THE SCIENTIST, THE QUESTER, AND THE WRITER : TRISTES TROPIQUES AND LEVI-STRAUSS

Lévi-Strauss has spoken of a 'Copernican revolution' in the field, and whatever else this may entail, it surely describes our feeling of weightlessness in the face of our subject societies; as in the cosmos of the new astronomers, our own place has been set adrift. Within an older, geocentric conception of anthropology, the anthropologist himself occupied the Archimedian point on which to fix the analysis of societies. The scientific rationality of his society had emancipated him from the conditions of the social; his very discipline signified a transcendence of the objects of his discipline. The objectivity of his language enabled him to become the ground upon which all other social languages could be charted. His own utterances were transparent; they supplied nothing. The understanding of alien cultures, therefore, presumed a total self-understanding.

The 'Copernican revolution' changed all this by 'rationalizing' the culturescape. The anthropologist has lost his privileged sense of being able to ground in his own code all the categories of the social; now he merely stands upon that ground like everyone else; he is of the same magnitude as his subject societies. These societies have made themselves felt as resistant to being subsumed by his rationality. To understand them, he must find them first, in a place distant from his own. Being merely a part of the landscape, he must travel across it, leaving his own locale behind. This is what we mean by mapping out intelligible relations between us and them. But if subject societies are opaque to us as anthropologists, we are opaque to ourselves as well. Having only a relative vantage-point on alien societies, a particular locale, we can understand where they are in the landscape only by understanding where we are, distinct from them. We cannot presume an immediate self-understanding, such as positivism takes for granted, since the one thing a perspective does not supply is a view of itself. What then is our project? What is our place in the larger society from which we seem interested in disengaging ourselves? What sort of disengagement is possible? To ask such questions is not to make anthropology effete or self-contained; it is to turn it out upon its subject in the only possible way, to let it finally get on with the job: the job of making sense of boundaries, and of crossing them. Fieldwork, like charity, begins at home.

I use here Lévi-Strauss' Tristes Tropiques (1973) as one of the few texts which raises the issue of what constitutes the figure of the anthropologist, and raises it in particularly rich and complex ways. For Lévi-Strauss presents us with two competing images of himself as anthropologist. One, the figure we meet in The Savage Mind, the Mythologiques, and Structural Anthropology, is the anthropologist as structural scientist and decultured man. The other, implicit in the narrative stance of the fieldwork memoir, is the anthropologist as quest-hero. It will be clear to anyone who knows Lévi-Strauss' work that he has chosen the scientist over the quester as the model for his vocation; Tristes Tropiques sketches out for us the moments and motives of that choice. But if we pay attention to the way this duel plays itself out, we will see the figure of the scientist - and the structural anthropology he espouses - not as a response to the problems of being an anthropologist such as are raised in the memoir, but rather as an evasion of them.

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Lévi-Strauss' intellectual project is a Kantian one. He seeks to elucidate the fundamental structures of the human mind. These, he claims, must ground the range of social forms: 'In allowing myself to be guided by the search for the constraining structures of the mind', he writes in the Overture to The Raw and the Cooked, 'I am proceeding in the manner of Kantian philosophy, although along different lines leading to different conclusions' (1969 : 10). By 'different lines' he means that, while Kant was interested in the way these structures of mind constitute a transcendental subject, Lévi-Strauss seeks structures which are unbound by subjectivity, which are manifest only socially, in the 'forms of objectified thought'. This 'Kantianism without a transcendental subject' leads to a method not of philosophical introspection, but of investigation into external consensual forms - a Kantian science. The anthropologist seeks to formulate laws about outward, social phenomena which mediate between the diversity of societies themselves and any 'constraining structure of the mind' (see, in general, Lévi-Strauss, 1969 : 1 - 14).

The figure of the scientist is central to Lévi-Strauss' self-presentation in Tristes Tropiques. He begins the famous analysis of Caduveo face-painting:

> The customs of a community, taken as a whole, always have a particular style and are reducible to systems. I am of the opinion that the number of such systems is not unlimited and that ... human societies ... never create absolutely, but merely choose certain combinations from an ideal repertoire that it should be possible to define. By making an inventory of all recorded customs, ... one could arrive at a sort of table, like that of the chemical elements, in which all actual or hypothetical customs would be grouped in families ... (1973 : 178).

What does it say about being an anthropologist that he would make such a periodic table his project? First of all, he claims to be free of the terms in which each particular society presents itself to him, for he claims a way of generalizing beneath those terms. The possibility of his arriving at an 'ideal repertoire' means that his language of analysis can subsume all other social forms under his own code; societies as they are given have no autonomy. The anthropologist's goal is to reduce the diversity of visible phenomena into a unified domain of constituent elements - a trans-social domain accessible only through his particular structuralist language.

The difficulty here is not so much with the idea of a deep structure itself as with the issue of how the anthropologist gains access to it. As a scientist of the 'ideal repertoire', he must be able to jump levels, as it were, from ordinary social discourse to a deep analytical discourse which grounds the terms of the social as given. He must be able to describe his 'periodic table' at this deep level, since his everyday location in discourse will itself be contained by the table. Thus his mind must already contain individually the 'constraining structure' whose objectified forms he is investigating. His access to the 'ideal repertoire' depends on an isomorphism between his mind and society:

> Knowledge ... consists ... in selecting true aspects, that is, those coinciding with the properties of my thought. Not, as the Neo-Kantians claimed, because my thought exercises an inevitable influence over things, but because it is itself an object. Being 'of this world', it partakes of the same nature as the world (1973 : 56).

The anthropologist jumps levels of discourse by jumping levels within himself; he confirms the generalizations of his science by recourse to a deep interiority. The way down into the categories of thought is the way out into social categories. The anthropologist's personal movement is not horizontal then, movement across the landscape towards strangeness, but vertical, the geological delving into the substrata of the landscape itself: 'Exploration is not so much a covering of surface distance', Lévi-Strauss writes in Tristes Tropiques, 'as a study in depth' (1973 : 47-8).

Such a 'vertical' project requires the anthropologist to extricate himself from any particular locale in the landscape itself; he must free himself of commitments to any single community, since his vocation is to reduce all communities to a common ground:

> While remaining human himself, the anthropologist tries to study and judge mankind from a point of view sufficiently lofty and remote to allow him to disregard the particular circumstances of a given society or civilisation. The conditions in which he lives and works cut him off from his group for long periods; through being exposed to such complete and sudden changes of environment, he acquires a kind of chronic rootlessness; eventually, he comes to feel at home nowhere ... (1973 : 55).

It is central to Tristes Tropiques that these hardships of the task are also its great strengths. Lévi-Strauss constitutes the anthropologist as a figure utterly dégagé, a decultured man. His deracination is a liberation:

> In proposing the study of mankind, anthropology frees me from doubt, since it examines those differences and changes in mankind which have a meaning for all men, and excludes those peculiar to a single civilisation, which dissolve into nothingness under the gaze of the outside observer (ibid : 58).

'Anthropology frees me from doubt': nowhere are Lévi-Strauss' scientistic ambitions made clearer. Being free of Cartesian doubt, the anthropologist is free as well of Cartesian subjectivity. He becomes a new kind of man, an 'outside observer' pretending to an infinite extensiveness liberated from perspective. He exchanges the humanity of belonging to the group for the humanity of seeing what it is to belong to the group, and so he conceives anthropology not as the relating of us and them, but as the identification of us and them. This disengagement is exactly what is meant by the anthropologist's 'recourse to interiority': his study in depth is a leap into solitude. In identifying us and them, Lévi-Strauss permits the anthropologist to inhabit at once the locale of his ordinary social discourse and the deep structure of fundamental categories which he presumes to embody. As Lévi-Strauss says about myths, the anthropologist is both langue and parole, both the ground and the grounded.

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This figure of the decultured scientist is the protagonist of Tristes Tropiques. He is also the figure that we meet elsewhere in Lévi-Strauss' work, as in his injunction in The Savage Mind 'to study men as if they were ants, ... not to constitute, but to dissolve man' (1966 : 246-7). But when we read the memoir attentively, we notice a second figure l king near the scientist, a rival anthropologist. Far from celebrating his outsider's autonomy and solitude, this anthropologist writes in the final pages of Tristes Tropiques:

> The self is not only hateful: there is no place for it between us and nothing. And if, in the last resort, I opt for us, even though it is no more than a semblance, the reason is that ... I have only one possible choice between this semblance and nothing. I have only to choose for the choice itself to signify my unreserved acceptance of the human condition (1973 : 414).

This putting-on of the conditions of us is totally removed from the liberating disengagement where 'anthropology frees me from doubt'. On the contrary, the second figure presents himself as committed to a particular locale, a perspective around which the world extends indefinitely:

> I have a duty to men, just as I have a duty to knowledge. History, politics, the economic and social world, the physical world and even the sky surround me with concentric circles, from which I cannot escape in thought without ceding a fragment of my person to each one of them. Like a pebble striking water and making rings on the surface as it cuts through, in order to reach the bottom I too must take the plunge (ibid : 413).

According to this anthropologist, the abstraction into an 'ideal repertoire' of one's real encounters in social life will bring disintegration of the person. Far from a 'point of view sufficiently lofty and remote', he falls into his particular situation and accepts the concentricities that surround him. Rather than treating men as if they were ants, Lévi-Strauss ends his book by identifying himself in worship at a Buddhist kyong.

If the scientist is the hero of Tristes Tropiques, this other figure is its narrator; and we learn what anthropology is for him not so much in the tale told as in the manner of its telling. For Tristes Tropiques is told as a quest, that is, as a movement from a homeworld across boundaries to an otherworld of strangeness. This movement is not vertical but horizontal, not a delving into the landscape but a journey across it. Access to deep structure is not so much at issue as access to them in the first place. Indeed, despite the Archimedian pretensions of the scientist to view society as an abstracted whole, Tristes Tropiques concerns nothing if not the difficulties of relating us and them in the most particular ways. Lévi-Strauss symbolizes these problems in the ongoing encounter between Old World and New World; thus he ruminates as he crosses the South Atlantic:

> The inky sky of the Doldrums and the oppressive atmosphere ... epitomize the moral climate in which the two worlds have come face to face. This cheerless sea between them, and the calmness of the weather whose only purpose seems to be to allow evil forces to gather fresh strength, are the last mystical barrier between two regions so diametrically opposed to each other through their different conditions that the first people to become aware of the fact could not believe that they were both equally human (1973 : 330).

In this hostility between worlds, where can we find 'those differences and changes which have a meaning for all men'? Unlike the easy, wandering analyses of the Mythologiques and The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Tristes Tropiques is full of borders and difficult crossings, which is why its interminable descriptions of trekking and transportation are so central to the narrative stance.

Nor does the narrator claim to have extricated himself from the limitations imposed by the mystical barrier between Old World and New. Just as he is held down by the jungle and the marshland he slogs through, he is rooted in a particular corner of the cultural landscape. Unlike the lofty figure who is freed from doubt, this second man remains unextended and local; he cannot claim privileged access to the ideal repertoire of social customs. At the climax of his expeditions, coming on an utterly unstudied, undiscovered Indian people, he writes:

> I had wanted to reach the extreme limits of the savage; it might be thought that my wish had been granted, now that I found myself among these charming Indians whom no other white man had seen before ... Alas! they were only too savage ... There they were, all ready to teach me their customs and beliefs, and I did not know their language. They were as close to me as a reflection in a mirror; I could touch them, but I could not understand them. I had been given, at one and the same time, my reward and my punishment (1973 : 332-3).

The Kantian science must fail here: there is no truly generalizing language, no easy isomorphism between mind and social structure.

This second figure refuses to admit the possibility of deculturing himself. Where the scientist seeks to disengage himself from any ground, any local language, the other anthropologist disengages himself from his own locale only to re-engage himself in another. The conditions of locality itself, of inhabiting a perspective, never change. Where the scientist seeks generalizations, the second figure, who is the anthropologist as quest-hero, seeks particularities, since strangeness only resides in the particular. As opposed to the 'outside observer', but like the narrator of Tristes Tropiques, the figure of the quest-hero is always on the way. The scientist attempts to assimilate us and them; the questor tries to go the distance between.

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As the model for his vocation, Lévi-Strauss raises up the questor only to dismiss him: 'Adventure has no place in the anthropologist's profession', - he writes on the first page of the memoir, 'it is merely one of those unavoidable drawbacks, which detract from his effective work ... The fact that so much effort and expenditure has to be wasted

on reaching the object of our studies bestows no value on that aspect of our profession, and should be seen rather as its negative side' (1973 : 17). This contempt for the value of strangeness and of crossing distances is a far cry from the narrator who relishes telling the hardships of travel, who confesses 'I wanted to reach the extreme limits of the savage'. Why the rejection of the quest-project?

Because the quest is one that must fail, Levi-Strauss is hard on the allure of anthropology as quest:

> Is mine the only voice that bears witness to the impossibility of escapism? Like the Indian in the myth, I went as far as the earth allows one to go, and when I arrived at the world's end, I questioned the people, the creatures and things I found there and met with the same disappointment: He stood still, weeping bitterly, praying and moaning. And yet no mysterious sound reached his ears, nor was he put to sleep in order to be transported, as he slept, to the temple of the magic animals. For him there could no longer be the slightest doubt: no power, from anyone, had been granted him ... (1973 : 41-2).

To conceive of anthropology as a quest is misguided for two reasons. First, to the extent that the subject society remains separate from the Old World (which is what makes it a fit quest-object), the fieldworker cannot understand it; this is what occurs with those Indians mentioned above. Conversely, if the anthropologist claims to understand such people, he can only have assimilated their customs to a pre-existing code; he has not learned from them, only domesticated their New World into the terms of his Old:

> I reject the vast landscape, I circumscribe it ... : there is nothing to prove that my eye, if it broadened its view of the scene, would not recognise the Bois de Meudon around this insignificant fragment, which is trodden daily by the most authentic savages but from which, however, Man Friday's footprint is missing (ibid : 334-5).

Against the crisis of such insufficiencies, Levi-Strauss offers the rival image of the scientist. The scientist is freed of the task of understanding alien societies in their strangeness, their particularity; indeed his whole purpose is to reduce social life out of its given terms to that 'ideal repertoire' of universally valid elements. A respect for locality gives way to the desire for totality:

> The study of these savages leads to something other than the revelation of a Utopian state of nature or the discovery of the perfect society in the depths of the forest; it helps us to build a theoretical model of human society, which does not correspond to any observable reality ... (ibid : 392).

At the same time, claims Levi-Strauss, this reduction will not be mere ethnocentrism, the domestication of the New World by the Old. The terms of scientific discourse will be free of any single locale, because they will reach that level where ordinary local discourse is grounded. The anthropologist reconstitutes the fragments of societies as given into terms which will be knowable to all men, while belonging to none in particular: '... after demolishing all forms of social organization, we

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can ... discover the principles which will allow us to construct a new form' (ibid : 390). To put it in Lévi-Strauss' own vocabulary, the anthropologist escapes the contradictions of being a quester by becoming a bricoleur, a scientist of the concrete: he reveals the principles of social life by demolishing and revising it.

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This is an elegant formula. Unhappily it does not solve the problem. For the problems raised by the failure of the quest-idea are not really answered in the figure of the scientist. If the old World's domestication of the New were imply epistemological, simply a failure of imagination, then the scientist might be sufficient; his reconstitution of the alien world through its fragments might supply the conditions for understanding. But Lévi-Strauss makes clear that the anthropologist's projection of his own locale into his subject's is not innocent, is more active than just a failure of imagination. Even when he carries the Old World with him in the most trivial ways, as when he hums over and over a Chopin melody while marching through the bush, a darker and more potent intrusion is implicit ; for his problem as a quester is not that so much remains inaccessible to him, but that so much has already been destroyed. Lévi-Strauss litters his memoir with stories of pathetic and perverse sorts of ethnocentrism and exploitation - on the part of adventurers, missionaries, cowboys, bureaucrats, and even anthropologists. In questing to leave his own world behind and to encounter social life in its strangeness, the ethnographer is only another contaminator, a cultural analogue to the seventeenth century traveller who remarked how free of disease the Tupi Indians were at the same time that he was helping to infect them. The whole idea of a quest into their world presupposes our having undermined it already. Anthropology arises in a situation where its project of crossing borders is nostalgic and inauthentic. The boundaries have already been trespassed upon, and we find only second-hand versions of ourselves:

> Journeys, those magic caskets full of dream-like promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and over-excited civilization has broken the silence ... what else can the so-called escapism of travelling do than confront us with the more unfortunate aspects of our history? ... The first thing we see as we travel round the world is our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind (ibid : 37-8).

In the face of such problems, the figure of the scientist is not a sufficient response. Since the quest fails for particular historical reasons, as well as for general methodological ones, it is not only a new epistemological stance that is called for but also the anthropologist's acknowledgement of his personal place in the events that led to his crisis. And appropriately it is on these historical grounds, rather than epistemological ones, that Lévi-Strauss seems to make his most important defence against the failures of the quest-project:

> What has happened is that time has passed. Forgetfulness, by rolling any memories along in its tide, has done more than merely wear them down or consign them to oblivion. The profound structure it has created out of the fragments allows me to achieve a more stable equilibrium and to see a

> clearer pattern. One order has been replaced by another. Between these two cliffs, which preserve the distance between my gaze and its object, time, the destroyer, has begun to pile up rubble ... Events without apparent connection, and originating from incongruous periods and places, slide one over the other and suddenly crystallize into a sort of edifice which seems to have been conceived by an architect wiser than my personal history (ibid : 43-4).

Lévi-Strauss defends his project here in exactly the realm which had failed him, the realm of history. Here is an attempt to make 'time, the destroyer' of Indians into 'time, the provider' for anthropologists. Notice how the narrator shifts time's destruction from the New World to his own memories of it; what lies in fragments is not the culture of Brazilian Indians, but his ideas about them; and this shift allows him to build them up again. One order has indeed been replaced by another - not a new and whole social order for those who have been exploited, but a new conceptual order for the anthropologist. And it is the fact that the New World has been fragmented by the Old which gives the anthropologist the elbow-room to develop his own way of building the fragments up again.

As the idea of the passage intimates - an idiom of 'fragments', 'piling up rubble', and 'one order replacing another' - Lévi-Strauss defends his anthropologist from the accusations of history by constituting him as a bricoleur; for bricolage is exactly this process of transmuting time from a destroyer to a provider. In making this transmutation, however, Lévi-Strauss evades the very issue we require him to answer: the issue of particular historical responsibility. The idea of bricolage cannot resolve that issue, because it subsumes the particular instance of destruction under the general process of understanding; it subsumes the content of history under the method of science, a science of the concrete. But this is just what Tristes Tropiques has led us to judge indefensible. There is no necessary conceptual significance to the rubble of his Brazilian memories, only a necessary political significance. The passage is dishonest in asserting that 'a profound structure is being created out of the fragments', since the structure might only be a way of evading the acknowledgement that the fragments are one's own. When a world has disintegrated to the point of being unable to resist or falsify an observer's claims about it, it will not do to call that observer disengaged or scientific. What results is not so much fundamental structures as imaginative ones - not an isomorphism between mind and society, but an encounter between a particularly fertile mind and particular societies unable to answer back to it.

A good example in Tristes Tropiques of the errors of such a scientism is Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the Nambikwara political system and his claim to have illustrated through them an elementary structure of politics (ibid : 305-317). The Nambikwara live in small, loose-knit nomadic bands, each led by a chief. The chief has no hereditary power, and as families can leave the bands and join others whenever they want, Lévi-Strauss shrewdly points out how political authority and stability depends on consent and contract rather than on a traditional order made up of prescriptive relations. He takes this as an affirmation of the position of the Enlightenment philosophes, especially Rousseau, in their definition of political authority in terms of contractual association and consent.

Why should we take the Nambikwara bands to illustrate the elementary forms of the political life? It is much more likely that their instability, and consequent reliance on individual acts of consent, come from historical conditions which Lévi-Strauss has earlier spoken of: their population has been decimated by white-carried diseases over the previous century so that the bands are only a tiny fraction of their former size. It seems likely that the older bands would have had more stability and a more hierarchical distribution of authority. Whatever the case, Lévi-Strauss errs in attributing general significance to what might be better explained within a specific, historical context. Out of the fragments of Nambikwara life, the bricoleur builds up a personal myth about political origins and then attributes it to the world.

What is odious in such instances is not structuralism per se or the notion of depth analysis, but rather the claim to a structuralist science. When the anthropologist respects the idea of borders and grants social forms enough integrity to resist easy classification, then structural analysis is unobjectionable. I take Lévi-Strauss' analysis of Caduveo face-painting and Bororo social classes as good examples of this. To claim the capacity to universalize through depth analysis, however, is to presume the autonomy of each society to be no more than superficial; it begs the question of relating us and them by simply identifying them. If we discover, as does Lévi-Strauss in Tristes Tropiques, that our original sense of this relation is naive, our project should be to redraw the relation with more subtlety, not abandon its terms. The failure of the quest to engage a world of strangeness does not emancipate us from the necessity of engaging at all; it does not free us to become scientists. For we have seen how the figure of the scientist depends on backhanded commitments to the very locality from which he claims to have extricated himself; he receives from his own history the fragments with which he imagines his freedom from history. The new figure of the anthropologist must avoid both the presumption of the scientist and the naivete of the quester. On the one hand, he must acknowledge the problem of us and them in all its difficulty; nothing, not even imperialism, will free him from the burdens of being local and present. On the other hand, he must not fetishize strangeness into the purpose of his work; he must realize that the New World is new not because it is pristine and exotic, but because it is not yet born. Here, as usual, it is Lévi-Strauss who is his (our) own best and most eloquent critic:

> Being human signifies, for each one of us, belonging to a class, a society, a country, a continent, and a civilization; and for us European earth-dwellers, the adventure played out in the heart of the New World signifies in the first place that it was not our world and that we are responsible for its destruction; and secondly, that there will never be another New World: since the confrontation between the Old World and the New makes us thus conscious of ourselves, let us at least express it in its primary terms - in the place where ... our world missed the opportunity offered to it of choosing between its various missions (ibid : 393).

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