

GERTRUDE

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A POSTFACE TO A FEW PREFACES

One fine day, the day of their hundred and forty-third meeting, GERTRUDE decided to take stock of their situation. There was nothing brilliant about it; dejection was mounting. All the listing, scrutinising and indexing of 4,573 theses and 32,367 diplomas, all of them Africanist and produced by universities in France and abroad, had not clarified anything. A few heads - and not the emptiest or least well-shaped either - were found to have cracked definitively under it all, and their owners had taken to wandering along the corridors of the colleges and the underground with sneering grins on their faces. Others had managed to keep the balance of their minds undisturbed - but couldn't stop grinding their teeth. The question that had been scrutinized for a number of years now - 'On the sexual production of knowledge, or, The source of correct theses' - remained unanswered. Theory had nothing to say - which is intolerable when everyday practice imposes solutions of an agonizing banality. GERTRUDE gave in.

And so it was that, on that very day, a decision was taken - unanimous but for two votes (a bit too much sarcasm had unleashed a fury that could not be contained simply by the lateral chafing of the lower jaw against the upper jaw, and the two votes were exchanging blows in the corridor). It was a decision to go and consult a few eminent members of the Corps Universitaire.

One delegation set off in the direction of the Collège de France, full of hope. Barely inside the courtyard, the delegates came across a Genealogist of some repute and went straight up to him. The great man was very approachable - but all his time was taken up with a History of sexuality in six volumes. He nonetheless offered a few words of advice:

'For decades now the human sciences applied to sub-Saharan Africa bespeak a sexual division in the production of their discourse. Neither outbreaks of violence in the world, nor the structural transformations of African societies, nor even changes which, in European nations, affected both feminine participation in development and the relations between the sexes, have altered this established process - namely, the transformation of a legally married couple into a research unit of which the practices remain unchanging, whatever breaks there might be in the theoretical field in which they are circumscribed.

*We might well express some surprise nonetheless in the face of those mutations which, from functionalism to structuralism and to marxism, far from allowing the discourse to develop in an infinite continuity, have educated it to be ready to abandon hackneyed problematics - however recent - in order to embrace new ones - themselves swiftly obsolete - to such an extent that the referential patterns articulating the final declaration, display, in contrast to the singularity of its object and

the permanence of its production practices, a burgeoning diversity. Could this mean acknowledging that, against all that ever-fluent and multiplex written parole stands a whole unsaid - perhaps an unsayable - an unformulated history of events, of relations and rules which, as the work took shape, held sway between researcher and spouse? There is nothing to prevent one taking this view - but would it not mean according a unique repressive power to the manifest discourse, a power to efface the interplay of practices without which it would all have remained in a state of parole without écriture, of thoughts without any systematicity, of a quest obstinately devoted to self-erasure through lack of materiality: just pieces of paper covered with a finite number of signs?

'In short, the prolixity of the written text should not delude us, and the task you are undertaking now tends towards a revelation of the hollowness inlaid as an intimate filigree in the overflow of Africanist discourse. Your task will involve an analysis of pages so little read that one might think them drafted only to signify nothing, to establish an irrelevance. To be brief, we are talking about prefaces, or, more precisely, about those few lines which, in one sweeping enunciation, articulate, in terms of sexual categories, the sum of operations constitutive of the final corpus.'

Encouraged by this initial success, GERTRUDE mounted a new expedition to the Collège. A few months had been enough to fix up an appointment with the Academician. With the advice of the Genealogist followed to the letter, a file of prefaces was rigorously compiled according to each and every type, and was submitted to the scholar's expertise. The conversation rarely thawed, but the illustrious mythologue willingly sketched out an analysis:

'First of all, let us consider one group of prefaces.

P1 'My wife has assisted me by reading a mass of background literature in anthropology and history...' (Max Gluckman, Politics Law and Ritual in Tribal Society, Oxford, 1965: XXVII).

P2 'My wife collaborated actively in all aspects of my field-work...' (V.W. Turner, Schism and Continuity in an African Society, Manchester, 1966: XVI).

P3 'I must express my gratitude to my wife, who [...] also read the whole manuscript through with me more than once.' (I.A. Akin-Jogbin, pahomey and its Neighbours, 1708-1818, Cambridge, 1967: XI).

P4 'My wife [...] has also materially assisted in its authorship by comment and criticism.' (Meyer Fortes, The dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi, London, 1969: XII).

It appears from this group that the spouses have the same vocation: both are carrying out research in Africa. It appears, too, that this activity can be broken down into several moments, revealing a structure of progression: from the preparation of the field (P1), to the field itself (P2),

from the field to repeated readings of the manuscript and on to critical comments (P3, P4). At no stage do man and wife find themselves dissociated and these very variants specify a feminine attitude: in pursuing the task up to its end. From this kind of generalised undifferentiation of feminine and masculine work, should one conclude their equivalence? Certain examples would seem to suggest the hypothesis of an interchangeability of the sexes in Africanist thought and institutions:

P5 'To my wife whose book this is as much as mine.'
(S.F. Nadel, A Black Byzantium, Oxford, 4th ed., 1961: I).

P6 'She served not only as companion in the field but also as a co-worker...'
(Alvin W. Wolfe, In the Ngombe Tradition, Evanston, Ill., 1961: VI).

However, a systematic survey of the onomastic categories employed at the moment of publication reveals that it is the men who affirm themselves as sole signatories of the pieces and who easily find themselves socially acknowledged as such. The way the whole process takes place suggests a progression, as if a first confused stage - wherein spouses, collectors of different materials and undifferentiated producers of a scholarly harvest were indistinguishable - were succeeded by an era of clear-cut oppositions: the man, promoted as author of the book, lives thereafter alone in the world of culture and history, whilst the woman, of whom there remain only a few delicate memories, scattered in prefaces and dedications, returns to a state of shadowy inexistence. That original couple, self-contained and united in primitive synchrony, suffers an ineluctable disjunction since, from the preparation of the manuscript to its publication, it operates in a diachronic perspective. Now, from the original text to the printed text, not only does the message remain unchanged, but it is not unknown, too, for the wife herself, through an attentive reading of the proofs, to see to the fidelity of reproduction. Thus, it is necessary to posit a structural disequilibrium as a given from the outset, and, in spite of appearances, a secret dysharmony as the guiding force in the relations between the sexes.

From this new angle, we shall embark on another group of prefaces.

An opposition immediately presents itself: the woman, as sole commander of techniques for conserving information gathered in the field (shorthand and typing, cartography, photography...) retains use of them for herself.

P7 'My wife [...] who typed and filed notes with love and patience...'
(Pierre Bettez-Gravel, Remera: A Community in Eastern Rwanda, Paris-La Haye, 1968: 10).

P8 '[My wife] whose expert stenography often relieved me of the burden of recording my observations myself ...'
(M.G. Marwick, Sorcery in its Social Setting, Manchester, 1965: XVIII).

P9 'Her contribution included most of the photography and much of the measuring of gardens and mapping of villages.' (V.W. Turner, op.cit.: XVI).

P10 'She also spent many hours typing and tabulating data...' (Richard T. Curley, Elders, Shades and women, Berkeley, Calif., 1973: IX).

This technological inequality is further reinforced, on the psychological level, by a mass of qualities which place the feminine character in a position of superiority:

P11 'I wish also to thank my wife whose moral support has been expressed immeasurably in patience and forbearance.' (W.A. Shack, The Gurage, Oxford, 1966: XIII).

P12 'Barbara, an unfailing source of patience, cheerfulness and support...' (F.P. Bowser, The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650, Stanford, 1974: X).

P13 '... ma femme [...], à laquelle je suis redevable d'un inlassable soutien dans mes difficultés quotidiennes.' (D. Zahan, Sociétés d'initiation bambara, Paris-La Haye, MCMCX: 8).

Holdings thus of indispensable technologies, unshakeable supports of an oft demoralised partner, the women possess, too, the ability to communicate with the female members of the population under study.

P14 'All the information pertaining to the woman's side of the culture was gathered by her...' (M.J. Herskovits, Dahomey. An Ancient West African Kingdom, New York, 1938: XI).

P15 '[My wife] who took many texts from women...' (M.G. Marwick, op.cit.: XVIII).

P16 '... Jane, who collected the bulk of the data on the Sudanese women...' (H.B. Barclay, Buuri al Lamaab, New York, 1964: XIII).

We recall that, according to the first group of prefaces, the spouses had an identical vocation; according to the second group, they remain faithful to it but realise it in a way that scorns any parity between the sexes. A dysfunction has been established; expressed through three codes - technological, psychological and sociological - it casts the woman as super-heroine of the research and leaves the man in a position of obligation, reduced to affirming his gratitude.

It is precisely at the point when the husband declares his thanks in the preface of the work that the initial situation is inverted: mere tributary of his wife during the actual research, he then captures the publication and turns it all to his own account. To offer thanks signifies, in a literal sense, to express gratitude, but, in a figurative sense, to

offer thanks signifies a pay-off, a dismissal. In the intimacy of the couple, the men are expressing some indebtedness; in the world of culture, they are paying off their debt. There is an equivalence between rhetorical transformation and sociological transformation, and the women would be quite wrong to accept literally any thanks offered for their research activities when the latter, devoid of any social value once completed, will be worth no more to them than to see themselves, metaphorically, paid off.'

GERTRUDE was dazzled. The exposure of the structure rendered even the more talkative members speechless, crushed by the stupefying weight of the obvious. Time passed and the interrogations were resumed. Structural awareness had given rise to exaltation, but ended up being demoralising. As luck would have it, they suddenly thought of the Theoretician, and the historical aspects of the question were feverishly pieced together. The dossier was passed on to its editor and, for greater security, to certain spinozist friends. In spite of a wealth of pre-occupations - such as upholding his thesis and the dictatorship of the proletariat - the famous philosopher wrote down, on the Paris-Amiens, his 'Reply to GERTRUDE'.

'Why these prefaces, and might they not suggest one of those moments of what we can call, with Bachelard, the 'epistemological break'? Would they not seem to mark a discontinuity between a pre-scientific practice and a theoretical, scientific practice? It is a risk to go so far as to affirm that these prefaces illustrate a decisive piece of theoretical transformation, but a risk we resolutely take. To begin with, we will place ourselves on this side of the break, in the time of its ideological prehistory. No doubt can be entertained: the dedications sublimate forms of cooperation and allow belief in a creative fusion of men and women. And there, fully at work, is the reality-masking energy of the imaginary which constitutes empirical practices into decision-making spontaneity.¹ Then, beyond the dedication, the men remain the sole producers, unique actors on the stage of scientific experimentation.

It is of capital import to distinguish the stages of that process which restructures, into an emergence of masculine theoretical supremacy, the indistinction of the couple during empirical practice. If, as Lenin has noted, contradiction is at work at each and every moment, then it is necessary for a non-antagonism to transform itself into an antagonism in the dominant structure of the complex whole wherein these transformations occur. Marxist theory and practice demonstrate this: everything rests in the concrete conditions. Now analysis of the productive forces and of the relations of production which take form in the initial phase reveals an immediate difference between the actors. Whilst they are interchangeable at every instant in the fieldwork investigation, one practice introduces, however, a permanent inequality: the appropriation

1. 'Witness particularly this preface:

"The drawings in the field, the maps and the diagrams have been made by Claudine, who also contributed her own observations and insights about Tio life. I cannot acknowledge her share in this work because love cannot calculate. In any case, it was a joint enterprise as our whole lives are." (J. Vansina, The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880-1892, London, 1973: Acknowledgements.)'

of the means of writing, of the typewriter, by the women.

The prefaces, like the investigations or the evidential reports, confirm the generalisation of this practice. This is not simply by chance. The moment of typing is that wherein the raw material (the information gathered so adequately called material) is transformed into a product (the typed script) by the methodical employment of means and relations of production (only the women do the typing). But production does not constitute the sum of social practice, there exist also a number of other practices, distinct in reality, theoretical practice amongst them. Now, to reduce social practice to production would mean, by fixing of the contradiction between men and women, to allow the latter a dominant position. It would, above all, be mechanically to reduce superstructure to infrastructure and to fall into 'economism'.

The true marxist tradition teaches us that every contradiction implies a real struggle and that the feminine monopolisation of typing, principal aspect of the contradiction in the practice of production, becomes secondary at the level of theoretical production. We know very well now that everything rests in the 'concrete conditions', that is in the existence of the complex whole, at the very moment when each contradiction reflects a process characterized by a dominance. Under determinate conditions - a sufficient number of typed pages - there occurs a substitution of unequal feminine and masculine roles and the man becomes dominant in turn. But the principal contradiction thus produced by displacement (transformation of roles) becomes decisive now and there occurs a condensation of the struggle at that strategic moment of the printed preface, an unstable condensation since the book constitutes a radically new form of man/woman relationship; the virilisation of theoretical practice.

We now find ourselves ready to answer the initial question 'why these prefaces?' by the exposure of their specificity. In each case, they operate as a purification, a liberation from spontaneous technical practices still subject to ideology; they radically separate the ideological elements (all the possible modes of life and work in the field) from the scientific elements (theoretical elaboration). And, in rigorously assigning limits to the domains of sexual co-production, they mark off scientific knowledge from the ideology of its past and reveal that past as ideological. It's all as clear as day.'

GERTRUDE was overcome. In one text, as dark as night, the Theoretician had repeated, with full ideological rigour, the diagnosis of the Academician. The verdict of structure found its confirmation in dialectical materialism. GERTRUDE had sought a theoretical weapon, and had been handed an instrument of hara-kiri. Happily, a few of the more combative elements took to denigrating thinkers who pretended to totalisations: they always deceived, they spoke of a by-gone world or prophesied a world to come, but the present always remained as a monstrous incongruity, corrupted by history when it wasn't spoilt by survivals. Enough of grand overviews; what was required now was detail, even sordid detail. A great fuss had, in fact, been made of a man who scrutinised texts from A to Z: a Semiologist. He, too, could be found at the Collège de France. He was charming, agreed to devote one of his seminars to the study of certain prefaces chosen for their literary merit,

and revised the results himself.

'Enfin, il convient de remercier notre épouse qui a bien voulu (jusqu'à présent) supporter les tribulations donquichottesques ainsi que les avantages et inconvénients " exotique " du métier d'anthropologue.' (Jean Copans, Stratification sociale et organisation du travail agricole dans les villages wolof mourides du Sénégal, Paris, EPHE, thèse de 3^e cycle, 1973, p.5.)

'Il convient de remercier notre épouse' REF. Deontological code²: a custom with the force of law demands that the woman be thanked (ousted from the publication)/ the possessive plural 'notre', indicating modesty or majesty, depending on the circumstances, reproduces an obsolete academic usage, REF. University; 'épouse' rather than 'femme', reinforced by 'notre' (SEM. Préciosité); 'qui a bien voulu (jusqu'à présent) supporter' REF. Women's Code (they are the ones who endure): this kind of endurance is the very proof of woman/ the wife's freedom metonymically suggested - she belongs to a humankind that is free - stands in antithesis to the Code that demands that, as a woman, she show forbearance (SYM. Freedom). Antithesis: accepting, refusing, placed in the balance by the 'jusqu'à présent'; 'les tribulations donquichottesque': the researcher describes himself from the outset according to literary convention, with self-evident reference both qua author and qua hero to the field of écriture/ fixed syntagm: 'avantages et inconvénients du métier' (every job has its advantages and inconveniences) / 'exotiques métier', academic connivances: reference to Bourdieu (The Sociologist's Job) and connivance with respect to the non-exotic, as shown in the use of quotation marks; every anthropologist knows that his métier is exotic only for non-anthropologists.

'Je dois maintenant rappeler l'importance qu'ont eue pour moi les nombreuses discussions menées avec L. Althusser, E. Balibar, P. Bonnafé, R. Cabanes et R. Waast ainsi et surtout qu'avec Diana Hulman, ma femme, qui a partagé avec moi aussi bien le travail sur le terrain que l'élaboration théorique.' (Pierre-Philippe Rey, Colonialisme, néo-colonialisme et transition au capitalisme, Paris, 1971, p.24.)

'Je dois' REF. Ethics, moral exigence of an autonomous subject: je. 'L. Althusser... R. Waast' SEM. Anti-hierarchical will: the millenarian convention which governs our alphabetical order lists the interlocutors in an absolutely non-significant mode/ 'et surtout qu'avec Diana Hulman', mention of first name instead of a simple initial, which distinguishes the interlocutrice from the group of interlocuteurs. 'Ma femme qui a partagé' REF. Women's Code (they are the ones who do the sharing). SYM.

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2. 'It has been agreed to note by SEM. those unities which constitute signifiés that will be designated each time by an approximating word (SEM. Femininity); by REF., those unities which mark cultural codes or codes of reference (REF. Code of gallantry); by SYM., unities which, in the symbolic field, take the form of antithesis (SYM. Field, Theory); by ACT., the Code of actions and behaviours.'

field and theory: in this symbolic field, an imaginary distinction contrasts field and theory/ the fixed syntagm 'élaboration théorique' connotes the teaching of Althusser, REF. Marxism in the University.

'Finally, I wish to thank my wife, to whom this book is dedicated, for her unfailing support, help and encouragement. She lived and travelled with me in this difficult region of East Africa, particularly in Turkana, where it was not thought that a European woman could easily withstand the necessarily rigorous life. She was especially important in obtaining information from the womenfolk, with whom I as a man, found serious difficulties. She herself, in addition, wrote almost the whole of The Central Nilo-Hamites which was wrongly attributed to us jointly by the editor of the series in which it appeared.' (P.H. Gulliver, The Family Herds, London, 1955; IX).

'I wish to thank my wife' REF. Code of gallantry: the woman thanked (ousted) here receives the gift of a dedication. 'she lived... difficulties': feminine Code: the woman shares. But British empiricism amasses material proofs of the wife's femininity. 'She herself... it appeared' ACT. Attempted transgression, followed by a failure. The test of the signing of a piece by the wife alone did not succeed, but it was only a half-failure.

'...last but not least is the debt I owe my wife for her graceful resignation while much of my time was being spent, mentally and physically, in the hills of Central Africa. Bringing me back from time to time to another level of reality was not the least of her contributions.' (René Lemarchand, Rwanda and Burundi, London, 1970: XI.)

REF. Economy of the gift: the preface (like any preface) is involved in an economy of exchange: the husband pays his debt by a gift superior, since it is written, to the silent effort typical of femininity. As in the case of potlatch, a gift is a test: I am giving you more than you have given me, I dominate you, I am the signatory, I have the last word. 'bringing me back...' SYM. Antithesis Culture/Nature: too far on the side of culture, the man is called to nature by the feminine sex. REF. Feminine Code: women offer repose to the warrior.

Africanism, wife in the field, woman, constitute the signifié of the dedications. Each one poses as the unveiling of a personal, intimate relationship. Fragment of a loving, conjugal discourse? I thank her because she helps me, she helps me because she is my wife. There is a circularity here: the help refers back to the matrimonial situation which, itself, is the basic grounding for help. And might she not simply have helped me so that I would thank her? Aberrant supposition which is contradicted by a vast number of authorities, by an anteriority of patterns that make of feminine devotions ~~not secure code~~. In announcing their thanks, the authors simply establish the reality of their conjugal relationship, but by means of narcissistic proof: I am in a position to thank her.

A narcissism often mollified, as though obliterated by good manners. It is customary to introduce one's wife when she is standing there, quite

visible, in the centre of the drawing room. The author has wanted to introduce her to his readers and she sees herself drawn out of the shadows: simple effect of social vanity. A narcissism sometimes poorly disguised by the play of connivances. The layman would smile at the naive egotism of one staging himself as some exotic Don Quixote; but the academic elite will recognise here a gravity tempered by elegant irony. Otherwise the dedication might appear a bit too heavily focussed on the ego (I owe, as for me, with me), but for the fact that scientific materialism, shared by a number of interlocuters - all professional - stands as guarantor of the relationship with the wife.'

The whole thing assumed manic proportions. All known prefaces were gone through; a publication was envisaged, but the editors back out when faced with a manuscript of almost 3000 pages. It remained in the archives. To tell the truth, the semiological initiation had not allowed an inch of progress, although it had offered some respite. Each time a manuscript of Africanist erudition appeared, we raced to the preface and forgot the rest. Back with reality, some sort of balance sheet had still to be drawn up. Structure, superstructure and infrastructure, signifier, signified, epistemology and archaeology, quite a few avenues had been explored. There was one last one left, one that was still somewhat fearsome, for so much was being said about the unconscious... once more, contacts worked for us, and those members of GERTRUDE who could presume on a more or less distant connection with one of his disciples, went to meet the Master. Naturally, the interview was recorded in full:

'GERTRUDE: we have spent some considerable time analysing a mass of dedications, a mass of dedicaces...

The Master: Des dits cassent, words have effectivity, everyone can be heard saying it over and over again, even of the most worn-out survivors of the '20s; it's easy to say, des dits cassent, but what do they 'cassent'?

GERTRUDE: Er... well, anyway, we wanted to talk about the human sciences in Africa...

The Master: Ef-fec-tive! And there we have the whole of the new discourse of our master thinkers, of those best educated in the scientism of our time... Ef-fec-tive, as it happens, en Afrique or sans fric? The first clause that one should immediately articulate, because the exposé cannot stand the delay, is that prefaces are a riddle. Freud has warned that they should be taken as such, to the letter. Just like absurd pictures of the white-negro or of the monkey-dressed-up-to-take-first-communion, images in pre-faeces are only to be retained for their value as signifier, that is for what they allow to be spelt out of the 'pro-verb' set forth in the riddle of the pre-face.

GERTRUDE: we have already tried it on hundreds of prefaces. However, if you don't mind our saying so, we have not shifted at all; we are still behind a typewriter, derrière une machine à écrire...

The Master: Machinez-vous donc et pas à écrire... la preuve, ma Chine à (sc)rire! And, anyway, what is le derrière d'une machine à écrire? It talks, it chatters. And what does it say - will you ask me? It has a whole history, all of its own, and reconstitutable by the most painstaking genealogist, from its-leaving-the-factory-to-the-order-slip-to-the-supplier's-bill, and it has a whole activity, whether or not she knows of its implications, whether she be typing out an invoice or an ethnological treatise, whether she agrees with it or not. And if, as is foreseeable, especially after this rhapsody, any of you should dream yourselves a type-writer, it will hardly be a matter of surprise that, when deciphering the signifier-position held by the machine in the riddle wherein the dreamer will have circumscribed his desire, we shall decipher what we can call the pre-conscious of that machine.

GERTRUDE: undoubtedly, undoubtedly, but...

The Master: But we shall still not know where it is, the derrière d'une machine. And still it is from that place that dedications effect a phantasm of l'être. L'être of the author's place. A cover, after all, and that's all. A cover, and you behind, that much is perfectly certain. But the whole enigma becomes, accordingly, clouded: la place de derrière, c'est là que ça se machine, et pas seulement à écrire.

GERTRUDE: We remain behind, even if we don't know where it is, and they, on the cover... That's what you are saying here...

The Master: yeah! Triste topique... Leave them there where they are fully occupied. A good Africanist of that sort can be spotted at first glance: through that interior and even posterior contraction which reveals him as pregnant with the mortified foetus of his resistances.

GERTRUDE: We did not dare to think too much along those lines... (Almost in chorus) Des dix casses, casse-pipe, casse-toi...

The Master: It's coming, it's coming... and sentiment is not ruled out ...Bye! See you soon!

For a few weeks, the proceedings of GERTRUDE's meetings remained totally hermetic. Observers were left pensive, before the bewildering dispositions of typewriters and the proliferation of the rarest and most antique editions of Almanach Vermot. Not a single visiting Africanist, whether budding thesis-slogger or recognised authority, missed out on a jolly 'Comment-vas-tu-ya-de-poêle?', but no-one ventured an 'Et-toi-le-à-matelas?'. And then it wore off.

GERTRUDE had found, by approaching leading members of the university, a few ideas to contemplate, but nothing had changed and the origin of correct theses remained as obscure as ever. One fine day, the day of the two hundred and thirty-fifth meeting, GERTRUDE at last hit upon a plan of action that was bound to work, but it was agreed unanimously - without any vote against - to keep it rigorously secret. Until now, no-one has given it away.