

Book Reviews

The Savage in Literature. Brian Street. R.K.P. London. 1975.
xii, 207 pp. £5.75

Brian Street has broken new ground with his book The Savage in Literature. He has drawn attention to the influence of anthropological theory on the image of the savage in English literature from 1858-1920. The reason for the choice of these dates is not altogether clear, but with a training both in anthropology and literature Dr. Street is in a good position to show where the two disciplines meet. As he says in chapter 1:

"... Part of the object of this work is to show how and to some extent why particular aspects of 'primitive' life were seized upon by many European writers in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries and taken as representative of the whole...Such descriptions tell us more about the Victorians themselves than about the people they purport to describe". (p.2).

His book suggests, though it does not altogether prove, that current anthropological theory was one of the main influences underlying and re-enforcing the choices that writers made in their portrayal of the primitive. Of course the problem of selection is not only confined to novelists; the problem of how to represent the "mass of orderly life" also confronts anthropologists - in our day as much as in Tylor's. Dr. Street does not consider directly the origins of those representations which affected the perceptions of the anthropologists. Certainly the 'feedback' between a society's representations - and scientific enquiry - is more difficult to evaluate. But his main interest is in literature and the influence of anthropological theory upon it. He states that:

"... It is one of the contentions of this work that the development of a body of theory in academic anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century altered this image [of the primitive] more than slightly..." (p.5, my italics).

But this perception of the 'primitive', albeit in a fictional form, also tells us something about the society in which these writers were operating:

"A major concern of this work is the conflict between 'romance' and 'reality'. And since the reality is the 'character' of other cultures, the enquiry is appropriately an anthropological one". (p.11).

One assumes, though, that the 'reality' which Dr. Street mainly deals with is that of Victorian society - in its perception of 'other cultures'. It is the 'point-counter-point' in the perception of the Other that enables us to examine the way the Victorians perceived their world. Hence it is the identification and charting of their 'collective representations' (surely the leitmotif of Brian Street's book) that gives this study its anthropological flavour.

However, to gauge the 'influence' of anthropological theory on imaginative writing is not an easy task. Merely to identify bits and pieces of 'theory' floating around in a novel results in a serious distortion of

the work - if not in its total reduction. One can only suggest that certain ideas were current in the intellectual and social milieu in which the writer worked. Thus with reference to the theory of Evolution, and the way it affected the comparison of savages with children, Dr. Street observes:

"...Haggard, interested in anthropology through a long friendship with Andrew Lang, often echoes the anthropological comparison..." (p.69).

and

"...Although there is no specific references to Frazer in Nada the Lily, and Haggard's interpretation is not based on Frazerian Divine Kingship, nevertheless the very fact of Haggard's interest in the symbolic nature of chiefship arose from the climate of thought that writers like Frazer were creating at the time..." (p.151-2).

In other words, despite, in spite of the 'echoes' and 'climate(s) of opinion' created by anthropologists, and definitely affecting the perceptual world in which the writer worked, one cannot assume a straightforward reflection of the one in the other. But there is also the possibility that the writer will come to be seen primarily as a passive agent. From this perspective the writer's task is to ornament in fiction the representations of his culture shaped by the anthropologists. Thus anthropological theories were represented in "fictional form" (p.73), where they were brought to life "on the ground"; they were given "life" in "vivid characters and exciting adventures" (p.80); and the writers only served to add "personal details" to the "stereotype" or "common core" of ideas. (p.80).

Of course to say that the writers were concerned with "dressing up" certain scientific theories in a fictional form is an over-simplification. Dr. Street acknowledges this when, in restating his thesis, he says:

"... Occasionally specific references to scientific studies can be found in the fiction. The object here is less to point these out than to demonstrate the use of general themes, to show what happens to them in literature, and to show the subservience of empirical thought to the framework of thought of the observer" (p.98).

But as the above selection of quotations may have indicated, there is no theoretical discussion of the relationship of literature to its period, and the validity of using the former to investigate the latter. While there may be no definitive answers to such questions, Dr. Street does not grant that they even exist. Furthermore he gives no consideration to differences in literary genre; novels, poems, detective stories are all grist to the mill (and why stop there?). In spite of his interest in a particular period, he has little feel for the effect of history on literary 'traditions'. For example, he refers to T.S. Eliot's transformation of the metaphor of 'Divine Kingship' in 'The Waste Land', in the following terms:

"By doing so, he gives it [the metaphor] new imaginative life, makes it seem more significant to his contemporaries and their condition, and makes it part of the literary furnishings of the English-speaking world for generations to come" (p.178).

Yet even accepting the (uncontroversial) view that the idea of Divine Kingship was originally culled from Frazer, Dr. Street doesn't emphasize that the significance of this metaphor lies in the way it is used. For while Eliot draws his metaphor(s) from 'traditional' sources, he uses them to confront us with the alien nature of our own tradition (which at the same time we cannot live without). Hence the relation of Tradition and the Individual Talent (and the relation of the writer to his public) after the First World War was totally different from that in 1858 - when Coral Island was written.

Jeffrey Meyers has pointed out in Fiction & the Colonial Experience (1973) that the appeal of the primitive to writers of the 'colonial novel' from Kipling to Graham Greene was twofold. Firstly it enabled them to posit the "heart of darkness" that is potentially within us all, and which can burst out whenever 'civilised' constraints are removed or weakened. Secondly, the portrayal of the individual's relations to the hostile world of the tropics:

"...often symbolises modern man's alienation from his own society and civilisation. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz, who is the prototype of Eliot's hollow men..." (Meyers, p.lx).

Now while 'alienation' may not be prominent in the literature of the first half of Dr. Street's study - where he seems most at home - it receives no attention from him in the second. Thus a wide range of ideological and political factors are ignored. And Jeffrey Meyers' book a significant contribution to the subject - receives no mention.

In addition, one is still unsure as to how 'anthropological' this study is. Is it solely a contribution to the 'history of ideas' - through literature and science? Or does the 'anthropological' perspective somehow enrich our understanding in a new way? An anthropological training should move us away from the consideration of discrete 'ideas' or 'beliefs', and make us look at the "collective representations"?) His final quotation from Evans-Pritchard raises the question as to the difference between "collective representations" identified in a pre-literate society and those identified in written texts. Perhaps a discussion of "collective representations" in literary and anthropological study would have been useful.

One's overall feeling, by the end of the book, is that Dr. Street has not finally decided what he is trying to do. The focus of the book is unclear, and many of his statements of intent (as I have tried to indicate) are subtly contradictory. At times the material is not well organized; though Chapter 4 seems to me the best argued part of the work. Thus while the book is in no way a 'monster', it certainly is 'baggy'.

In spite of the frustrations of the book, and the anecdotal nature of much of its presentation, I found a great deal to enjoy. There are many fascinating nuggets of information, such as the anonymous Oxonian who thought that 'primitive' races were inferior because they didn't practise practical jokes. The fact that there is much to disagree with indicates the stimulating and controversial nature of this book.

Daniel Tabor.

Tales of Power Carlos Castaneda Hodder & Stoughton 287pp

Reading Castaneda: A prologue to the Social Sciences Donald Silverman Routledge and Kegan Paul 113pp £1.95 (paperback)

It is fifteen years since Carlos Castaneda met Juan Matus in an Arizona border town. In that time he has produced four redactions of his experiences as apprentice to the Yaqui brujo. With the fourth, Tales of Power, the cycle is completed: Castaneda finally arrives at the 'sorcerer's explanation' and bids farewell to Don Juan. The various techniques used in Castaneda's training are shown to be merely instrumental in the attainment of 'knowledge': the psychotropic plants, 'stopping the world', 'erasing personal history', 'the right way of walking', are all, ultimately, distracting tricks, didactic devices designed to open him up to other possible realities - even 'seeing' itself is only one of several routes ('dancing', 'dreaming') to this knowledge. The role imagery of the previous volumes - plant-gatherer, hunter, warrior, traveller - is redeployed and the experience of non-ordinary reality described in them subsumed under a new pair of concepts, tonal and nagual.

The analysis of these two categories occupies over half the book and is an extended attempt to adumbrate the relation between 'ordinary' and 'non-ordinary' reality. Conventional anthropological accounts of Mexican cultures describe the tonal as the guardian spirit obtained by a child at birth, and the nagual as the animal that sorcerers transform themselves into. Don Juan, of course, mocks these descriptions: the tonal, he says, is 'everything we know', then, imitating Castaneda, he says it is 'the social person', the nagual is everything we rule out in making sense of the world, everything the tonal is not; the tonal is 'reason', the nagual is 'will'. This is not to suggest that the two are a pair in the (colloquial) sense of mind and matter or good and evil, for this would be to turn the nagual into an item of the tonal. The nagual is possibility, a different order of reality, 'that part of us for which there is no description - no words, no names, no feelings, no knowledge'. So we re-enter the realm of the ineffable, of ciphers and language-shadows. And even this brush with comprehension is subverted: the nagual cannot be described, says Don Juan, it cannot even be thought about, it has no meaning - 'A warrior does not care about meanings'. The sorcerer's explanation itself is 'not what you would call an explanation' - he speaks of 'handling' not 'understanding' experience - 'nevertheless it makes the world and its mysteries, if not clear, at least less awesome. That should be the essence of an explanation, but that is not what you seek. You're after the reflection of your ideas'.

Don Juan's ideal of the knowledge practised by the free, fluid, 'tight' warrior embodies a kind of relativism that is outside our experience. It is an open system of knowledge not in the sense that it is open to criticism and change but in the sense of being open to coexistent alternative realities. Don Juan's system of thought emphasizes the provisionality of both world-views, and the necessity of both. Thus 'Order in our perception is the exclusive realm of the tonal; only there can our actions have a sequence, only there are they like stairways where one can count the steps. There is nothing of that sort in the nagual. Therefore the view of the tonal is a tool, and as such it is not only the best tool, but the only one we've got.' The nagual does not subvert the tonal - it even complements it, structuring its interstices, the stray sensations, dreams and twilight zones - but it challenges the primacy of the rational.

It is understandable that as he absorbs some of Don Juan's relativism and approaches the 'sorcerer's explanation', Castaneda should himself become more enigmatic. The glowing lucidity of his style remains, but the spiky rationalism that characterised the protagonist of the other three books is muted. This is the only one which does not begin with a retelling of Castaneda's first meeting with Don Juan. Instead it contains Don Juan's account of the event. Thus Don Juan, who all along has guided Castaneda's experiences and elicited and ordered them by his questioning in a wry inversion of the usual anthropological relationship, now has direct influence on the retrospective version too. This partial surrender of control over his narrative may reflect an ambiguous attitude developing towards the book itself. If 'knowledge' is beyond WORDS, writing only makes sense as an act of 'controlled folly' and it may well be described as 'tales', suggesting not simply a literary genre, but a logical status precluding simple judgements as to truth or falsity. 'An act of power to a sorcerer', says Don Juan, 'is only a tale of power to you'.

In A Separate Reality, Castaneda read to Don Juan from the Tibetan Book of the Dead: 'Perhaps the Tibetans really see', Don Juan went on 'in which case they must have realised that what they see makes no sense at all and they wrote that bunch of crap because it doesn't make any difference to them; in which case what they wrote was not crap at all'. In this spirit, Castaneda embraces the pain and paradox of seeing, of knowledge beyond words, of teachings that are barely understood, a reality that comes in flashes, a journey that never ends and tales that go on forever.

The publication of Tales of Power coincides with the appearance of the first Castaneda primer. 'Castaneda's accounts' according to Silverman, 'provide a fitting occasion to review the basis of the sociological enterprise', but how much Reading Castaneda has to do with understanding the books is perhaps better suggested by the author's Introduction: 'There is no requirement...to read Castaneda's books...in order to follow my argument'. 'It does not matter to me whether any or all of the 'events' reported by Castaneda ever took place' he says. Indeed, 'what I write for you cannot possibly be about his book it must at all times be about my book'. Thus equipped with an uncritical acceptance of the nouvelle critique, Silverman moves chattily through such topics as observer bias, the limits of knowledge, consensus reality and 'textualization' towards his banal vision of a 'reflexive sociology' with the inane joie de vivre of the sociologist who has just discovered Barthes and Wittgenstein. 'Scientific explanations', he tells us, 'works of art, everyday accounts are all persuasive because in understanding them as they wish to be understood, we sustain our communal mode of existence' and yet, he continues breathlessly 'together with Castaneda, we learn that making sense together is not an easy affair and that whatever sense we do make involves a commitment to play a particular game'. Blithely avoiding all possible subtleties either of epistemology or of textual criticism, we are lead through a melange of cliches to the final revelation: '..the enterprise which my writing seeks to point towards is thinking'. In fact it is all very simple because 'understanding can only express what, in a deep sense, one knows already.' And that, indeed, is the only feeling one gets from reading this book.

John Ryle

Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition. Gary H. Gossen. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1974. 382 pp. £7.50p.

This book is a richly documented study of the oral tradition of the Tzotzil speaking Chamula Indians of Mexico. But it is also far more than this, for in it Gossen pursues in a fascinating way the obvious point that language, being a social fact, will share many of the organising principles of a culture's other symbolic systems. Thus he shows how the native taxonomy of verbal activities fits with Chamula spatial symbolism, the classification of time, and their categories of different persons. Moreover, he reveals the way in which features of a technical linguistic nature (redundancy, syntactical parallelism, metaphorical stacking, and so on) serve to mark out the internal boundaries of this system of oral genres. With increasing interest shown in symbolic structures over the past few years, anthropologists have come to recognise how crucially their discipline is concerned with language. Certainly this has been a field of major advance, although the work by both British anthropologists on symbolism and Americans on ethnographic semantics has frequently been glaringly deficient. Studies like this one by Gossen which takes verbal activity as a totality and shows how its structure relates to other types of cultural activities, and how it calibrates with systems of cosmological symbolism, clearly shows how much more refined the links between anthropology and language can be.

Malcolm Crick.

Books Received

Meaning in Culture F. Allen Hanson. R.K.P. (International Library of Anthropology edited by Adam Kuper), 1975. xi, 127 pp. £3.95.

Men of Influence in Nuristan: A Study of Social Control and Dispute Settlement in Waigal Valley, Afghanistan. Schuyler Jones, Seminar Press, 1974. xii, 299 pp. £4.90.

Patterns and Processes - An Introduction to Anthropological Strategies for the Study of Socio Cultural Change. Robert L. Bee. Free Press, 1974. xi, 260pp. £2.

A Chief is a Chief by the People. Stimela Jason Jingoos. Oxford, 1975. xviii, 252pp. £6.50.