

## Comparative Literature as Textual Anthropology

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Comparative Literature as Textual Anthropology," Antony Tatlow proposes textual anthropology as a critic's approach in the comparative study of literature. If anthropology is "behavioural hermeneutics" (Clifford Geertz) with the implication of self-reflexivity, the anthropologist will be disposed to fashion in the object of attention what is neglected and that can therefore be described as the unconscious of his/her own culture. In an application of his framework, Tatlow relates totemic and utopian thought through the use of animal signs. In his article, Tatlow shows how cultural demands both fashion the ethnographer-critic and select the perspectives he/she must transcend. As auto-anthropologist, the artist "invents," instead of "describing," the Other. Tatlow discusses in his application of textual anthropology in comparative literature Gauguin and Brecht and shows how Lévi-Strauss enables us to understand Brecht's response to Daoism and Buddhism as energised by the repressions in what we call the social or cultural unconscious.

**Antony TATLOW****Comparative Literature as Textual Anthropology**

In his study, "Why Look at Animals?," John Berger observes: "The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man" (3) and he asks: "What were the secrets of the animal's likeness with and unlikeness from man? The secrets whose existence man recognised as soon as he intercepted the animal's look. In one sense the whole of anthropology, concerned with the passage from nature to culture, is the answer to that question. But there is also a general answer. All the secrets were about animals as an intercession between man and his origin.... Animals interceded between man and his origin because they were both like and unlike man. Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged there and here. Likewise they were both mortal and immortal. An animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox. This -- maybe the first existential dualism -- was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected and worshiped, bred and sacrificed.... All theories of ultimate origin are only ways of better defining what followed.... What we are trying to define, because the experience is almost lost, is the universal use of animal signs for charting the experience of the world" (4-6).

Brecht's *Auf einen chinesischen Theewurzellöwen* (*On a Chinese Tea Root Lion*), a private totem, descends from the animals described by Berger (I draw on a discussion of animal signs in art in an earlier study; see Tatlow 1990). The *Tea Root Lion* also illustrates the universal use of animal signs for charting the experience of the world: "Die Schlechten fürchten deine Klaue./ Die Guten freuen sich deiner Grazie./ Derlei/ Hörte ich gern/ Von meinem Vers" (1967, 997). At first glance, the *Tea Root Lion* may appear to domesticate the consternation embodied in the earlier animal figures but in its own way this figure speaks to Berger's anthropological question. We should not be misled by the apparently emblematic figure or by what first looks like the flatly allegorical function of the verse, by the supposition of a one-to-one correspondence in what may then seem an only too easy moral equation, the good and the bad neatly divided from each other like the sheep and the goats. This verse should never be, but invariably is, separated from the artefact to which it is conjoined and such separation greatly facilitates these simplifications.

Everything depends upon the level on which we choose to conduct our enquiry. Brecht's work has suffered enough from being reduced to, and then constrained within, those superficial and convenient perspectives from which its meaning was once socially authorised. It is, therefore, necessary to explore the possibility of further connections between totemic and utopian thought. When the animal's look is transformed into an animal sign, into an imagined alien Other and located within the structure of a work of art, hidden forces undergo a process of externalisation. We therefore approach a potential self-encounter as we are drawn into an interrogation of the work. When representation separates layers of perception, whilst presenting them with visual immediacy, every more or less adequate act of interpretation must put our sense of self into jeopardy or, at the very least, draw attention to how we are engendered and positioned by our culture. In this particular case the utopian reflection contained within the verse cannot dispense with, therefore in some sense derives from and is interwoven with, an engagement with the anthropological other in the form of an intriguing artefact, the representation of an imagined animal from that other culture. This animal sign undergoes, in the newly established juxtaposition that playfully echoes and develops the aesthetics of Chinese painting, a process of acculturation, even as such repositioning provokes, like all anthropological engagements, a potential self-encounter or, to be more accurate, cannot really be interpreted unless such an encounter takes place.

"In grasping these truths," Lévi-Strauss observed of the wider consequences of the anthropological encounter, we are "ramenés à nous-mêmes par cette confrontation" (1955, 354). The discerning anthropologist can be sure of at least one thing: that he will have to face up to himself if his work is to have any descriptive cogency. Much has been said in recent years about the interpenetration of the disciplines of anthropology and literary criticism. (Here I am thinking primarily of studies by Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, George Marcus, and James Boon. The way

these disciplines now learn from, adjust to and change each other is itself a subject for anthropological reflection and an example of the dialectics of acculturation in thought.) Ethnographic anthropology is always, finally, writing about culture and hence, in some degree, invents the culture which it studies as criticism creates the work it interprets. Both activities respond to cultural demands and these both fashion the ethnographer and select the perspectives he must transcend in choosing what he wants to see. At the end of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss speaks of the anthropologist as someone in flight from his own culture, searching abroad for what he lacks at home. Of course this can involve a form of escape, but this search and the activity of writing which brings it to a temporary conclusion should not be confused with that fearful, blind or arrogant avoidance of the self which escapism usually connotes. We can surmise that the anthropologist or artist or critic will be predisposed to discover and fashion in the object of his attention what is neglected or denied in, and what we can therefore describe as the unconscious of, his own culture. The new narratives arise, according to Foucault, out of the silences of the previous episteme. If anthropology, for Clifford Geertz, can be termed "behavioural hermeneutics" (1986, 379), with all that this implies in respect of self-reflexivity, then criticism can surely be thought of as a form of textual anthropology, interrogating texts as functions of the culturally necessary and culturally possible. Geertz also calls this form of writing "faction" (1988, 144). The best account I have seen of the changing status of anthropology in cultural studies and the various positions from which its discourse may be determined is offered by Marcus and Fischer (1986).

To my mind, some of the most interesting recent comparative literary criticism has been written by anthropologists who have applied the insights of literary theory to their own discipline, thus helping us all to understand better the nature of creative and communicative processes. Geertz and James Clifford have shown how Malinowski created cultural order in the unified narrative of his anthropological descriptions of the Western Pacific, a practice of writing long equated with the totality of the discipline, by rigorously excising the self of the investigator whose troubled reflections he confined to the pages of his diaries (Geertz 1988, 73). This scientific "objectivity," therefore, depended on a form of perceptual schizophrenia, required by the larger political strategies of his own culture, since it enabled him to pin down the Trobrianders in a rhetorical power game, placing them where they belonged in the Western disposition of knowledge (see Clifford; Clifford shows how Malinowski and Conrad negotiated languages and their own identities as they created or occupied various narrative positions in relation to their description/invention of remote and exotic places; see also Tatlow 1995).

As auto-anthropologist, the artist "invents," instead of "describing," the Other. The work both investigates and is itself the object of investigation. Gauguin's invention of the Pacific fascinated Brecht and had numerous consequences for his own work. Gauguin reached Tahiti, only to discover that "Tahiti" had already vanished. And so the "savage," in flight from a rotten European civilisation, and probably bringing his syphilis with him, re-invented what had disappeared. The process is fascinating and I can only refer obliquely to it. He constructed his own "oceanic character" by reading Moerenhout. He then invented a mistress who tells him stories of the gods. He borrowed from everywhere. His disdain of originality, constantly and almost literally drawing on the work of others, just as Brecht did, was also his mark of it. Out of Gauguin's incompatible narratives emerge his extraordinary paintings. In *Noa Noa*, he bids goodbye to the hospitable soil, imperative family duties call him back, his lover is in tears. He leaves behind on the quay-side legend, fragrance, love, natural innocence and dignity (see Gauguin 1985, 42). But the unprinted Appendix, like Malinowski's diary, tells a different story: "After the work of art -- The truth, the dirty truth" (Gauguin 1985, 43; "work of art" here means the text of *Noa Noa*). He is shipped back as a pauper in third class, with 50 square centimeters of space among sheep and cattle, longing to escape the actual Tahitians he viewed as primitive thieves and to be "among my own people and my friends." Identity is a function of stylisation, pure artifice. Most of his provocatively Tahitian paintings were structured on Western models, Cranach, Manet, among others, and the most famous of them all, *D'Où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* even echoes -- and there is more to this than parody -- the nineteenth-century allegorists Signac, Sérusier, and Puvis

de Chavannes (see Thomson 196). Even in his last and remotest retreat on Hivaoa in the Marquesas, he had fixed a print of Botticelli's *Primavera* to his wall.

In this context it is instructive to observe how *Te arii vahine* recapitulates virtually all the body postures of Cranach's *Diana Reclining*, except that Gauguin has retained the hand which covers the sex of the naked woman, as if from the more overtly repressive gesture of Manet's *Olympia*, which he had copied in 1891 and where the Western woman displays herself in this contradictory posture beside the fully clothed black servant. Gauguin did not paint the natural, or the exotic, he painted his dreams and the repressions of his culture: "You drag your double along with you and yet the two contrive to get on together" (Gauguin 1921, 240). These paintings reach deep into himself and his experience of the obsessions of his culture and so transcend the naturalist allegories, the politically anarchist idylls which helped him paint them. He was not interested in what could be seen in Tahiti but in what was no longer visible. He did not fantasise a Tahitian unconscious but he did reinvent it by passing it through the practice of his own imagination, giving his shape to their fears. Take, for example, *Manao tupapau*. This is how Gauguin describes the experience that led to the notorious painting which mixes fear and the erotic: "Tehura lay motionless, naked, belly down on the bed: She stared up at me, her eyes wide with fear, and she seemed not to know who I was. For a moment I too felt a strange uncertainty. Tehura's dread was contagious: it seemed to me that a phosphorescent light poured from her staring eyes. I had never seen her so lovely; above all, I had never seen her beauty so moving ... Did I know what she thought I was in that instant? Perhaps she took me, with my anguished face, for one of those legendary demons or spectres, the Tupapaus that filled the sleepless night of her people" (Gauguin 1988, 280). And yet the dispositions in his paintings, a form of communication unknown to Tahiti, are nevertheless akin to the function of totemic thought which metaphorises relations and organises perception in a productive and protective relationship to the forces man contends with, offering, like works of art, conceptual models in the form of metaphor. The anarchist idylls domesticate nature, as the Neoplatonist idealises perception, in a projection of untroubled utopian control, and even here we can see a tenuous link with totemic thought, but Gauguin's project energised, and was energised by, deeper dispositions, searching for the self in the other, seeking an arrangement with what cannot be so easily controlled yet must be lived with. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss offers an account of how totemic thought establishes codes for discriminating relationships, establishing dispositions between phenomena through the organisation of perceptual space and of the correspondences which enable us to make imaginative and practical sense of the world. He recounts a practice among the Hidatsa Indians in America who developed a particular technique for catching the elusive eagle, lord of the sky and metaphor of their aspirations. They would dig a pit, a trap, and lie in it, waiting for the eagle to descend upon them. They were, observes Lévi-Strauss, "both hunter and hunted at the same time" (1966, 50). He uses this to exemplify the binary -- high/low -- and triadic -- sky/earth/underworld -- patterns that organised their totemic thought and tribal life.

Brecht's early plays constitute an iconographical zoo, they teem with animal metaphors. They are constructed as mythologies of the unconscious, and consequently their plots are labyrinthic. They do not move logically, like the well-made play, from incident to incident but wind erratically through uncharted psychographic territory. The other or exotic, no matter how far this mental territory may be placed beyond the Berlin/Bavarian borders, whether in Africa, Tahiti, China, or America, is not a geographical but a methodological concept, an ethnography of the imagination, a proto-surrealist psycho-collage, rhetorical exploration, all designed to one end: combating the insanity which was that positivist normalisation of the actual. Normality in 1918, when he was writing *Baal*, was monstrous. It had to be re-invented. It is noticeable how the scene titles of this play echo the apparently inconsequential titles of paintings like those of van Gogh -- *Nachtcafé*, *Green Field*, *Blue Plum Trees*, *Maple Trees in the Wind* -- and how the language appears to paint scenes in strong Gauguinesque colours. Like the Hidatsa Indians, *Baal*, in the provocative song that starts the play, tells how he hunted vultures by personifying their prey, and this passage occurs again within the play, in the scene *10 Degrees East of Greenwich* (Brecht 1970, 56) He does so, just as they did, to absorb into himself their soaring immortality. *Baal* consumes them,

swallowing the light of their skies, light enough to hold off the death he embraces, for his whole trajectory is a descent into materiality, the obverse of the Christian and Neoplatonic topography which structured the conventions of Brecht's culture.

Nothing is more savage than normality. The imagination resists its own obliteration by proposing a counter reality that now radically undermines, is simply incompatible with, the whole industrialising post-Enlightenment cultural paradigm, drawing on the metaphorical dispositions of totemic thought because it allows you to reconceive all relationships. But this is no abstract reaction, no simple rejection of indefensible instrumentalisation, for it also anticipates realignments of individual positions which refuse the spaces available in modern industrial culture, and this is a constant counter-theme in Brecht. Sartre once observed that Racine and Brecht have something in common -- the savage dreams and emotions in their distanced characters: "on nous les montres à froid, séparés de nous, inaccessibles et terribles ... et nous nous retrouvons en eux sans que notre stupeur diminue" (1973, 82). In fact many of my themes are anticipated by Sartre, though without the vital exploration of the relational models in totemic thought, when he writes of that moment of consternation produced by Brecht's dramaturgy: "L'idéal du théâtre brechtien, ce serait que le public fût comme un groupe d'ethnographes rencontrant tout à coup une peuplade sauvage. S'approchant et se disant, dans la stupeur: ces sauvages, c'est nous. C'est à ce moment que le public devient lui-même un collaborateur de l'auteur: en se reconnaissant, mais dans l'étrangeté, comme s'il était un autre, il se fait exister en face de lui-même comme objet et il se voit sans s'incarner, donc en se comprenant" (qtd. in Contat and Rybalka 327).

The audience comes face to face with itself, it produces itself -- se fait exister -- in that auto-ethnographic experience enabled through the interpretation of a work of art. Here, of course, lies the anthropological value of the so-called "alienation effect." Brecht consistently strove in his dramaturgic practice to provoke that experience of consternation which turns in upon the self, though people still confuse the socially-authorized trivial rationalisations, in what can only be repressive interpretations, with the capacity of his plays. These parallels between Racine and Brecht may seem superficially surprising but we have seen where they exist, if we can escape the comforting critical clichés, as their texts construct and plot the monstrous unconscious of their cultures. "Exploration," observes Lévi-Strauss, "is not so much a matter of covering ground as of digging beneath the surface" (1961, 50).

The Chinese associations in Brecht's work have almost invariably been read in terms of quietism, underlying all superficial politics (in my opinion, Martin Esslin gives the most intelligent account of this position) but when they are most interesting they represent precisely the opposite of any quietist retraction into the isolated self, because the models are all relational, figures for interconnectedness, and so can be seen in terms of the metaphors of totemic thought. This "other" Brecht of course does not stand for the totality of his positions, but is the one that matters now. Even the Buddhist associations have their activating moment. They do not represent, as has been suggested, any denial of the will to live, and hence an unflinching Schopenhauerian refusal or any intensification of "Nietzschean" existential despair but rather a rejection of the possibility of continuing to live as heretofore (see Dieckmann 92; see also Tatlow 1998). If *On a Chinese Tea Root Lion* appears to make easy reading, we need to remember its context, where the picture-poem was devised as an affront to Stalinist aesthetics. This animal is also another self-questioning self-portrait because the meaning of its third sentence is uncertain: "Derlei/ hörte ich gern/ von meinem Vers" (That's what/ I'd like to hear/ About my verse") is strictly ambiguous, capable of two diverging readings. Brecht's late poetry in Stalinist Berlin continuously interrogates his own positioning and seeks relational figures, exploring other dimensions, as in that discussion of the aesthetics of Soviet painting, tracing filaments, webs of meaning in the small space then available. In a public discussion in February 1955 Brecht described the official aesthetic criteria as: "inhuman, barbaric, superficial, bourgeois, that is to say petit-bourgeois, slipshod, irresponsible, corrupt, etc., etc." (1983, 213).

Geertz finds particularly the later accounts which Lévi-Strauss gives of primitive thought too coherent, lacking the difficult and empirically unassimilable facticity of his earlier studies. Geertz reads the narrative of *Tristes Tropiques* in terms of the mythical quest, of that search for the

labyrinthic other: "the journey ... into another, darker world, full of phantasms and odd revelations; the culminating mystery; the absolute other, sequestered and opaque, confronted deep down in the sertao" (1988, 45). But this "other," how could it be otherwise, not only locates the self, it is the self: "The book is a record of a symbolist mentality (French) encountering other symbolist mentalities (Bororo, Caduveo, Nambikwara) and seeking to penetrate their wholly interior coherence in order to find in them the replication of itself - 'the most fundamental form' of thought" (1988, 43) This mytho-logic seeks "the foundations of social life, and ... of human existence" (1988, 45). Yet to position yourself thus would surely be, not to discover the self that has been hidden from you but, in reality, to forget yourself and how you have been positioned. It should, however, be possible -- although obviously not completely, that is out of the question -- to take something of these mutual placings into account. And if that happens, they defamiliarise each other in the process I call "dialectics of acculturation," although only because of the points of contact between them. If that is so, then I do not see how we then necessarily inhabit what Geertz attributes to the thought of Lévi-Strauss which developed out of his reflections on these encounters, namely that "closed-world view of meaning that results from it all" (1988, 44).

Surely the point is that "their" horizons appear fixed and delimited only because "we" set them. And "our" horizons are opening up, after a relatively long period of closure and certainty, in part because we now understand how "theirs" encode paradigms that are not exhausted, that are capable of re-examination. If we feel uncomfortable with the rigorous formalism of structuralist anthropology, it is because it apes our totalising, or even totalitarian, desire to possess the world. Totemic thought knew no such attitude. In *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss undoes the power of absolute signs and this is certainly true of Brecht. To envisage this, they both employ Buddhist or Daoist associations, and Daoist or Buddhist models fit very well with a Marxist philosophy of process. It cannot be a coincidence, though Brecht knew nothing of Lévi-Strauss, that we can discern this parallel in their thought (see Tatlow 1998).

The Popperian reduction of science now seems almost as unproductive as the vulgar Marxist models he so caustically, and rightly, rejected. Scientific thought is rediscovering how understanding grows from the exploration of intuitive and poetic metaphors. When most suggestive, scientific like totemic thought is perhaps analogical. There is indeed a Dao of physics. Science depends on understanding how the imagination works and will be most productive when intuiting a wholeness that will always remain "unknowable" (see the cited texts; Capra 1975, 1982; Tolstoy 1990). We need to explore every avenue of escape from closed totalities into the openness of holistic thought. Closure will be global, absolute, and irreversible unless we confront the monsters engendered in ourselves. In the conclusion to *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss reflects on Buddhist meditations, on "the mutual exclusiveness of being and knowing" (1961, 395). Such a refusal of "knowledge" in favour of "being" should not be thought of as a Heideggerian metaphysic or as a blanket abstraction, denying material and intellectual life, even if Lévi-Strauss plays with the anthropology/entropology pun, (1961, 397) but rather as welcoming that "emptiness" which is the metaphorical figure for relationality. In Chinese terms, there is no *you* (having) without *wu* (nothing), "having" depends on "not having," on being content with "nothing" because, like fullness and emptiness, they interpenetrate, one cannot be thought, or had, without the other. The same is true for totemic and utopian thought. Both arrive at their figurations through a process that draws on and is energised by the repressions lodged in what we call the social or cultural unconscious.

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