

DEPERSONALISING THE DIGRESSION

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The findings, speculations, arguments, and conclusions of an anthropologist are no better than their ability to write them down, in clear, distinct and acute prose or prosody. One thinks no better than one can write, and for the simple reason that one's audience, one hopes, is not exclusively in one's own head. (So much for subjectivity, and of course postmodernism.) What is a culture, without its imageries, or a science without its metaphors? Most of us do have private languages, semi-public imageries, and to be sure private ethnographies that shall never see the light of day. Well and good ("What a civilization dies in me!"), but then so do most other people on this earth. What really matters in this contingency is not whether our private languages, imageries, or ethnographies could in some way be brought into accord with one another (what kind of accord? The thought is insane!), but whether there is enough (objective) common ground to render them translatable.

A universal telepathy would render effective ethnography impossible (but do wonders for phenomenologists and the CIA). This is not only because lying is the enabling condition of the human imagination, but more because the ability to block, filter, and control, to prevent meaningfulness is essential for meaning to exist. A verbally meaningful equivalent of, say Schubert's "Great" C major Symphony, or Bruckner's Eighth, would probably rupture irreparably the cerebral hemispheres in the listener. Who was it wrote those lines (I'm not sure I've got it right): "He who loves both strong and well / Will look on Helen's face in hell / He whose loves are thin and wise, / Shall see John Knox in paradise?" Most good ethnographies are rather calvinist in this respect.

"Explanation," I have written elsewhere (Coyote Anthropology, forthcoming), "is a dirty game." A kind of apology, really, for having to do it in the first place. Comprehensive explanations ("how it really works") grow like summer weeds in places and times where nothing really works or even pretends to work in anything like the way it was supposed to. Whereas, of course, really good facts, like gravity or natural selection, explain themselves so well that they create a sort of empirical vacuum around themselves, which scientists are obliged to fill with good examples. How did Postmodernism begin? "Explain yourself," said a cynical bystander to a would-be anthropologist; then all hell broke loose. (They should have locked the tyro in a small room with a gun and a bottle of whiskey.) Cultures have a certain plausibility when used as grist for the mill of explanation, societies less so, but an individual human being? Don't make me laugh!

"Writing" is the perfect foil for anything; though basic to all of them, it does not fit into any of our categories, is neither necessarily artistic, nor scientific, historical, and most certainly not "literary." (To make a profession of the writings of William Shakespeare was the one thing Shakespeare himself would not do--yet another feather in his cap.) This leaves us with but one alternative: example--"do as I do, and not as I say." Since the days of Horsa and Hengist (the respectively insular and continental Old Saxon terms for Equus caballus), understatement (I would call it "underdetermination") has been the secret superweapon and survival strategy of the English people ("oh really!"). Elizabeth I used it against the Armada, Churchill against the Blitz, and Shakespeare against all comers. It even works backwards, the other way around:

"Telescopes and microscopes magnify the insignificant" said Goethe (a Franco-nian, "Ferengi," and not a real Saxon), a telling inversion of commonplace micro-management. Facts make their best showing when stripped to the bare essentials; we owe our whole knowledge of the astral firmament to the unassuming photon, and germs are too small to get very dirty. Still, a subtle inaccuracy in determining the properties of the photon (the so-called "gravity lens," for example) might multiply or divide away whole sections of the cosmos, and a mere mischance in the writing of a post-graduate thesis might expunge or unwittingly glorify some otherwise innocent portion of the human race. (And the human race is what we are all about, isn't it?) So do be careful, and remember that digression (Q E D) and not memory, is the diagnostic profile of anthropological grandeur, besides being that of the village gossip, the stage comedian, and the Indubitable Divinity ("Excuse me, Sir, but how did all of this come about, I mean really?" "Well, it's a long story, but it all began at... .."). What we normally call "memory" is in fact the privatised version of a universal digression, and we have no evidence that, apart from a few face-saving details, it is not exactly the same thing, in form as well as content, in all individuals up to and including the Indubitable Divinity.

Often enough I find myself confusing my past record with the subject of Tennyson's Locksley Hall or, more rarely, Melville's White Jacket or Moby Dick ("Hast seen the white whale?"). There is a certain studied humor in this, like jokes told by the ethnographer at their own expense (CF Evans & Pritchard, Bateson, and even Castaneda), but, like all humor, it has a very precarious balance to it, like the "Ego" on a kinship-diagram. Our option, as anthropo-

logists, is to control that balance, like the classic figure-ground reversal that underdetermines all perception, and of course all humor. A close friend once wrote that "The anthropologist wants to be the figure as well as the ground and that makes things hard to follow." I do not know of a single human being, or for that matter animate being (with the possible exception of the echidna), that has achieved such mastery. Go figure, if the Indubitable Divinity were able to achieve Perfection in that respect, there would be no need for the visible universe. ("Go to ground, you know the saying 'different strokes for different folks,' and, by the way, while we are on the subject, why do you (expletive deleted) Saxons persist in using that heinous cutting implement called the seax, you know, the one that Shakespeare, "Seax-behre," was named for? I'll have you know it is outlawed even in the infernal regions. --Yöur old buddy, The Universal I.D.)

All kidding (and cutting) aside, the Universal I.D. ("Indirect Discourse," "Irresistable Digression," "Indomitable Diaspora," etc.) remains as anthropology's best solution and biggest problem. Most significant sentences in its repertoire were never completed in the way the author had originally intended them to be; most chapters or books wind up being really "about" something the author had never had in mind at all. If the anthropologist had a muse (Ariadne? Arachne? the Medusa?), she would be most amused by this, and, as John Keats put it:

His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.