COMMUNICATIONS

ON THE WRITING OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Vincent Crapanzano

An ethnography – and I use the word in its most comprehensive sense to include what might more properly be called ethnology – is a sympton [1] of a particular confrontation between two or more individuals – the ethnographer and those others whom he, the ethnographer, refers to, impersonally and presumptively, as *his* informants. As some anthropologists are beginning to recognize, with more or less sophistication, there is no question but that this confrontation is anxiety-provoking, ego-dystonic, threatening to the ethnographer's sense of self. George Devereux has, in a significantly ignored book, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, considered the implications of anxiety on the methods, procedures, and conceptual apparatus of the behavioral sciences.

Devereux notes that "good methodology" is "the most effective and the most durable anxiety-reducing device". Ideally,

> It does not empty reality of its anxiety arousing content, but 'domesticates' it, by providing that it, too, can be understood and processed by the conscious ego [2].

He is quick to add:

> Unfortunately, even the best methodology can, unconsciously and abusively, be used primarily as an ataractic – as an anxiety-numbing device – and, when so used, produces scientific (?) 'results' which smell of the morgue and are almost irrelevant in terms of living reality [3].

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Elsewhere, he notes that frames of reference, methods, and procedures within the behavioral sciences "are often systematically transformed into veritable counter-transference reactions, leading to self-constricting acting out, masquerading as science" [4].

Devereux is concerned principally with *data* as anxiety-provoking. The emphasis itself on methodology in the social sciences – and Devereux recognizes this – suggests that methodology may often be a locus of displacement for the anxiety provoked not just by data but by the investigator's confrontation with the subjects of his research. This displaced anxiety produces, to use one of Devereux' favorite words, its own scotoma – its own blind spots.

One of these blind spots is, curiously, the writing of ethnography. It is surprising that a discipline which has become as self-conscious as anthropology – and is traditionally concerned with texts, – has ignored the structural presuppositions and implications of the text by which it conveys its data, meanings, hypotheses, and theoretical confabulations, its very identity as a scientific or humanistic discipline.

However much the writer of ethnography wishes to separate his ethnography from the ethnographic confrontation, the writing of ethnography is a continuation of the confrontation. Such stylistic devices as the self-conscious avoidance of the "I" (anthropologists appear particularly disturbed by the presence of the personal pronoun in a "serious" work),

elimination of connotative, impassioned, and generally polysemic language, and the calculated use of scientistic, jargonistic, generally monsemic or stenic language become a defensive attempt to isolate the act of writing, and its end-product, from the confrontation itself. Whatever the reason for this dissociation, the fact remains that the confrontation does not end before the ethnography but, if it can be said to end at all, it ends *with* the ethnography. Indeed, one could argue that at one level the writing of ethnography is an attempt to put a full-stop to the ethnographic confrontation, just as, so often in the history of civilization, writing has selectively embalmed reality rather than continuously explicating it.

To refer to field work as confrontation is to call attention to the violent, wrenching quality of the encounter between the ethnographer and his informants. By this I do not mean the sado-masochistic component of field work, of the ethnographic gaze, which, incidentally, Luis Bunuel picked up on in his extraordinary documentary, *Land Without Bread*, in the late thirties, but the inevitable disruption of the sense of self that both the ethnographer and even his informants may experience. I use the phrase "sense of self" here to denote, loosely, a reflexive awareness of a centered unity and continuity, an identity, that oscillates between reification and resistance to reification.

The individual's sense of self is constructed through a complex dialectical movement, mediated and hypostatized by language and consequent idiomatic typifications, with the other. The other, really a moment in this movement, is a quite complex constitution. It includes not simply concrete individuals within the self's socio-historical horizon, if in fact such individuals can ever be separated from their symbolic connotations and evaluations, but also – or rather – these individuals *as* symbols. In other words, the other by whom the self is constituted is a symbolically typified individual. At the most abstract level, he is the transcendental locus of meaning; at the most concrete level, he is a person-who-is-standing-there. Between these two levels he is typified by social roles, conventionalized perceptions, culturally determined styles, and a whole array of idiosyncratic associations which may be less than conscious. He is, so to speak, also the object of transference.

The dialectical movement by which the self is constituted is continuous, albeit subject to the vicissitudes of the developmental cycle of the human organism. Society, as Sartre remarks, "is presented to each man as *a perspective of the future*" [5]. To view the movement in terms of discrete moments, however necessary this may be to analysis, is to distort it, to give it a beginning and an end. The movement of lived reality is, as Sartre points out, synthetic. Indeed, the "movement" of fieldwork can be seen as a movement of self-dissolution and reconstitution. The ethnographer, in learning the ways of the other – the alien other – learns to take on their standpoint; and this leads inevitably to a new view on, if not a new sense of, self. This may be very disturbing to the individual. He may be flooded with vague anxieties, specific, even paranoid, fears, resentments, feelings of stubbornness, of anger, of cruelty even, of inadequacy, impotence, worthlessness, and of depersonalization and loss of identity, which hopefully play themselves out on the oneiric, and not the "real", stage of human endeavor.

This process of self-dissolution resulting from the ethnographic confrontation is relentlessly spelled out by Malinowski in *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* [6]. The *Diary* itself, especially the second part, is a sort of *aide-de-soi*, an attempt to maintain a sense of self which is continually threatened by the absence of certain significant others in Malinowski's life – his mother, his friend Stav., and his various women friends – and by the presence of that ultimate other whom he refers to so often, with magical vindictiveness, as *bloody nigger*. His first dream upon leaving

Brisbane reflects the threat of dissolution of self.

> I had a strange dream; homosex., with my own double as a partner. Strangely autoerotic feelings; the impression that I'd like to have a mouth just like mine to kiss, a neck that curves just like mine (seen from the side). I got tired and collected myself slowly . . . (Malinowski 1967:13) [7].

However rooted in his personal history, his immanent departure, or his neurotic adaptations, Malinowski's dream prefigures the very last sentence of the *Diary*: "Truly I lack real character".

All fieldworkers, insofar as they have carried out research *elsewhere*, have experienced something of this. What they have experienced too – and have seen often enough in others coming back from the field – is the shock of return. In many ways the shock of return is more difficult than the initial encounter. The fieldworker has been led to expect the stress and strain of the ethnographic confrontation; he does not really expect such stress and strain, such anxiety, upon his return. He is, after all, returning *home*. What he forgets of course is that the confrontation with the other – his informants – has had its effect upon him. His sense of self has been altered. He is other than he was, even if his response to fieldwork has been conservative – a stubborn refusal to go native. At home he must be his old self again, must adopt the standpoint of those significant within his "own" socio-historical horizon. He requires re-affirmation – reconstitution – and this he tries to accomplish in many ways, including, most notably, the *writing* of ethnography, which will also "free" him to be a professional again.

The act of writing, any writing, is an act of communication. It requires, minimally, an addressor and an addressee – a self and an other. At some level, it is always, inevitably, an appeal to the other for recognition. "What I seek in the Word", writes Lacan, "is the response of the other" [8]. It is a response which constitutes the writer's sense of self. It reconfirms his meaningful world. The other, too, is constituted – evoked, in Lacan's magical language – through the act of communication. To give the other constitutive priority is to reify a "moment" at the expense of a "movement". The painter and the politician, Merleau-Ponty cynically reminds us (and we might add the writer, even the writer of ethnography), "moulds others much more often than he follows them".

> The public he aims at is not given; it is precisely the one his works will elicit. The others he thinks of are not empirical "others" defined by what they expect of him at this moment. He thinks even less of *humanity* conceived of as a species which possess "human dignity" or "the honor of being man" as other species have a carapace or an air-bladder. *No, his concern is with others become such that he is able to live with them* (italics my own) [9].

The act of writing – the evocation of the response of the other and the constitution thereby of the self and his meaningful world – is reified, in its product, the written word. The self is objectivated in the written word, and insofar as the self is objectivated, the other is also. Sartre, in his study of Jean Genet, describes this process brilliantly:

> At the beginning Genet utters the words or dreams them; he does not write them down. But before long these murmurs cease to satisfy him. When he listens to himself, he cannot ignore the fact that it is he who is speaking . . . He is aware that he alone hears himself, that he alone "offers himself the ideal fault of roses" and that a moan of pleasure will not keep the earth from turning. Therein lies the trap; he will write. *Scripta manent:* tomorrow, in three days, when he finds the inert little sketch that confronts him with all its inertia, he will regard the phrase as an erotic and scandalous object. A drifting authorless sentence will float toward him . . . This is only an expedient. Even when he reads the sentence, Genet still knows who set it down. He is therefore going to turn once again to the Other, for it is the other who confers upon the word a veritable objectivity – by listening to it [10].

Sartre notes that others "were already present in the heart of the word, hearers and speakers, awaiting their turn". In Genet's case – and Sartre finds exceptional here what is probably an essential characteristic of all writing –

> The imaginary gaze of the gentle reader has no function other than to give the word a new and strange consistency. The reader is not an end; he is a means, an instrument. Genet is not yet speaking *to us*: he is talking to himself, though wanting to be heard [11].

So, too, I suggest that the writer of ethnography writes "to talk to himself, though wanting to be heard". The act of writing ethnography is an act of self-constitution – of a willing objectivation of self well worth the price of alienation. Indeed, the alienation is an inevitable feature of the act, for the act of writing is not simply an act of creation, objectivation, or constitution; it is also, in some curious way, an act of exorcism. Like the writing of autobiography – and however objective they may seem there is an autobiographical dimension to all ethnographies – the writing of ethnography through objectivation and consequent alienation of the ethnographic confrontation serves to exorcise the writer of the confrontation. "And if I succeed in taking my mind off myself when the word comes out of my mouth", writes Sartre, with reference to the onanist's use of the word in his incantatory masturbations, "if I succeed in forgetting that it is I who say it, I can listen to it as if it *emanated from someone else*, and indeed even as if it were sounding all by itself" [12].

The ethnographer in writing ethnography is doing more, it would seem, than making a scientific contribution or convincing others to hire, reappoint, or promote him. He is affirming an identity, subjectively felt as a sense of self, by addressing and reifying thereby, an other. The question remains: *Who is this other, whose standpoint the ethnographer takes in his act of self-constitution*? Surely, if the contention about the multidimensionality of the other is correct, he is much more than the name to whom the ethnography is dedicated. He is more, too, than the ethnographer's professional or public audience, his spouse, his father, his mother, his mentors, or any other significant other in his personal history against whom he wishes to separate or measure himself or from whom he desires recognition. The other of ethnography is, I suggest, an essentially more complex other – a bifurcate other. He is at once the significant other of the ethnographer's own cultural world and the other of the ethnographic confrontation. The writer of ethnography writes – and creates – a double audience: the audience of his own people and the audience of those other people whom he refers to in an act of presumptive if not patronizing incorporation as "my people". The writing of ethnography – and this must have an effect upon the objectivity if not the scientific validity of the work – is essentially a compromise formation. The ethnographer wants to reconstitute his old self – or his new professional self – through an act of writing that is addressed to the significant others within his own world. He wants, too, to address, and must inevitably address, those illiterate others on his fieldwork – not simply out of good faith, professional responsibility, integrity, guilt, irritation, resentment, hatred, or the desire to fill an obligation, but also out of a necessity to declare them worthy of having been and continuing to be that silent audience by which he identifies himself as an ethnographer and obtains his sense of self. His ambivalence toward both his audiences, inevitably toward himself, is worked out in a text – the ethnography – through a dialectic of constitution and deconstitution, incantation and exorcism, creation and destruction, which must be revealed, like the structures of dream and myth, before the anthropologist can succeed to the importance he pretends. The anthropologist must recognize his product for what it is – a symptom of extreme confrontation with otherness which can only be understood when he learns to read – and read with courage – what he had written.

NOTES

1 George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

2 Ibid, p. 97.
3 Ibid, p. 97.
4 Ibid, p. 83.
5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Knopf, 1963) p. 96.
6 Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967).
7 Ibid, p. 13.
8 Jacques Lacan, "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis" in *The Language of Self*, Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968).
9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Chicago: Northwestern University, 1964) p. 74.
10 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (New York: Mentor, 1964) p. 494.
11 Ibid, p. 494.
12 Ibid, p. 492.