

# The Literary Phenomenon and the Maintenance of Human Meaning

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The present study is a companion piece to a previously published study entitled 'Executioners of Mystery', which appeared in *Scrutiny* 2 (1998). In that essay, I posit that in order to qualify for participation in disciplinarity, the domain of literary studies would need to satisfy three requirements – (1) an object of study (that is, demonstrable, necessary and sufficient properties common to all objects designated 'literary', (2) some foundational, axiomatic principles and (3) a set of procedures which promote rule-governance for intellectual activity. The evidence supports the observation that all three claims for disciplinarity at the site of literary studies are exceedingly weak. In spite of this, the site of literary studies flourishes, tempting one to suppose that it performs significant functions within cultural meaning and value. In the present study, in an attempt to answer the question, 'What operations are performed?', I am obliged to ask wider and logically prior questions within the human symbolic, which in turn requires a move into the attendant discipline of symbolic anthropology. Finally, I attempt to apply these anthropological observations to the literary phenomenon and its secondary productions.

## 1 Origins of Cultural Codes and the Symbolic

If symbolic behaviour is even half as important as Freud, for example, suggested, symbolic anthropology is the custodian of the richest of all the mines which are worked by the science of man (Melford Spiro 1969:214).

The term 'culture' has numerous meanings, both in academic and ordinary language. For our purposes, culture can be defined as the sum of human meanings and values within an individual consciousness at one moment. And this 'sum' need not be integrated, fully conscious, logical, or even factually correct. Culture is multiple and contradictory, subject to alteration. Culture is the ways in which an individual attaches bits from the flow of meaning to the self, or the ways in which individuals

are attached to meanings. Individuals are active creators and passive receivers, passive creators and active receivers of culture. Anthony Cohen states:

Culture ... is the means by which we make meaning, and with which we make the world meaningful to ourselves, and ourselves meaningful to the world (Cohen 1993:196).

These meanings are manifested in momentary gestures of assent, consent or dissent during the individual's participation in everyday life.

Alfred Kroeber and Talcott Parsons present culture and society as interrelated:

We suggest that it is useful to define the concept of culture for most usages more narrowly than has been done in most American anthropological tradition and have it refer to transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behaviour and the artefacts produced through behaviour. On the other hand, we suggest that the term society—or more generally, social system—be used to designate the specifically relational system of inter-action among individuals and collectivities (Kroeber & Parsons 1958: 582)

Here, 'social system' designates the network of human interaction; 'culture' designates the systems of meaning which direct and constrain those human interactions. The distinction is at best blurred, indicating the inseparability of sociology and anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown makes a similar observation: 'Neither social structure nor culture can be scientifically dealt with in isolation from one another ...' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1957: 106). Simply stated, culture may refer to Durkheim's 'collective representations', whereas a social system refers to a state of affairs—the difference is between meaning and action, meaning structures and meaning-in-action. The distinction now begs questions about how meaning can ever be known except in action, since all representations of meaning are expressions, and thus qualify as acts. Perhaps the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, despite many differences in their styles of data collection and analysis, constitute the same discipline, one which explicates human-organizational systems and the meanings which direct them.

E. Cassirer, in *An Essay on Man*, proposes the centrality of symbol in human meaning systems:

The great thinkers who have defined man as an animal rationale were not

empiricists, nor did they ever intend to give an empirical account of human nature. By this definition they were expressing rather a fundamental moral imperative. Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence instead of defining man as an animal rationale we should define him as an animal symbolicum. By so doing we can designate his specific difference, and we can understand the new way open to man—the way to civilization (Cassirer 1976:25f).

What are the origins of symbolization as the central component of human meaning systems? In order to give substance to the claim that symbols regulate human meaning, it is necessary to make a few remarks concerning the Upper Palaeolithic.

The original 'centre' of any Palaeolithic economy had to have been survival. Successful Palaeolithic economies were those that survived. Survival practices were inevitably coded into a metaphysical system of conduct and meaning. The contention towards which I hesitantly move is that the broad and complex web of beliefs, imperatives, taboos and injunctions which constitute modern forms of social organization may be the end product of thousands of years of aggregation, development and structuring. During the Upper Palaeolithic, 40,000 years ago, Cro-Magnon man developed an impressive range of bone, antler and stone tools throughout the Old World (Marshack 1991). The populations of Africa, Asia and Europe underwent a population explosion (between 40,000 and 30,000 years ago) which was accompanied an explosion of creativity of a symbolic kind (Pfeiffer, 1982), as is evidenced by the production of non-utilitarian objects from bone, shell, coral and a variety of stones. The Russian archaeological site of Sungir, east of Moscow (dated at 28,000 years before present), reveals the bodies of an adult male and two children, each wrapped in thousands of carved ivory beads. This accumulation indicates a significant number of work-hours, thus establishing this burial as a noteworthy (and possibly quantifiable) event within the economy. Given that the burial of beads with the three bodies can have no material value, this site must indicate that the metaphysical has been accorded a prominent position within material life, indicating in turn that symbols operate strongly in communication and in everyday life (White 1993). There was an explosion of paintings, engravings, necklaces, the practice of cremation and the symbolic use of red ochre, throughout the Old World by 30,000 years ago.

The notion that 'cave art' served an 'aesthetic' function is pure modern supposition. Moreover, Palaeolithic pictorial representation contains numerous abstract forms, unquestionably symbolic (see Pfeiffer 1982:143 and Graziosi 1960). Studies of present-day hunter-gatherer pictorial representation reveal that aboriginal explanations of the symbolic meaning of drawings is vastly more rich and complex

than one could possibly speculate from the drawings (see Gould 1969). In short, the evidence of the Upper Palaeolithic and, in particular, the Magdalenian period (20,000—15,000 year ago), caused Francois Bordes to declare that the Magdalenian was the 'first of the great civilizations'. (Bordes 1953:445) What is evident is symbolic encoding, which has been a principal organizing activity of the species for at least 20,000 years, thus locating the symbolic at the centre of human meaning. Pfeiffer speculates on the human-organizational importance of cave art as follows:

This was not art for art's sake, nothing casual. It was bare survival-necessity. The development of prehistoric, preliterate mnemonics must have been the result of considerable trial and error. As an analogy, think of how many illnesses and deaths from eating poisonous and low-nutrition plants preceded the selection of grass seeds, legumes, and other basic foods. Failures of communication, misunderstandings and forgettings, late arrivals and nonarrivals, were just as lethal. The same ingenuity and attention to detail which we apply today in planning political campaigns, the design of buildings and machines, and theatrical productions went into the uses of art and special effects in the caves (Pfeiffer 1982:127).

Given the numerous indications of complex social, technological and spiritual life at this time, it is likely that language would already have achieved complexity. Arsenburg et al (1990) record, at a dig at Kebara, a 60,000 year-old skeleton with a complete hyoid bone, indicating that, anatomically, a wide range of speech sounds was already possible. It has been proposed that language is most responsible for this dramatic increase in skills and symbolic behaviour:

In an intelligent social species such as ours, there is an obvious adaptive benefit in being able to convey an infinite number of precisely structured thoughts merely by modulating exhaled breath (Pinker 1994:25).

Language became a strong social bridging agent, and provided a repository for metaphysical beliefs. A metaphysical realm—inhabited by deities, ancestors and animals—can thus be given precise shape and form. The metaphorical use of language is well suited to encoding and communicating the transcendental. And one may further surmise that this metaphysical realm becomes the inviolable storehouse of human wisdom, lore, belief and law. Deep-structure beliefs can be encoded, transmitted and enforced by means of symbolic language. The Sorcerer, a painting in the Pyrenean foothills dated at 15,000 years old is a mixture of human, bird and animal (see Lewin 1993). This totemic figure indicates a complex attitude to existence, one in which the symbolic intrudes into material life. With the invention and codification of the metaphysical, a symbolic space is created which becomes the

storehouse of human meaning and in which the imperatives of human organization are accorded transcendental status.

It is reasonable to propose that the symbolic functioned to encode the rules of social organization. This metaphysical repository of transcendental law may have been the most powerful agent in the creation of stable social-organizational patterns. By 20,000 years ago, perhaps as much as half of Europe was under glacial ice. The only way in which the species of modern man could survive and flourish in these punishing circumstances was by means of controlled group composition (Stringer & McKie 1996:202). One may speculate that this sophisticated metaphysical cluster of imperatives, the 'rules of the race', retained a singular, organically homogenous character until the creation of the comparatively modern scientific disciplines of mathematics, physics, and other procedural discourses which established their separateness from ancient lore or cultural axioms. These moments of separation or splintering (such as the emergence of the science of evolution) are characterized by great cultural crises as the totemic symbolic centre of human meaning is challenged and diminished. Consequently, the realm of deep-structure non-rational law shrinks until it comprises only religion and ethics—those notoriously invisible meaning-clusters, which continue to enthrall the species at its deepest levels. These powerful relics cannot be displaced by a mere few thousand years of rational disciplinary activity. Instead, their points of articulation—exegesis, moral tracts, metaphysical exhortation and the broad field of the literary phenomenon—have become more active and urgent sites for affirming and modulating the centre of human meaning and value, precisely because this centre disregards the principles and procedures of the modern disciplines. Encoded, symbolic survival strategies are not easily altered or relinquished—their great antiquity gives them powerful precedence over mere rational inquiry. The discourses of religion, ethics and the secular-sacred symbolic representations of the literary phenomenon can be regarded as vestigial places, the diminishing symbolic field which continues to house the ethical-metaphysical totems of the species.

Prior to the division of labour, according to Durkheim, function was less differentiated than in modern societies. One of the significant effects of undifferentiated labour is a more cohesive social unit, one in which individual existence is as a group member. The social order has a high degree of authority—of sacralization—and becomes the symbolic organizing principle of everyday life (see Durkheim 1893 & 1895). Thus, survival is synonymous with group survival, and group survival is strictly regulated and ruled by the symbolic order to which all members subordinate themselves. In short, the symbolic order was, in late Palaeolithic society, its lifeblood, its frame of reference, its knowledge and law, its metaphysics and ethics—an untranscendable horizon. It is that which Ludwig Fleck terms a 'thought collective' (*denkkollektiv*) which 'almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force' (Fleck 1935:41).

The aim of this speculative digression into paleo-anthropology has been to emphasize two contentions, namely, that the immaterial edifice of human meaning is ancient, and that in its 'original' state, it was a singular system of great explanatory force. The present-day remnants of Palaeolithic knowledge-systems point to a tight nexus of first principles which once provided explanations of all material and immaterial phenomena. All-inclusive accounts of causality created the binding agent for the original master narratives. The result of a dramatic increase in knowledge in the last few thousand years has been the proliferation and development of specific, relatively self-sufficient knowledge disciplines, technologies and ideologies, all splintering off from the non-rational core. Contact with the non-rational basis of this core may principally be undertaken by religion, ethics and the literary phenomenon. There exists a vast array of crucial human information within this core for which only an imperfect, perhaps only rudimentary, explanatory discipline exists, namely symbolic anthropology. The elucidation of human meaning requires a sophisticated tool, especially because all knowledge-claims proceeding from its practice will simultaneously constitute new eruptions of the object of study. Roy Wagner reminds us:

Unless we are able to hold our own symbols responsible for the reality we create with them, our notion of symbols and of culture in general remain subject to the 'masking' by which our invention conceals its effects (Wagner 1981:144).

## **2 Axioms, Imperatives and the Realm Beyond Question**

Mary Douglas provides an interesting perspective on the formation of the 'institution' (which includes all deep structure imperatives) based on analogy:

There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set of social relations to another and from these back to nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognized and endowed with self-validating truth (Douglas 1986:48).

Conventions need to be validated by an appeal to something other than themselves. And this may add support to Durkheim's insistence that religion is the unifying element of society because it is in the metaphysical realm that all conventions are given authority. The symbolic exists to order the material and is created specifically for that purpose. Douglas further observes:

Ancestors operating from the other side of life provide the naturalization analogy that seals the social conventions. The focus should be not on how they symbolize the structure of society, but on how they intervene in it. One could say that sitting back and receiving worship is usually the least time-consuming part of an ancestor's duties. The full job description includes continual, active monitoring of daily affairs in response to public demand (Douglas 1986:50).

This is true of the job description of the entire realm of symbolic value, including all secular-sacralized concepts beyond the concepts of religion and its handmaiden, legislative ethics. The symbolic is functional, not simply representational; it intervenes rather than simply embodies. The notion of the ancestor is useful in the constitution of the human symbolic because it accentuates the dynamic, legislative, active principle—'the ancestors are a socially necessary invention' (Douglas, 1986: 51). They confer natural status on the deep structures governing social relations. This natural status, and the realm beyond question, may best be approached by recourse to the notion of the axiom. Rodney Needham explains:

When we try to account for social forms, whether through direct involvement or with the relative detachment of a humane discipline, we naturally tend to rely on premises that we take more or less for granted. In a formalized subject these premises are properly described as axioms. The noun comes from the Greek *axiōma*, that which is thought fitting, decision, self-evident principle; from *axiōn*, hold worthy, from *axios*, worthy (Onions 1966: 66, s.v.). An axiom is not thought to require demonstration; it is accepted without proof as the basis for the logical deduction of other statements such as theorems (Needham 1983:2).

The derivation of the word axiom is thus traceable to worth and worthiness or that which is hallowed, beyond reproach and beyond suspicion. In human knowledge systems, that which is taken for granted becomes invisible while it conditions the basic shape of human expression and behaviour. The notion of the axiom may be transposed into cultural analysis so that one may speak of cultural axioms, the deep-structure network of the totemic and the culturally sacred. This network may be shown as the generative principle of cultural activity.

The proposal that cultures adhere to deep principles or codes has, for decades, been the site of fierce debate among structuralists, structural functionalists and configurationists. (See Singer, 1984:1-31, for a fine summary of the various epistemological and methodological debates in anthropology.) Having neither the space nor the expertise to reinvigorate this lengthy debate here, I wish to offer only

two brief observations. First, while this study favours the notion that deep-structure codes of behaviour, meaning and value govern all cultures, it makes no claim for a foundational equivalence or complementarity of all deep-structure culture patterns. Robert Redfield offers the following observation:

In coming to understand an alien way of life, as in coming to understand an alien art, the course of personal experience is essentially the same: one looks first at an incomprehensible other; one comes to see that other as one's self in another guise (Redfield 1962:488).

This 'family of man' proposition can neither be supported or refuted here. Only an exhaustive study of numerous specific cultures (and one which has overcome the problem of observational perspective) can support or refute this claim. Similarly, I can neither support nor refute the classic structuralist stance that all deep-structure codes and rules cohere into a single, homogenous system or structure which sets up no contradictions or conflicts in individual minds. Only an exhaustive analysis of the codes within complex human cultures can offer evidence one way or another. These matters cannot be settled a priori, in a theoretical manner, but must emerge as a conclusion drawn from large accumulations of evidence and analysis.

Perhaps the most sensible, inclusive, and internally rigorous methodological underpinning for a study of the literary phenomenon would be to follow Singer's proposal in favour of a semiotic anthropology after C.S. Peirce (see Singer 1978; 1980; 1984). Singer summarizes the claims of semiotic anthropology as follows:

The fruitfulness of the language analogy depends not so much on the obvious pervasiveness of language and other sign systems at the heart of social life as on the less obvious fact that the interpretation of signs presupposes an acquaintance with the objects designated by the signs and with the speakers and hearers of the signs (Peirce 1977:196f; Nida 1964; Barthes 1970). To interpret social and cultural sign systems as if they were 'languages' becomes an operatively fruitful procedure when one has such collateral acquaintance. This condition is not unique to the interpretation of nonlinguistic sign systems; it is equally a condition for the interpretation of linguistic signs. In anthropology such a requirement of experience and observation is called 'fieldwork'. Because anthropology fieldwork involves travel, and special experience, training, and study, a semiotic anthropology will contribute to a descriptive semiotic. Its methods and results will not be restricted to the formal or quasi-formal domain of pure semiotic. Although the definitions, rules, and theoretical constructions of pure semiotic will be useful to guide empirical research and analysis, such research and analysis will be something more than a logical deduction from pure semiotic. It will



include inductive and abductive inference as well, and presuppose acquaintance with nonlinguistic objects and events, and with speakers and hearers (Singer 1984:28f).

A semiotic approach, following Peirce's index, icon and symbol division, might be particularly appropriate to a study of the literary phenomenon as a contemporary site of the maintenance of deep human-organizational codes because the medium here is language, for which and from which semiotics was originally developed. Moreover, it may be true that anthropology is methodologically weakest in the area of the symbolic.

The realm of the symbolic should not be viewed as a static set of laws. Mary Douglas says of the maintenance of social order:

The orthodox anthropological interpretation, which was accepted right through the 1960s, assumed a self-stabilizing model in which every item of belief plays its part in maintaining the social order. However, some interesting upheavals in the last quarter century have thrown doubt on the existence of tendencies making for equilibrium in the societies studied by anthropologists. One factor is the theoretical development of the subject and its dealing with new findings. Among these, the most relevant is the growth of critical Marxist anthropology whose historical materialism rejects the homeostatic emphases of the earlier generation (Douglas 1986:28).

In opposition to theories of homeostasis and equilibrium, this 'critical Marxist anthropology' proposes only that the period of equilibrium may be brief, rather than long. What is common to both the 'orthodox' and the 'critical' here is that both place belief centrally in the social order. At any instant, a symbolically controlled social order exists, while during the following instant or the following century, this order alters. The process of maintenance and interrogation is ceaseless but, at any given instance, may appear static. As Douglas states:

The categories of political discourse, the cognitive bases of the social order, are being negotiated. At whatever point of this process the anthropologist clicks his camera and switches on his tapes he can usually record some temporary balance of satisfaction, when each individual is momentarily constrained by others and by the environment (Douglas 1986:29).

What needs to be accentuated here is that the nexus of codes is constantly in the process of alteration, although cultures have vested interests in making these codes appear to be homeostatic.

Dan Sperber says:

All these learned terms -signifier and signified, paradigm and syntagm, code, mytheme will not for long hide the following paradox: that if Lévi-Strauss thought of myths as a semiological system, the myths thought themselves in him, and without his knowledge, as a cognitive system (Sperber 1974:84).

Symbolic anthropology will always be haunted by this 'cognitive system' it proposes, for the proposition itself entails that symbolic anthropology is one of its products. The discipline then faces the prospect of forever being a fragment of its own object of study. Moreover, one must be reminded that the nexus of symbolic imperatives has no independent existence. From the perspective of anthropology, the metaphysical is operative only insofar as it constitutes some of the furniture of an individual, living mind. This observation leads directly to the debate concerning the primal constitution of the self. At one extreme, Ludwig Fleck proposes that the unconscious is cultural:

The individual within the collective is never, or hardly ever, conscious of the prevailing thought style which almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force upon his thinking, and with which it is not possible to be at variance (Fleck 1935:41).

However, the long-standing dispute between structural anthropologists and Freudian psychoanalysts concerning the nature of the primal engine driving all human action and meaning has not been resolved. Does the id (or even the family) take precedence over the cultural unconscious in the governance of deep patterning in the individual?<sup>1</sup> Spiro offers an account of 'cultural propositions' and the process of internalization of such propositions. At the deepest level of acquisition, propositions instigate action or are affective, precisely because they have been absorbed into the self (Spiro 1987: 36ff). The usefulness of Spiro's discussion can be located in his own straddling of the disciplines of anthropology and psychology, which gives rise to the explanation of how a cultural proposition exists not only as part of a general, cultural belief system, but as a part of the individual's motivational system (Spiro 1987:38). Spiro gives a

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that the term 'cultural unconscious' (derived from Rossi 1974) may be a confusion of competing disciplines. However, psychoanalysts must concede that much of the deep patterning in the individual is cultural in origin, while anthropologists must concede that cultural patterning can only ever occur within specific consciousnesses. My borrowing of the term 'cultural unconscious' does not dissolve the debate, but calls for a truce in the present study.

degree of technical specificity to the process whereby individuals absorb beliefs and how, in the process of deep absorption into the structure of the self, these beliefs pass into the realm 'beyond question'. This mode of inquiry does not treat cultural axioms as abstractions or as reconstructions of a group belief system but as active components of individual emotional life, giving rise to an 'anthropology of self and feeling' (Rosaldo 1984). It is not necessary here to debate whether or not all structures of thought and feeling are culturally determined. The value of psycho-anthropology in the present study is that it begins to isolate precise, 'local' ways in which culture operates at the level of the individual, thus confirming the existence and operation of imperatives within individual functioning which are of cultural origin.

This discussion of the cultural unconscious can be given greater specificity by mentioning Shweder's notion of the 'cultural frame' (Shweder 1984) which is defined as being grounded in neither logic nor experience, and which is thus non-rational. Moreover, cultural frames are participating elements in the construction of reality, which thereby locates them at deep levels of human functioning. However, to say that cultural frames are non-rational is, in my opinion, only to say that they could not be 'naturally' acquired by an individual as a result of logical deduction or as a result of real-world experiences and are thus 'cultural' in origin. But this does not mean that these cultural frames do not have a deep-structure logic or that they did not originate in the dim past as a result of logic or experience. The point is that these frames do not require validation by means of appeals to logic or experience. They become part of the furniture of cultural-mental space and have entered the realm beyond question.

### 3 The Literary Phenomenon and the Realm Beyond Question

I begin this section with a quotation by Ihab Hassan:

The question returns, stubborn, hidden in all our exactions: what precisely did I, does anyone, expect to find in literature? Beauty and Truth, really? The spoor of power? Some perverse pleasure of the text? Balm for loneliness, for loss? An endless vision going endlessly awry? The wordy glory of civilization? Occult knowledge? The redemption of reality? A mirror in the roadway, a pie in the sky? All these and none: simply a way to make a living? (Hassan 1993:2).

Hassan's blunt questions are appropriate. And perhaps the literary phenomenon is 'simply a way to make a living'. Nevertheless, anthropologically, there is nothing simple about this living, one which occupies such prominent cultural space. In an essay titled 'The Future of Literary Studies', H.V. Gumbrecht asks:

Is it not astonishing that governments, taxpayers, and parents have consistently financed academic disciplines whose functions are anything but obvious, even to their practitioners? (Gumbrecht 1995:508).

Remarkably, the literary phenomenon has escaped the intense scrutiny of modern anthropology, perhaps because literary theory itself has registered such strong claims to being the mechanism of inquiry into the literary phenomenon as a cultural activity.

Durkheim offers an interpretation of the literary phenomenon as a necessity:

By determining the main cause of the progress of the division of labour we have at the same time determined the essential factor in what is called civilization.

It is itself a necessary consequence of the changes occurring in the volume and density of societies. If science, art and economic activity develop, it is as the result of a necessity imposed upon men. It is because for them there is no other way to live, in the new condition in which they are placed (Durkheim 1984:275f).

Art (and for our purposes literature) as a strict necessity in complex societies, rather than as an exclusive or leisure pursuit, is a perspective seldom offered in modern times. For Durkheim, art is self-evidently crucial and central to the operation of human organization. In short, it is necessary to view the literary phenomenon as a fundamental social-regulatory device. Various mindshifts may be necessary for the analysis of the literary phenomenon.

The first is to view the components of the literary phenomenon—the production and reception of literature, or author, text and reader—as components of a single event. The ‘primary’ and the ‘secondary’ are structural elements of a larger whole. The production and reception of literature have been miscast in the division between literature (an artistic phenomenon) and criticism (a procedural academic discipline). They constitute components of the same endeavour—a mediated means of accessing the secular sacred. The second, related shift of perception is to view the literary phenomenon as a process rather than as a series of products—an act rather than a cluster of things, a ritual rather than a museum. A thing-based approach to the literary phenomenon causes all sorts of trouble. The text itself is seen to contain all meaning. The primary (that is, the literary) is inappropriately viewed as distinct from the secondary (that is, literary response, interpretation and theory). When viewed as an object-phenomenon, the first impulse is to separate objects. When viewed as an event-phenomenon, the impulse is to retain a strong sense of the whole and of the flow of meaning. Any spectator at a football game knows that in order to arrive at an appreciation of the game, attention must be focused on the process and not the

individual 'objects' of veneration (the players). Such object-veneration does occur in football, but only insofar as an object contributes to the process (the game). It is a natural human tendency to venerate things, precisely because this is the way that cultures attempt to transcend process. Nevertheless, the literary phenomenon is an extended totemic practice, a sequence of action. Significance and timelessness are seen, by our species, as necessarily linked. All types of veneration accentuate transcendence as if the ultimate goal of mortality was immortality. And because immortality is beyond process it follows that veneration is thing-based. This deep-structure human tendency has played havoc within the domain of literary studies because, despite the eclipse of the New Criticism, the discipline remains thing-based, with all of the concomitant blindnesses.

The cluster of phenomena described as activities within the literary phenomenon serves to mediate between the individual and matrices of human meaning, between initiative and norm. Mieke Bal says:

The integration of social norms and individual desires can be acted out, ideally, through language, since the expression of fantasies in language is culturally validated and allows for otherwise unacceptable thoughts to escape from repression. Language itself shares this conjunction of the utterly individual and the utterly social in its function as a tool that bridges the gap between the two as far as it is possible at all (Bal 1990:6).

An event-based anthropology of the literary phenomenon strives to achieve explication and comparison of moments of ritual action in the acts of writing, reading and theorizing. Thus, the basic unit of meaning is not the 'primary' literary text but all acts of encoding and decoding undertaken by writers, critics and theorists. Victor Turner may be of use in carrying this discussion further. Turner says:

I came to see performances of ritual as distinct phases in the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes and adapted to their external environment. From this standpoint the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field (Turner 1967:20).

Simply stated, the literary phenomenon may be characterized as a series of cultural-participative acts centred in the affirmation or interrogation of the matrix of cultural meaning and value. The 'primary' text acts as a centering device with totemic status. And the 'secondary' activities (of response, criticism and theory) are communal totemic activities.

- These totemic occasions may be spatially and temporally singular and to-

temic specific as in conferences, colloquia, meetings of literary societies and award ceremonies or they may be spatially and temporally dispersed as in the production of published scholarship. The centering function performed by the 'primary' text provides a site of residence, a fixed point or an address at which anyone may call, in order to tinker with, or simply reinforce, this thick nexus of cultural meaning. David Raybin (1990: 20-21) makes the connection between Shelley's 'spirit of the age' and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the doxa, the 'class of that which is taken for granted' (1977: 169). The text deemed 'literary' is an invitation to the individual to participate in a continuous totemic event constituted by the sum of literary-appreciative micro-events or moments. Providing the doxa (or network of cultural imperatives) with an address performs three crucial functions. First, the text is seen to anchor aspects of the doxa, giving them thing-status and, in the process, absencing them from time and flux. Thus cultures can take comfort from the perennial and enduring nature of its doxa. Second, as an invitation, the text provides a forum for human expression of, and response to, aspects of the doxa. Precisely because the doxa is 'beyond question' it is not normally discussed. Revered textuality provides a suitable site for human participation in the doxa. Third, tinkering with the doxa may occur only under controlled conditions because, despite the fact that a doxa is constantly altering (usually in tiny steps) it is necessary for it to be seen to be transtemporal. Hallowed textuality offers a reassuringly stable and respectful venue at which doxa maintenance may occur. In short, so as to prevent deep-structure anxiety (and, in the extreme, a chaotic interregnum within cultural meaning) totemic symbols are brought to the surface under strictly controlled conditions.

The doxa may alternatively be described as the matrix of group meaning, Geertz's 'collective conscience' (1973: 220), a fusion of metaphysical and ethical notions which may never be articulated at the level of the individual. And by offering aspects of this web as timeless venerable objects or instances of 'art', what is offered in the literary phenomenon for group participation is non-negotiable negotiables. Only within totemic practice can the structure of group values be operated on; only within the strict confines of those revered objects and instances (which, in their cultural centrality, are deemed to have transcended culture), can the apparently non-negotiable be negotiated. At this stage in the development of anthropology, the precise structure and contents of each macro-cultural reservoir of deep-structure imperatives is insufficiently known. The proposal that the literary phenomenon is the site for the reaffirmation or destabilization of cultural axioms may have to await more specific anthropological data.

Art, for Victor Turner, exists in the 'subjunctive mood', in which 'suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities, and so forth, all become legitimate' (Turner, 1977: vii). This is an activity quite apart from the routine enactment of collective imperatives. And, in the subjunctive mood, the process of 'art' may

generate restructurings of the 'collective conscience' which, according to Turner, 'may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jurial models that control the centre of a society's ongoing life' (1977: vii). In *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Turner goes so far as to place the phenomenon of art at the very centre of cultural functioning precisely because it is absented from the everyday flow of the continuous, unreflective enactment and implementation of cultural imperatives. The very liminality of art provides it with a special status. The subjunctive mood presumably takes many forms in culture ranging from shamanism and ritual, to poetry and dramatic performances. Each form functions as a bubble beyond everyday life, one in which deep-structure imperatives may be renegotiated. Oddly enough, this notion returns us to Shelley's postulate that artists are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world', as Turner (1974:28) observes, although it is the entire event-cluster of writing, response and interpretation which constitutes the liminal act—the entire literary phenomenon rather than only the literary 'artefact'.

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner offers the following account of liminality:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions (Turner 1977:95).

Precisely because of its indeterminate status within structured human meaning and convention, the liminal act functions to reflect on human meaning either to reinforce or to modify it. It is simultaneously curatorial and revolutionary, tradition-supporting and tradition-altering. It functions to re-assert 'common sense' or to introduce 'uncommon sense' (Turner, 1985: 160) into the cultural unconscious. Turner adds:

A community of human beings sharing a tradition of ideas and customs may bend existentially back upon itself and survey its extant condition not solely in cognitive terms but also by means of tropes, metaphors, metonyms, and symbolic configurations ... (Turner 1985:124).

Turner's speculations on what may be termed 'axiom maintenance' might provide valuable groundwork for an anthropology of the literary phenomenon. Another study which does much to establish a discipline of the culturally totemic is Warner's *The*

*Living and the Dead* (1959). Warner excavates and analyses the ritual and totemic practices in 'Yankee City', thus applying the anthropological perspective to an instance of the deep imperatives operative within a modern New England urban community. This perspective needs to be applied to the literary phenomenon, although with a more expansive theory of the 'symbol'. Warner describes symbols as follows:

... the essential components of a symbol are the sign and its meaning, the former usually being the outward perceptible form which is culturally identifiable and recognizable, the latter being the interpretation of the sign, usually composed of concepts of what is being interpreted and the positive and negative values and feelings which 'cluster about' the sign. The sign's meaning may refer to other objects or express and evoke feelings. The values and feelings may relate to the inner world of the person or be projected outward on the social and natural worlds beyond (Warner 1959:4).

In Warner's work the tendency is to seek singular totemic objects or drawings to describe the field of totemic symbols which 'relate to the inner world of the person'. What is neglected in this process is a focus on discursive tracts (in this instance, poems, plays and narrative fiction) as performing similar totemic functions. While it is true that anthropology has paid attention to mythological and religious narratives in order to access the human symbolic, the realm of the literary has not been accorded central symbolic status in such an investigation. The theory of symbols (as developed by Peirce, Levi-Strauss, Durkheim and the host of theorists who have refined and expanded our knowledge of the functions of symbols) needs to be developed so as to incorporate the literary phenomenon within its scope. This enterprise is quite different to the widespread practice of identifying specific linguistic symbols in a literary text because it seeks to locate the totemic or symbolic value and function of entire texts or portions of discourse in addition to the symbolic value of individual words. What unifies all of these discursive units of radically different sizes and characters is function. To return to the above passage by Warner, it is the 'values and feelings' which 'cluster about the sign', the various semantic enclaves invoked by various literary-discursive tracts, that should fall under the gaze of symbolic anthropology. The cultural-symbolic function of the literary phenomenon may be difficult to discern because the totems are occluded within literary discourse (or in fact are the discourses themselves), providing symbols of extraordinary complexity and opacity.

Deep-structure cultural imperatives—that which otherwise might be called the cultural unconscious or the symbolic grammar of human organization—require association with other forms of authority, especially those which exist entirely beyond question. In this way, such cultural imperatives increase their authority by increasing their axiomatic status. These are deep taboos which operate as axiomatic



of the universe. And the two most prominent of these are 'nature' and the 'metaphysical'.

'Nature' must be subjected to scrutiny because what is referred to here is the set of properties culturally ascribed to nature. Between the strictly detailed scientific knowledge (of each species, each eco-system and each meteorological event) on the one hand, and the rich and complex mythology ascribed to nature on the other hand, there is a gulf. It is the latter culturally-designated symbol cluster that concerns us here, one which is entirely human in construction, a realm which reflects cultural norms and myths, to which myths and ideologies appeal for 'truth'. Similarly, the 'metaphysical' realm is a truth place, proposed and sacralized by mortals, then accorded independent existence. In short, the world above, and the 'natural' world around us, constitute two realms beyond contest. Both realms are thickly mystified, rich in centuries of enculturation, labyrinths of taboo. It is not my intention here to enumerate the multiple qualities associated with these realms. Rather, it need only be stated that all other realms aspiring to axiomatic and transcendental status gain enormously by association with these realms. And the literary phenomenon—in both its 'primary' and 'secondary' manifestations—is no exception.

The history of world literature reveals a perennial obsession with 'nature'—as mother, as origin, as centre, and as the resilient heart of the planet. Palaeolithic pictorial representation suggests that this has been so for at least 30,000 years. (One may even speculate that the species has always revered and symbolized nature, for obvious reasons.) And, in literary criticism (the 'secondary' products of the literary phenomenon), there are frequent conceptual appeals to the 'natural': terms such as 'organic unity', 'rhythm', 'coherence', 'form', 'growth' and 'beauty' may all be making direct appeals to the 'natural realm beyond question'. The literary phenomenon, in both its primary and secondary manifestations, is rich in appeals to culturally legislated versions of nature.

The metaphysical realm plays an equally prominent role in the literary-phenomenon. The history of world literature has always had strong links with all aspects of the metaphysical—with organized religion, mysticism, the world of 'faery', truth, beauty (in its eternal, rather than transitory nature), the unchanging and the immortal. Literary criticism has been eager to maintain strong links with the metaphysical. The term 'literature' has been defined as that which transcends the origins of its birth and which has universal, transcultural and transtemporal value. To participate in the literary is to be sublime. The notion of canonicity is the attempt to assemble sets of texts which are always, in themselves, beautiful and true. The canon is a literary-metaphysical construct. The practice of literary criticism is to be of service to the supertext; the critic is the handmaiden to the shrine of literature. Moreover, literature has always been presumed to have an ethically legislative function, and most ethical norms have a strong metaphysical base.

This brief discussion of the literary in terms of the human categories of nature and the metaphysical suggests that the literary phenomenon is at the very centre of the imperatives of human organization. It is part of the reservoir of human-organizational meaning and value. In order for anthropology successfully to scrutinize the meaning clusters, or high-order symbols generated within the literary phenomenon, attempts will have to be made to isolate the terms which best express these deep norms. These may be beyond words because of their axiomatic, often invisible existence. Moreover, they may best be accessed as implied clusters within entire texts or portions of discourse. However, as a preliminary investigation, the following terms may be identified as deep-structure values expressed 'in' texts:

authority	harmony
balance	humanity
beauty	integrity
clarity	propriety
elevation	purity
equality	specificity
freedom	truth
generality	wisdom
grace	wholeness

I have listed these terms alphabetically because there is a potentially infinite number of ways in which the meaning-clusters possibly generated by these terms could be arranged in terms of synonymy, complementarity or opposition. In addition to those above, the following terms may be identified as deep-structure values expressed 'by' texts:

complexity	universality
form	veracity
subtlety	verisimilitude
perspicacity	

When one begins to discuss ways in which these terms, inhabiting the literary phenomenon, might mean, one is led to the notion of 'semantic enclaves' (Wallis, 1975). This is useful because the term can include all shapes and sizes of clusters from single terms to entire volumes, genres and literary-historical periods. The literary phenomenon attempts to make these enclaves addressable in language—to bring them to the social field in a particularly useful, easily dispersible form, namely within and by means of complex written language.

Roy Wagner defines human meaning systems as follows:

In every 'culture', every community or communicating human enterprise, the range of conventional contexts is centred around [sic] a generalized image of man and human interpersonal relationships, and it articulates that image. These contexts define and create a meaning for human existence and human sociality by providing a collective relational base, one that can be actualized explicitly or implicitly through an infinite variety of possible expressions. They include such things as language, social 'ideology', what is called 'cosmology', and all the other relational sets that anthropologists delight in calling 'systems' (Wagner 1981:40).

The collective relational base is established by means of symbols (abstractions which regulate and define the relational base) which, in time, come to attain their own prestige and importance, distinct from the numerous real-life instances which represent their presence or absence. Thus, the founding concepts of each society become valued in themselves and all members can unequivocally give allegiance to a symbol such as 'justice' or 'purity' without necessarily having a 'full' concept of justice or purity in his or her consciousness at the time. Allegiance to an empty (or scantily-filled) concept is a shorthand way of endorsing the relational base of society, like using acronyms for which one has forgotten the original term. According to Wagner:

The symbols abstract themselves from the symbolized. Because we are obliged to use symbols in order to communicate, and because these symbols must necessarily include more or less conventional associations among the sum available, the effect of symbolic self-abstraction, and the consequent contextual contrast, is always a factor in symbolization (Wagner 1981:42f).

Moreover, Wagner makes the distinction between the conventional and the particular, the former referring to the set of conventionalized principles and prescriptions with strong moral force and the latter to individual performance which both participates (to some extent) in the generalized convention and which inhabits its own situational particulars. This may seem an obvious distinction but it may have strong explanatory force when applied to the literary phenomenon. Here, 'significant particulars' are offered (in the form of simulations of discrete human situations) whose relation to the convention is strongly stated or implied. This relation can be supportive or interrogative—in either instance, the reader is led from the particular to the significant convention and is asked, by the specificities of the simulated particular, either to endorse or to question the rightness of one or more aspects of the significant convention. Wagner continues:

Convention, which integrates an act into the collective, serves the purpose of

drawing collective distinctions between the innate and the realm of human action. Invention, which has the effect of continually differentiating acts and events from the conventional, continually puts together ('metaphorizes') and integrates disparate contexts. And the cultural dialectic, which necessarily includes both of these, becomes a universe of integrating distinctions and distinctive integrations, drawing people together by resolving their continuous action into 'the innate' and 'the artificial', and distinguishing individual persons, acts, and events by combining innate and artificial contexts in novel and highly specific ways (Wagner 1981:53).

One of the functions of the literary phenomenon—and perhaps its most important function—is to re-integrate contexts in new ways, or to re-inforce prevailing integrations. The literary phenomenon is one way for the individual to negotiate the 'dialectic of invention and convention' (Wagner, 1981: 55) at deep levels in cultural logic. Wagner comments on the literary phenomenon as follows:

Our novels, plays, and movies place familiar relationships (like 'love', 'parenthood', 'tolerance', 'democracy') in exotic, historical, dangerous, or futuristic situations, both to control those situations and make them meaningful and to recharge the relationships themselves (Wagner 1981:59).

Moreover, the acts of endorsing and questioning aspects of cultural logic perform the important function of interpreting culture—'filling' totemic symbols, re-rooting them in specificity and thereby bestowing on them the appearance of living symbols. However, a science of complex symbols may be fraught with difficulty. Wagner observes:

A science of symbols would seem as inadvisable as such other quixotic attempts to state the unstateable as a grammar of metaphor or an absolute dictionary (Wagner 1981:xviii).

Such a science may be unable to lift itself clear of deep thought-norms in order to conduct its business from a position outside of the semantic enclaves and, moreover, it may not have the capacity to create an investigative vocabulary beyond the terms listed above. Nevertheless, while the task is enormous and probably flawed, it may not be impossible.

In a discussion of Durkheim, Mary Douglas says:

He taught that publicly standardized ideas (collective representations) constitute social order. He recognized that the hold they have upon the

individual varies in strength. Calling it moral density, he tried to measure its strength and to assess the effects of its weakness (Douglas 1986:96).

The notion of 'moral density', of internalized and standardized ideas, comes close to describing the place of the literary phenomenon in its capacity as the site of secular-sacred collective representations, an integral part of which representations is the belief that we are entering a 'dangerous, new liberty'. Douglas explains:

When we also believe that we are the first generation uncontrolled by the idea of the sacred, and the first to come face to face with one another as real individuals, and that in consequence we are the first to achieve full self-consciousness, there is incontestably a collective representation (Douglas 1986:99).

The literary phenomenon invites individuals to remain faithful to collective representations or to consider new versions of collective representation.

What are the qualities which make the literary phenomenon so suitable as a medium for the presentation and maintenance of the secular-sacred symbolic or the realm of cultural imperatives? First, it offers itself as 'make-believe' insofar as it frequently seeks to mimic representation of the real while insisting on its own disqualification from real-life representation. This provides an 'as if' quality, an eternal fictionality within which to explore the sensitive spots of the human symbolic. In the same way that eunuchs are permitted intimacy with royal wives, literature is allowed intimately to offer life simulations because it can only ever be symbolically intrusive. Literature is permitted to mimic because it is deemed to be not of the same order as real-life representations. Of course, the ontological distinction between factual and fictional narratives can be neither neat nor simple. 'Factual' narratives such as history may be regarded as participants in rhetorical and narrative convention, which complicates their claims to simple facticity (see, for example, Hayden White, 1978 and 1987). And 'fictional' narratives, such as a novel by Dickens, offer representations (of mid-Victorian society) which might qualify as accurate depictions while no claims of veracity are sought for the characters or the specific events in which they participate. Nevertheless, these philosophical issues seldom intrude into the macro-cultural notion of 'fictionality', which retains a certain simplicity.

The second capacity enjoyed by literature as a medium for the representation of the secular-sacred symbolic is that by means of the mechanism of free indirect style or interior monologue, it can offer (or claim to offer) the immediate contents of consciousness or consciousnesses in one narrative. Fiction can burrow deeper than narratives claiming to offer 'real-life' representations, because authors of fiction have unlimited access to the consciousnesses of their characters.

Many of the 'great' characters of literature participate in greatness because they are regarded as quintessential representations of aspects of 'human-ness' (as a result of the epistemological licence authors have with their characters.)

Third, literature can emphasize or accentuate whatever aspect of human organization it chooses. This capacity for selection produces numerous genres—from lyric, to the epic and dramatic (and all variations within and between these genres) in order to highlight some aspect (either explicitly or implicitly) of human organization, meaning and value. These three qualities of the literary—eunuch-status, interior licence and the capacity for selection—enable the literary phenomenon to act as an exceptional site for the maintenance of the human symbolic.

Melford Spiro reminds us that

the social functions of symbol systems largely depend on their cognitive meaning, and the meanings which symbol systems have for social actors derive from and are related to their social context (Spiro 1987:287).

It is important to remember that while anthropologists enumerate and describe the imperatives or symbolic deep-structures which constitute the core belief system in any society, they may pay inadequate attention to their cognitive meaning in individual minds. How do members of a society ingest these deep codes? The answer to this question can be ascertained only by means of extensive empirical research. Members receive indications of these codes from an array of sources—the popular media, religion, the family, instructional institutions and peers, to name a few. But the content of these signifiers may be almost nil. Every member of a society may hold fiercely to the notion of 'equality' but with no knowledge of political systems or the precise and numerous ways in which capillary power operates in complex societies. One of the strong sites at which members may begin to 'fill in' their empty deep-structure symbols is the literary phenomenon, as here they are offered some details of the content of one or more of these high-order symbols—as well as a strong authorial interest position relative to the symbols—all within a compelling exemplary instance. As Turner points out:

A single symbol, in fact, represents many things at the same time: it is multivocal not univocal. Its referents are not all of the same logical order but are drawn from many domains of social experience and ethical evaluation (Turner 1977:52).

The multivocality of symbolism, in its broadest sense, is a key feature of the literary phenomenon, and is the mechanism whereby the secular-sacred symbolic is accessed. The employment of symbolism by writers does not imply that readers simply decode

inherent meanings. All participants within the literary phenomenon participate in ascribing meaning and significance to symbols and symbol clusters. It is the heterodox, multi-referential and evocative nature of potent symbols that attracts their repeated reiteration by all participants. Stephen Foster stresses the contingent, changing and social meanings of symbols:

Symbols and meanings are brought together however tenuously in the white heat of social events, not paraded about, already linked hand in hand, after being taken out of cold storage (a cultural repertoire) for the occasion. Here 'social events' also encompass interpretative practices (Foster 1990:124).

However, in the attempt to describe the literary phenomenon, it may be that there is no general explanation binding all instances. Steven Knapp says:

The right conclusion, to draw, in my view, is that it makes no sense, on any axiological theory, to assess the general costs and benefits of any very large and various set of institutions and practices ....

Whatever may be the specific benefits of particular literary works in particular social contexts, the right conclusion to draw about the ethical and political benefits of literary interest in general and as such seems to be, so far, that there may not be any (Knapp 1993:97f).

Knapp's cautionary remarks remind us always to ground all propositions concerning literature's functions and effects in specific cultures at specific times. Debates concerning the generality or specificity of functions within the literary phenomenon may only be settled by extensive anthropological investigation rather than by speculation. The present study has done little more than to point towards the possibility of an anthropology of the literary phenomenon, arguably one of the most dense and least penetrable of the sites of human meaning and value.

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