Brazil. (Lévi-Strauss 36)

> In the customs shed at Monzano Airport, we were all required to submit to a luggage inspection, and to convert what money we intended to spend in San Lorenzo into local currency, into *Corporals*, which "Papa" Monzano insisted were fifty American cents. The shed was neat and new, but plenty of signs had already been slapped on the walls higgledy-piggledy. ANYBODY CAUGHT PRACTICING BOKONISM IN SAN LORENZO, said one, WILL DIE ON THE HOOK! (Vonnegut 134)

The authors are momentarily helpless. Facing greater authority than themselves, they are subjected to detention and currency conversion. Threatened by foreign suspicion, both implicit and explicit, they are warned to mind local customs and local powers. Further, each is deeply entangled in a web of cross-border, trans-continental political-economic relationships. Lévi-Strauss is premised of being an enemy emissary, and Jonah is caught between currency rates, waiting to pass baggage check while contemplating death-by-hook in San Lorenzo's customs shed.

These selections call us to the awareness of the author as the subjective centre of a globe-spanning set of relationships. We are made intimately aware of their self-consciousness as characters present in a moving, shifting, migrating world economy where their well-being is fundamentally inconsequential. And in all of this, they are just as much frustrated and perplexed by myriad international interests, local laws and legal customs as we are in our own travels. This register establishes the personal immediacy of the authors, by accentuating their corporeality, ethnicity, nationality, and their ultimate (and inevitable) subjugation to forces beyond their control.

(b). ETHNOGRAPHY

i. RELIGION

> The lay-out of the [Bororo] village does not only allow full and delicate play to the institutional system; it summarizes and provides a basis for the relationship between Man and the Universe, between Society and the Supernatural, and between the living and the dead. […] A man is not, for them, an individual, but a person. He is part of a sociological universe: the village which exists for all eternity […] (Lévi-Strauss 216-218)

> [Jonah reciting *The Books of Bokonon*]
> In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness. And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." […] Man blinked. "What is the *purpose* of all this?" he asked politely. "Everything must have a purpose?" asked God. "Certainly," said man. "Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God. And He went away. (Vonnegut 265)

The second register considerably conflicts with the first. We are presented with the author's authoritative command of cultural concepts, related to religious beliefs.

These selections portray the authors actively claiming knowledge over religious beliefs. Each claims beliefs as something they command and exploit: beliefs in the Bororo village system and its corresponding sociological organisation for Lévi-Strauss, and beliefs in the creation of the world and the ramifications, as recounted through *The Books of Bokonon* by Jonah.

At the crossroads of Man and the Universe, these quotes move us away from the world-whisking adventures of explorers to provide a different register of stationary, objective, externalised, categorical knowledge. In the form of structural logic and formal organisational links for one, and in narrative and archival data for the other, they equally lay claim to knowing something about the people that they describe, and somehow representing their beliefs. This act of representation is a conventional ethnographic skill: to 'capture' knowledge (of structure, function, narrative) that is a kind of recitation. Reciting the dichotomies in Bororo village life, 'Man and the Universe,' 'Society and the Supernatural,' and 'the living and the dead,' and reciting the textual account of God's creation of the world – both authors read and recount the anthropological information before them. They are attuned to such knowledge in their command of traditional ethnographic data, but most importantly, the authors are both indefinitely consigned to a register of expressionless objectivism and external observation.

ii. RITUAL

These observations are further evidenced in the following passages, concerning ritual.

> But twice a day – at eleven-thirty in the morning and seven in the evening – there was a general assembly underneath the pergola which ran round their house. The ritual in question was that of the *chimarrao*: mate drunk through a tube. The mate is a tree of the same family as our ilex; and its foliage, lightly roasted over the smoke of an underground fire, is pounded into a course powder, the colour of reseda, which keeps for a long time in kegs. (Lévi-Strauss 147)

> "Gott mate mutt," crooned Dr. von Koenigswald.
> "Dyot meet mat," echoed "Papa" Monzano.
> "God made mud," was what they'd said, each in his own dialect. I will here abandon the dialects of the litany.
> "God got lonesome" said Von […]
> "God got lonesome."
> "So God said to some of the mud, 'Sit up!'"
> "So God said to some of the mud, 'Sit up!'" (Vonnegut 220)

These passages are claims to specific religious processes. The detailed itinerary of the mate ritual and the hypnotic rhetoric of Jonah's ritual experience, 'Dyot meet mat,' affix fluid activities to conceptual structures in attempts rationalise what is really going on.

This kind of representation, again, is exemplary of traditional ethnographic technique. But, these passages go farther by putting us in the action. These are not merely descriptions; they are narrative passages describing events that the author experienced (so we are led to believe). The use of specific times, specific preparation methodologies, specific colour and textural information for Lévi-Strauss and of direct dialects, repetition, verbal rhythm, and religious litany for Jonah place this authorial register in a position of external validity – a casting of judgment through assessment. Crucially, in order to do this, the authors are committed to the margins of their ritual environments: static and immobile in order to capture the 'essence' of each experience.

(c). PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISE

i. PROGRESS

The third authorial register present in both texts is, yet again, of a different constitution. Neither engaging the material worldliness of the author in the travel book, nor representing the activity of specific individuals, this register sits high with a flair of buoyant intellectualism.

> In the myth-minded age, Man was no more free than he is today; but it was his humanness alone which kept him enslaved. As he had only a very restricted role over Nature, he was protected, and to a certain degree emancipated, by the protective cushion of his dreams. As and when these dreams turned into knowledge, so did Man's power increase: they gave us, if I may so put it, the 'upper hand' over the universe, and we still take an immense pride in it. (Lévi-Strauss 390)

> "The people of San Lorenzo," the father [Castle] told me, "are interested in only three things: fishing, fornication, and Bokonism."
> "Don't you think they are interested in progress?"
> "They've seen some of it. There's only one aspect of progress that really excites them."
> "What's that?"
> "The electric guitar."
> (Vonnegut 234)

Here, philosophical discussions provide us a register that is pensive, concerned, distressed, but above all interested in problems and trends as applied to groups of people. These are not ethnographic remarks. They are intellectual problems, paradigmatic concerns, and they are treated with a bird's-eye-view approach.

Myth-minded age primitivism, development, evolution, progression, control of Society over Nature, and control of ruling class over peasantry – these ideas participate in a wider intellectual discussion that leaves the locality of ethnographic perusal. Involving theories of Weber (Traditionalism → Rationality), Spencer (Regimentation → Laissez-Faire), Comte (Religion → Science), Marx (Feudalism → Capitalism), and others, both of these authors engage with huge debates spanning hundreds of years with thousands upon thousands of voices. The audaciousness of both – Lévi-Strauss's shameless insistence upon the 'immense pride' of Man's mastery, and Jonah's assumption of progress as a good thing for peasantry – situates them above what they are talking about, with an assertive intellectualism that is detached, contemplative, and anchored in matters of mind. The ageing, dynamic author and the author of ethnographic recitation and observation are disregarded here for the armchair author.

(d). REFORMIST CRITIQUE

i. DISILLUSIONMENT

The last authorial register conveys a sense of pathos and integral human connection, whereby we can sympathise with the authors' passions and emotions.

> I visited Goiania in 1937. Among endless flatlands […] brand-new houses could be seen at the four corners of the horizon. The biggest of these was a hotel, a square box of cement, with the look of an air terminus or a miniature fort; one might have called it the 'bastion of civilization' in a literal, and, therefore, a strangely ironical sense. For nothing could be more barbarous, more essentially inhuman, than this way of grabbing at the desert. (Lévi-Strauss 129-130)

> We watched the Laboratory's receptionist turn on the many education exhibits that lined the foyer's walls. […] At her crisp touch, lights twinkled, wheels turned, flasks bubbled, bells rang. "Magic," declared Miss Pefko. "I'm sorry to hear a member of the Laboratory family using that brackish, medieval word," said Dr. Breed. "They're the very antithesis of magic." "You couldn't prove it to me." (Vonnegut 36)

Here, we encounter two very different selections, expressed for a very similar purpose: to evoke an all-too-human sense of disillusionment.

For Lévi-Strauss, this charged selection displays a lament of cultural cultivation. Goiania, a modernist enterprise summed up in 'a square box of cement,' with the humanity of an 'air terminus' and the compassion of a 'miniature fort,' is the opposite of the cultural richness that his work is about. Frustrated with this cookie-cutter modernisation, this bastardisation of human life, he cries out against this encroachment: 'Campers, camp in Parana! Or rather – don't keep your greasy papers, your empty beer-bottles, and your discarded tins for Europe's last-remaining sites' (133).

Vonnegut, on the other hand, deploys a twofold sense of disillusionment of science, by being subjected to a show of twinkling lights, moving gears, bubbling flasks, and ringing bells. First, to onlookers, these trinkets don't explain anything. Indeed, the audience becomes further mystified by the 'magic' of the performance. Second, to scientists, these trinkets cannot summarize the consequences of scientific activity. Instead of resolving confusions and providing concrete ways forward, the scene suggests that science is not a final answer. In a sympathetic register, upset with the disillusionment of both scientists and onlookers, Vonnegut reaches out to the reader to shake us out of knowing the world of science merely as merely 'magic' or toys. This register – not the worldly author, not the ethnographic author, not the strictly philosophical author – provides a reformist critique, which speaks not to itself, not to informants, not to intellectuals, but to *us* – readers – as human beings.

CONCLUSION

What do we have, then? We have the travel book, with an establishment of the author as immediate, personal, mobile, developing, characterised by ethnicity, citizenship, mortality, and obligatory subjugation. We have the ethnography, with a suddenly static, objectified external observer's claim to knowledge. We have the philosophical treatise, a movement from action to armchair, where the author takes a

bird's-eye-view away from the temporality, away from the field, and away from his subjectivity. Finally, we have the reformist critique, with the use of pathos to express an authorial passion through reflection on the human consequences of actions, making philosophy personal and re-establishing the author as a subjective being, preoccupied by bookish concerns.

These four registers are undoubtedly contradictory, competing, and irresolvable. The difficulties of relating life to text in the composition of both ethnography and the novel, are expressed in this writing strategy of multiple authorial registers. It is through the multi-dimensionality of what is presented that we, as readers, convey agency to an author-function to 'voice' these registers from one holistic position: a figure at once in command yet subjugated to forces beyond control; a figure at once totally subjective and completely uninvolved; a figure at once of cool recitation and fevered contestation.

Coordinated by the reader, these elements sync and we find that both ethnography and the novel are proclivities towards this type of textual organisation. We read ethnography and the novel in the same way, and they are strategised, likewise, in the same way. It is in this manner that neither is furnished with a 'stop clause,' and neither is ever sealed with final meaning. Because the coordination of registers, and the invention of the author-function come from the very physical act of reading over a text, readers will indefinitely maintain these texts in a state that is open and unreduced. A disposition that is, truly, counter-theological.

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