
ALLEGORIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

I would like to have defined the Malagasies in terms of the subtlety of their mind, the openness of their customs, their considerate, polite morality, if I were not afraid that in doing so I was conceding to a European ideal, and perhaps to that part of this ideal which had already been accepted by the Malagasies.¹

“Les Hain-Teny: Poésie obscure.”
Lecture delivered in Monaco, 1930

Malagas̄y Proverbs

Jean Paulhan spent 33 months, between 1908 and 1910, as a teacher at the first European college on Madagascar, the island in the Indian Ocean that France had colonized in 1896. He was responsible for teaching a variety of subjects, including history, French, Latin, German, and gymnastics, and from the accounts we have of the three years he spent there, he found the teaching very rewarding (his students were

a mixture of indigenous children and teachers, and children of French colonial administrators). As time went by, however, Paulhan felt an increasing distance from the arrogant colonialist attitudes of his compatriots. Paulhan commented at one point on the fact, for example, that their ideas about the cultures they were colonizing were drawn chiefly from Pierre Loti's novels, and that they believed, in any case, that "all of the colonies are the same,"² and later on remarked: "All of these people are living off the Malagasies. What a rotten lot of *bourgeois* they are!"³

He spent less and less time with the other colonial officials on Madagascar, and an increasing amount of time with his Malagasy friends, who were mainly Hova.⁴ He set about learning Malagasy, and made rapid progress in the language, successfully passing all of the exams (he was the only French person at the time to do so, and even outperformed most of the Malagasies who were taking the exams). As his interest in Malagasy culture deepened, his attention turned to its folklore, and he began noting down legends, stories, proverbs and the traditional oratorical debates known as *hain-teny*, which were rich in proverbs. He collected about 3,000 proverbs, this research being so appreciated on Madagascar that it earned him a place on the Malagasy Academy.

His attitude generally went very much against the grain of French colonialism, in that he argued strongly in favor of encouraging indigenous languages, and failed to see the purpose or usefulness of imposing French language education. His neglect of his "official" duties not surprisingly led to unfavorable reports from his colonial superiors, and he was eventually sent back to France at the end of 1910. He taught Malagasy at the Ecole des Langues Orientales, a temporary replacement post which only lasted a year, but the work he had begun on Malagasy proverbs was to preoccupy him for nearly 30 years, and was at the source of all of his later theoretical texts on language and literature. He translated and wrote an introduction to a selection of 153 *hain-tenys*, which he divided thematically into eight groups, a division he kept until the 1939 edition of the poems was published with an updated introduction. A number of essays, which seem merely to repeat the initial account of his experiences, predate this introduction. They in fact offer diverse perspectives on the question. It is well-known that Paulhan intended his work ultimately to become the subject of a thesis at the Sorbonne, an objective that was never brought to completion.

Paulhan's writings which were inspired by his time on Madagascar might be placed very broadly within the context of French literature born—directly or indirectly—out of the French colonial experience, and the contact with other, colonized, cultures. These texts—both literary as well as ethnological in intention—are representative of what James Clifford has termed “ethnography,” by which he understands a “general cultural disposition that cuts through modern anthropology and that this science shares with twentieth century art and writing.”⁶ Clifford sees manifestations of this in, for example, Victor Segalen's accounts of his travels to Polynesia and China, or in the “discovery” by the Surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s of what was then referred to as “negro art” (a catchall term whose non-specificity allowed it to assimilate such diverse phenomena as American jazz, African tribal masks and voodoo rituals). Cubist Art, according to some accounts of its origins, owed its inspiration to African and Polynesian sculpture, and although Picasso denied any conscious debt to African art, the angularity of his early experiments with human form clearly borrow stylistic elements from African tribal masks.⁷

It was, however, Surrealist writers who were most directly influenced by or involved with ethnography, to such an extent that Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), the account of the famous Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931, on which he was the official secretary of the trip, was considered as important as Marcel Griaule's ethnographic study of the Dogon, the most extensive study ever at that time of a single tribal group. It confirmed the extent to which, even on supposedly “scientific” expeditions such as the Dakar-Djibouti trip, Western writers continued to appropriate less “civilized” cultures as figures of (their own) alterity, as channels for escaping the dullness and rationalism of Western civilization. “Ethnography,” apparently the serious counterpart to Surrealism's playful distortions and reappropriations, was in Clifford's view no less caught within the same structural dynamics. As he asks rhetorically: “Is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, an inventor and reshuffler of realities? [. . .] Ethnography cut with Surrealism emerges as the theory and practise of juxtaposition.”⁸

More recently, African philosophers such as V. Y. Mudimbe and Paulin Hountondji have radicalized Clifford's questioning of the assumed “scientific” basis of much early ethnography, and have sought to articulate a specifically African epistemology that no longer relies

on the Western models used until now to frame the study of non-Western culture.⁹ The articulation of such an epistemology takes as its point of departure the critical re-reading of works produced by ethnographers thought at the time to be “pro-African”; from Frobenius’s descriptions of an idealized African society, to Lévy-Bruhl’s theories of “primitive” cultures exhibiting a “pre-logical” mentality, and Placide Tempel’s attempts to describe the Bantu “soul” in his *Bantu Philosophy*, with its merging of African and Christian spirituality.

To return to Paulhan, the accounts of his experiences do not fit easily into any of the categories sketched out above. He was certainly not on Madagascar for any Christian or other religious evangelistic mission, and his interest in Malagasy culture in fact predates the Cubist and Surrealist “discovery” of African art. Furthermore, Paulhan’s position with respect to Lévy-Bruhl, whom he had hoped would be one of the readers of his thesis, is stated clearly in his critique of the latter’s cultural hierarchy of logical and pre-logical civilizations. Paulhan argues that Lévy-Bruhl is the victim of what he termed the “illusion of the explorer,” that is, the assumption that French is capable of greater abstraction than “primitive,” supposedly more “concrete,” languages. As Paulhan shows in his essay “La Mentalité primitive” [Primitive Mentality], the attributes of “abstract” and “concrete” are entirely relative, and in fact reversible, as his examples from Malagasy demonstrate.¹⁰ As we have seen, Paulhan was very conscious of the injustices of colonialism, and aware of the various forms of ideological and political hegemony it brought with it. His own attitude to Malagasy culture was one of respect for the people and the language, taking them very much on their own terms, and trying himself to be assimilated, rather than to assimilate.

It would, of course, be naïve to claim that Paulhan was not just as much involved in the establishment and spread of colonial ideology as any of his compatriots on Madagascar, or that his work represents an extremely precocious form of self-critical ethnography. As Marc Augé has correctly pointed out, Paulhan’s essays are of fairly limited interest as anthropological studies. This is particularly true of his attempts to perform more conventional anthropology in his *Repas et amour chez les Merinas* (*Meals and Love among the Merinas*). This short essay is a comparison between the taboos that operate with respect to meals in Merinas society, and the etiquette and morality that surrounds matters of love in Western society, and Augé shows how

Paulhan sets up a false and ethnologically unworkable analogy between the two domains, since he fails, for example, to contextualize the problem of social taboos, and draws erroneous and very general conclusions about Merinas society. Indeed, when Paulhan argues, at the end of one of his accounts of his learning proverbs that “You don’t need to go to Madagascar to have the experience of the proverb,”¹¹ thus deriving a *general* linguistic problematic from the *particularity* of his experiences, one might say he fits very well into mainstream ethnography which “recomposes from its own point of view the image of the society it observes.”¹² Christopher Miller has characterized this process as one of *projection*, the perilous negotiation between subject and object that may, as he suggests, ultimately inform all ethnographic activity.¹³

What, then, are the value and usefulness of Paulhan’s studies, besides being a chapter in the history of Malagasy folklore? What would it mean to take his studies on their own terms, as Paulhan did with Madagascar? If Paulhan could not escape being the traditional “participant observer” of early ethnography, he operates something of a twist on this very notion, since his accounts are narratives in which he gradually *becomes* a part of the life with respect to which he had started out in a position of superiority, and his descriptive account is overtaken by a certain performativity, a narrative destabilization that we will see to be typical of the *récit*, and that needs to be itself accounted for. By reading his texts as *récits*, we might concurrently pose the question of whether they were in fact *intended* to be serious attempts at ethnography, since Paulhan did not come to Malagasy culture with any particular methodological predisposition. In any case, we might at least entertain this hypothesis while we read them. At the very least, it would allow us to see them as only very ironically linked to something like Tempel’s “ethnophilosophy,”¹⁴ in their effort to reveal the mysteries of the Malagasy “soul” as manifested in the finesse and ingenuity of proverbs.

If Paulhan’s inquiry started out, then, as a fairly simple anthologization of the *hain-teny*, an act of literary conservation simplified by the imposition of time-honored thematic categories such as love, abandonment, and pride, its innately constrictive character left him dissatisfied. Most obviously, such a codification failed to take into account both the ways in which a *hain-teny* can lend itself to several differing themes and the fragmented, improvisational nature of their composition.¹⁵ They are, he says, divided into two parts: a “clear part” and an

“obscure part,” the latter being made up, as he discovers, of proverbs, or of a kind of proverbial language. His first instinct is to see the essential part of the poem’s message as being contained in the clear part, with the more obscure ending adding a sort of poetic counterpart or rhetorical embellishment. As his investigation proceeds, and as he pays more attention to the obscure parts, Paulhan shifts the emphasis and suggests that the obscure parts in fact carry the main burden of the poems, and the clearer parts merely “set them up.” This change in emphasis comes about as Paulhan focuses more on the *effect* of the poems as opposed to their simple thematic *meaning*. The *hain-tenys* are often pronounced in the context of a debate, or rather of a highly formalized oratorical joust; it is during such contests that Paulhan came to recognize the importance of these proverbial phrases. Indeed, success in these debates is to a large extent determined by the strength and aptness of the proverbs one has at one’s disposal (“The value of a hain-teny depends on the quantity of proverbs in it”¹⁶). In the texts that Paulhan subsequently devotes to proverbs, this shift of focus does not displace the importance of the semantic aspect of the poems, but as a result the interplay between the two becomes the burden of the essays. This same interplay between effect and meaning is carried over into Paulhan’s studies of the more quotidian phenomenon that the proverb represents. Probably the most coherent account of Paulhan’s own struggle, or joust, with proverbs, that doesn’t sidestep the difficulties, failures and dead-ends involved, and the one which allows us to see most clearly the dynamics of Paulhan’s “ethnographic narrative” at work, is *L’Expérience du proverbe (The Experience of the Proverb)*.¹⁷

Although Paulhan, in his *Le Repas et l’amour chez les Merinas*,¹⁸ had engaged in more traditional ethnographical writing, the essay on proverbs marks a significant departure in that it presents a narrator who actively involves himself in the phenomenon he sets out to describe. The essay itself is fairly clearly structured as a before/after narrative, in which the narrator’s initial frustration in using proverbs is replaced, once he has learnt how to use them, by a symmetrical frustration in not being able to understand *why* his proverbs are successful. It is thus not simply a tale of the acquisition of a particular kind of language, but it examines the enigma of the proverb from two very distinct perspectives: before and after, outside and inside. The terms in which the question of the proverb is first posed recall the essay on *hain-teny*. The proverb is described by the narrator as a kind of “sec-

ond language,” differentiated from ordinary language by its tone, which commands attention and respect. Its authoritative force gives it the status of a kind of law, and it could thus be said to belong to the category of sententious discourse, such as maxims, aphorisms, and sayings.¹⁹ Often a proverb will be used to bolster the authority of another proverb, a process that is also characteristic of the *hain-tenys*. The author initially surmises the possibility of a secret code which it would be possible to crack—he talks of “the strangeness of the words it contained,” and of an element that is “foreign to our conversation” (*Expérience*, p. 102), and this strange element *in* language often serves to interrupt language:

Sometimes it would disrupt the tone of a discussion that was going on for too long, would hurry it along, get it out; or indeed would cut short some impending quarrel; in the Hova family I was staying with, this was the end of any argument: you needed a proverb, but a proverb was all you needed to end it. (*Expérience*, p. 102)²⁰

How does the proverb put an end to discussions? It is not a logical or a dialectical resolution, since there is a very definitive rupture with the discussion leading up to the proverb. Yet neither is it entirely a question of sheer force, despite the manner in which the debates are concluded, since it “stands in for” (“me paraissait tenir lieu”) more undignified interruptions of language such as orders or insults: “It stood in for them, if I might say, at less expense, and without there being any need to go outside of language” (*Expérience*, p. 103)²¹.

We might examine more closely how this works in some of the examples the narrator provides. In the first example, he is discussing with his friend Rajaona how they should go to market:

RAJAONA: Let’s take a *filanjana* to market. [Footnote in text: “A *filanjana* is a type of chair carried by porters.”]

ME: It’s only an hour’s walk, let’s go on foot. Only old people take *filanjanas*.

RAJAONA: You have to pay for respect. If you go to market on foot, people will make fun of you.

You have to pay for respect [*Le respect s'achète*] is a proverb. I don't notice it, no word warned me it was coming. But assuming it's just following on from the previous sentence, I reply:

I prefer to do as I please, and people can respect me a little less. Anyway, of course . . . (*Expérience*, p. 103)²²

The narrator completely misunderstands the function of the proverb, and Rabe and Rajaona, his two interlocutors, continue the discussion as if he had said nothing at all. Although “le respect s'achète” *does* mean something like “You have to pay for respect,” in the context of this conversation it is obviously not just this. And it is not simply, as the narrators suggests, that “the meaning was not exactly where I placed it” (*Expérience*, p. 104),²³ since even if we could find an expression that would come close to the Malagasy, the misunderstanding comes from attributing a meaning to it at all. It is not reducible to a cognitive statement, a sentence, about respect (“Such a detailed consideration is foreign to the actual sentence uttered by Rajaona” [*Expérience*, p.104]),²⁴ but it is a code that has to be learnt and applied mechanically. It is, to anticipate the following example, “le-respect-s'achète.”

In the second example Rainipatsa is counseling his son, Ralay, on the need to get married soon. Ralay answers his father by expressing concern about public opinion, in the form of the cautionary proverb: “No sooner has he taken a wife than he runs off and gets divorced” [“Il n'a pas plus tôt pris femme qu'il court divorcer”] (*Expérience*, p. 104). The narrator's rational analysis of the situation—that the two do not necessarily go together—again falls on deaf ears. When the narrator repeats his remark later to Rainipatsa, the latter finally understands, but to set him straight merely repeats Ralay's proverb, as if it needed no explanation. What is at stake is not the question of marriage and divorce, but the proverb that unites them inseparably, and as long as it is a question of the proverb, the narrator is wrong to dissociate them:

Ralay didn't mean that a first hasty act was liable to lead to a second one: rather, he cited a fact which included both hasty acts, without being able to distinguish between them. As if he had said, And what do you make of the *hasty-act-*

of-getting-married-and-divorcing-right-away, do you ever think about it? (*Expérience*, p. 105)²⁵

Inasmuch as the proverb is formed of a particular immutable configuration of elements, which does not primarily *mean* and which involves mechanical memory, it is like the syntax or grammar of a language. To argue, as the narrator does, in a way that questions the set composition of the proverb, is as futile and as incomprehensible as, for example, disagreeing that in French an adjective agrees in gender and number with the noun it qualifies.

It seems at one level that the narrator's difficulties are those encountered by anyone who has to deal with a language and culture foreign to his or her own. The position of the narrator as an "outsider" is a paradigm of the ethnographer generally, and it is posed in linguistic terms as a question of translation. Paulhan's difficulty with proverbs is indeed, as he remarks on a number of other occasions, a common problem of translation. Clichés in a foreign language always strike us as more colorful, more concrete, more imaginative than corresponding terms in our own language. What we take to be quaint and expressive is superficial and second-hand to the native speaker, "just words." In bringing their linguistic dimension to the attention of his Malagasy interlocutors, the narrator makes them feel quite uncomfortable, since he is in a sense exposing what needs to be kept hidden for them to function *as* proverbs:

I have recourse to the most unexpected metaphors: they seem to the Malagasies—as they do to me, come to think of it—as if they are said as part of a game [*par simple jeu*]: what's more, the interest of this game escapes them. (*Expérience*, p. 106)²⁶

It is not that the narrator misses the point. Rather, he is too close to the point for comfort. Hence the unease of the Malagasies he questions:

I found myself particularly disconcerted by the difficulty I had explaining to my Malagasy friends the cause of my discomfort. Their answers, even though they were full of good will, presented an awkwardness that was symmetrical to my own. (*Expérience*, p. 107)²⁷

Once set in motion, the system of proverbs foregrounds its own specific linguistic constitution, while curtailing close analysis of its features. In posing the question of their meaning, and in treating them as metaphors, the narrator makes explicit what is kept implicit in the original. It is not just that they are demoted to mere sentences, but they become at the same time sentence and proverb, semantics and syntax, sense and influence. From the perspective of the native speakers, the continuity of the system of proverbs depends upon keeping this discrepancy hidden, which is why there is a double, symmetrical (though not identical) embarrassment. The natives' loss is also the narrators' loss, since he has a considerable stake in keeping the proverb, and the possibility of assimilating it, alive. For the natives, the resistance to making sense of the proverbs takes the form of a recontextualization, as if the proverbial expression did not stand out for special attention. This putting back into context works particularly well as a strategy, since the context will always provide the *raison d'être* of the proverb and can always be made to seem like a necessary, metaphorical relationship.

In reaffirming the primacy of the contextual, or the contingent, over the metaphorical, or the necessary, the efficacy of the proverb as imposition has been preserved, an outcome for which the narrator is as grateful as the native speakers. The most forceful argument always seems destined to win the argument about whether a proverb is *force* or *meaning*, and to decide the question in favor of the proverb rather than the *sentence*. Or, to reformulate it in rhetorical terms, the "meta-proverb" always functions as metonymy (context, contingency, just another proverb) rather than as metaphor (with its claims to totalization, to self-sufficiency, to freedom from context, etc.). It is a structural necessity of the system that metaphor be read as metonymy, even though the inverse, as the narrator demonstrates, is always possible. It is as if the narrator, as outsider, were structurally destined to eternal failure, since he *has* to translate, to read metonymy as metaphor, to isolate the proverb as citation, to add meaning to effect, to notice rather than ignore the discrepancy. Failure is not, however, the foreigner's exclusive prerogative: all native speakers are faced with the prospect of their proverbs falling flat. One can always say that it is "just a proverb": "Those are just words. . . . What are you talking about. . . . Leave us alone with your proverbs!" (p. 110),²⁸ and when used strategically in the context of a debate, this is potentially devastating.

Everything then happened as if this misused proverb, forced to admit its status as a proverb, came to the aid of the opinion it was attacking, rather than of the one it was supposed to support. Its author had to invent some argument on the spot, some other proverb; even then, he would have difficulty avoiding the ridicule which had come from his initial awkwardness. (*Expérience*, p. 110)²⁹

If the narrator's predicament is now one he shares with the native speakers, he has yet to experience failure from the "inside," which in itself would hardly be an encouraging prospect or reward for his efforts. In any case, it is no longer certain that the division of inside from outside is tenable, nor that the proverb can be assimilated. To continue would, it appears, involve either pursuing the complexities of the problem that have come to light, or giving up the theoretical gains in favor of a feigned success.

It is therefore difficult to know how to read the opening of chapter 3, and the second half of the essay:

A few months go by. My language in turn begins to contain some proverbs. Of course, I usually quote them innocently when telling a story, "just for fun," yet I also manage sometimes to introduce them into a discussion in which they come to my support. (*Expérience*, p. 111)³⁰

The narrator has somehow overcome the insurmountable difficulties of which he spoke just a little earlier in the essay; he is now on the inside. He has managed to assimilate proverbs, and can use them with a measure of success. There is a very definite "after" which succeeds the "before" of the first half of the essay. Indeed, the sense of temporal progression is underlined in the first sentence of this second half ("A few months go by"). Yet despite asking the question, "How did I manage to possess this beginning of knowledge (*ce commencement de science?*)," and giving some indication of the steps involved, just how the passage from the first half to the second half is realized is highly problematical, and is hardly something that was in any way prepared. The ease with which this transition is negotiated should not make us overlook its crucial importance. It is narrated with the greatest nonchalance, and yet it involves nothing less than the passage which *le possible* in the first half of the

essay: the possibility of going from “I quote them innocently when telling a story” to “I also manage sometimes to introduce them into a discussion.”

The essay is more and more concerned with the precise nature of the relationship between the various sets of terms that have been brought into play in an attempt to account for the proverb. The necessity for a more precise articulation of what is at stake coincides in the essay with a reflection on the narrative organization of the essay in terms provided by the proverb. This is not simply a chronological moment whose occurrence we earlier anticipated when we considered the central transition of the essay. From the moment the narrator first asks the question of the proverb, it is in a sense already too late, he has already lost. This makes the narration of its recovery imperative, but the narration can never give us the proverb, since it is always either proleptic or retrospective. The proverb can least of all be simply cited; it can only be presented in the form of a representation, a mime, and although we are given literal, thematized versions of this mimicry in the latter half of the essay, the narrative is in fact concerned at every point with its own mode of representation.

This concern surfaces in the third section of the essay in a discussion of one of the narrator’s “procedures” that helped him to speak using proverbs. The procedure in question involved forming an image of the character of the Malagasy people, which becomes ever more subtle and charming. The narrator acknowledges that he is making a fundamental error, but it is a common enough one, “that most travelers make” (*Expérience*, p. 113),³¹ the error Paulhan refers to as the “illusion of the explorer” (“l’illusion de l’explorateur”). It consists of taking manifestations of Malagasy culture, particularly proverbs, as fine indications of a “Malagasy soul.” However, this is precisely the kind of metaphorical misreading that prevented the narrator from speaking proverbs early on.

The narration continues from “within,” as the narrator achieves almost native proficiency in speaking proverbs. The enjoyment of his success is, however, spoiled by a paradox, whose nature he then attempts to define more precisely:

The more I hurry and force myself to be sincere, the more it seems to me that when I say a proverb, *nothing* happens: I mean, nothing of a linguistic nature, nothing that can be

expressed by relating it to this singular kind of sentence named a proverb. (*Expérience*, p. 117)³²

Once he has successfully broken through to the inside, and is apparently within the proverb, “*nothing* happens,” just as when he was apparently “without” the proverb, it is also as if nothing happened when he spoke (“I’m talking in a void” [p. 103], “no-one hears me” [p. 104]³³). The distinction between a proverb and a sentence, as well as the spatial and temporal metaphors of inside/outside and before/after, were all along, it seems, a lure; a handy but ultimately defective narrative framework. As the narrator admits: “the very terms in which I formulated and presented this worry are taken away from me” (*Expérience*, p. 117).³⁴

Whether or not it is successful, the proverb only comes into play when there is an interference between two codes, since it necessarily entails some kind of an interruption of language. It is neither identity (as success it is “nothing”) nor difference (as failure it is also “nothing”), but it is the gap between two different figures of failure or success. What, we might ask, or rather where is the difference? How do we get from one to the other? The essay conveniently offers us a literal answer to the question. At the very point of intersection, or of interference, between the before and the after, at the precise center of the essay, there is a blank: an ellipsis, a void, nothing. We cannot tell the difference, because the narrator literally cannot tell, or narrate, this difference. The focus of the narrative appears to shift towards the end of the essay to what the narrator begins to call the “play of the proverb” [*jeu du proverbe*], the play of differences whereby the proverb continually appears and disappears. Since this involves accounting for its production, the essay also, by analogy or by extension, tells the story of the production and the uncertain status of the narrative itself.

How are we to understand this relationship of analogy between the proverb and the narrative about the proverb? The relation between thematized examples of the “play of the proverb,” and the entire essay, is itself a question of no small importance.³⁵ If examples in the essay have the same indeterminate status as the text itself, how are we to read either one of them? Is the example an “actual” example, introduced by a deictic “this is it!,” giving us the “real thing,” or is it merely a simulacrum of a “play of the proverb,” a “sentence which I place skillfully” (*Expérience*, p. 123). What is a convincing semblance of

spontaneity? To the extent that it determines its own status, it also determines its context, and by extension the status of the whole text. The same indetermination affects the text. Should we read it as a performative event or a constative statement? Whatever decision we make puts the example, so to speak, in its place. The text and the example seem to mimic each other, and to coexist in a state of permanent mutual displacement or usurpation. The connotations of parody or self-parody are undeniably present, and indeed it is precisely at this point that the question of irony is reintroduced:

It is not easy to imagine in detail how the reversal, whose origin and effects we have just seen, can happen. Irony or humor can give an approximate idea of it. (*Expérience*, p. 122)³⁷

The narrator then gives two examples that show orators who turn from their actual subject to the way in which they express it, and who attempt, like the narrator, to prove that what they are saying “is the case” (*c’est bien ça*). Unlike the earlier appearances of irony, when the narrator was mocking the seriousness surrounding the enunciation of a proverb, this irony is not merely a question of humor (or of the *effect* of irony). It is here both the putting into play and the suspension of the difference between meaning and saying, constative and performative. What this second irony suspends is the possibility of knowing whether one means what one says, and more pertinently, whether one can mean, or intend, to be ironic. The second irony ironizes the first irony—indeed, one could see irony as precisely the gap between the two—and as such the second irony is no longer simply a textual instance, and example of irony. Irony extends across the whole text in that this gap is everywhere—each example is “*mis en abîme*,” and narrates this unnarratable gap, or *abîme*, or *rien*. When the Malagasies intimate early on that there is no place for irony, this is literally true. This is not just because it is a gap, such as the blank between the two halves of the essay, but because it is both everywhere and nowhere in the text. We can never tell whether the text knows itself to be ironic or not, since it could always be pretending not to know—which is, etymologically, what irony is all about: the art of feigning ignorance.³⁸

Not the least of ironies of this text is that proverbs are taken to be deeply rooted in, and bound up with, common experience. The

title of the essay sums up very concisely the equivocation that a close examination of the proverb brings to light; does the “experience” belong to the “je” or to the proverb? Are we dealing with an experienced disruption or a linguistic disruption? This question is exactly the kind of question that the “play of the proverb” can account for. The truly ironic disruption is between the “play of the proverb” and the text which attempts to account for it, between, in other words, the “play of the proverb” and *L’Expérience du proverbe*. What, then, is the relation between a proverb and a *récit*, between an unreadable text and the story, or the allegory, of this unreadability?³⁹ They in fact stand in a paradoxical synecdochal relation to each other. The proverb seems to contain within it, in its potential for disruption, the future possibility of the *récit*, and yet appears lexically as merely part of the narrative. The *récit* makes the proverb seem highly improbable, even impossible, when subjected to close scrutiny, but such an assertion cannot be treated lightly, since it may be telling a tale of its own impossibility. So that even though the *récit*, or allegorical narrative, appears to be what the narrator calls “a part of language used to establish that one can speak,” it could very well be no more than a kind of proverb, inasmuch as it belongs metonymically to the rest of the language (“a *part* of language”). Thus the allegory of unreadability becomes “just” another unreadable text. Such seems to be the fate, according to de Man, of all allegories of unreadability: “Such an allegory is metafigural: it is an allegory of a figure (for example, metaphor) which relapses into the figure it deconstructs.”⁴⁰

Where does this leave Paulhan’s “ethnographic” writings in terms of the history of French ethnography generally? A reading such as the one we have just performed effectively decontextualizes the essay, and shows it to be concerned as much with its own linguistic and narrative complexities as with the supposed object of its study. Through the detour of this decontextualization, however, we are able to recontextualize and rehistoricize the essay as an allegory of the very activity of ethnography itself, the complex negotiation of self and other, which is actualized in the drama of the proverbial joust. It is a mark of Paulhan’s ability to exploit the resourcefulness of his own texts, and also an exemplification of the proverb’s own metonymic capacity for recontextualization, that this essay resurfaces in another form as a presentation for the short-lived College of Sociology.

SACRED LANGUAGE

The College of Sociology represents an entirely different strand of French anthropology, one which has its roots in the theories of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss around the turn of the century. Durkheim was writing in reaction to the sociological positivism of thinkers such as Auguste Comte, and attempted to conceptualize the sacred forces of “primitive” societies, which he sought to transpose in turn to the context of modern Western culture. He strongly influenced, in particular, the thinking of two of the founders of the College of Sociology Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, who saw its project as a kind of resacralization of Western society. Paulhan was one of the chief supporters of the College’s activities, publishing many of the lectures in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. His role was chiefly that of a facilitator, and his intervention at the College on 16 May 1939 may be seen as nothing more than a kind of guest appearance. While Caillois and Paulhan, who both proposed theories of the sacred, seem to have been at opposite extremes of the spectrum, it is possible, I would suggest, to see a deeper complicity between them.

The work of both writers has its origin, in different ways, in the ethnology of the time. Caillois was a student of Marcel Mauss and Georges Dumézil, and a voracious reader of the ethnography and cultural history of the early part of the century. In his first work, *La Nécessité de l’esprit* (*The Necessity of the Mind*), he used the mythologies and beliefs of “primitive” societies as evidence for the universality of his theory of lyrical overdetermination. Paulhan’s concerns were on the face of it far removed from those of Caillois and Bataille. While Caillois made a militant appeal in *Le Vent d’hiver* (*The Winter Wind*) for the “recalcitrants” (*réfractaires*) of society to form an elite community that would use its own power to subvert and regenerate Western civilization, drawing its inspiration from the sacred forces invested in similar privileged groups in “primitive” societies, Paulhan maintained that the sacred—which for him was manifest in the powerful “authority” of Malagasy proverbs—was within easy reach of everyone (“You don’t need to go to Madagascar to have the experience of the proverb”). The crucial question of the “College of Sociology”—how can we resacralize Western society?—prompts diamet-

rically opposed responses from Caillois and Paulhan: Caillois advocates a community of a select few purged of its weak, redundant elements, while Paulhan's solution is a utopian democracy, a "secret society" to which everyone belongs. A closer look at how the two writers elaborated their respective theories of the sacred, however, reveals in fact a deeper theoretical *rapprochement* between them.

Caillois's theory of the sacred is most thoroughly articulated in two of the lectures which he wrote for the "College of Sociology," "Le pouvoir" (Power), which Bataille presented in February 1938, and "La fête" (Festival), the text of which Bataille read in May 1939, which became in the two key chapters of *Man and the Sacred*, "The Sacred of Respect" and "The Sacred of Transgression."⁴¹ Unlike Bataille, for whom the sacred offered a model of pure transgression, the mystical *sovereignty* of a kind of shamanism, Caillois was interested in analyzing the dynamics of the interaction between the sacred and the profane as it occurred in a wide range of "primitive" societies. In "The Sacred of Respect" Caillois stresses the sacred as a prohibiting force, one that functions as a means of preserving and regulating the social order. As Caillois shows, for example, in many Australian and North American Indian tribes, opposing clans have distinctly complementary and symmetrical prohibitions, and totemic emblems, such that what is sacred for one clan is profane for another, and vice versa, thereby allowing for a mutual exchange between the two.

According to Caillois, as societies become more complex, they lose this fundamental duality which is at the basis of their social structure, and the "sacred of respect" is transferred onto a single, sovereign power. In this evolutionary account of the genesis of political power, the crime of *lèse-majesté* becomes the most sacrilegious of all. Yet any society in which all of the forces are oriented towards its own preservation tends, in Caillois' theory, towards its inevitable decline, its decadence, and necessitates a period of regeneration and recreation:

There comes a moment when an overhaul is necessary. A positive act has to ensure a new stability for an order. A simulacrum of creation is needed to renew nature and society. This is what the festival provides.⁴²

The sacred force represented by the "festival" stands in dramatic contrast to the reverential awe that characterizes the "sacred of respect";

the dull continuity and repetition of everyday life is interrupted by an explosion of frenetic activity, its dispersion remedied by a paroxysm of intense, concentrated celebration in which the usual rules no longer apply. Caillois describes this period as a collective recreation of the world, a simulacrum of chaos that ushers in a renewed cosmos. And as he emphasizes, the disorder of the festival stands in a precise relation to the order of the normal course of life: “these sacrileges are considered to be as ritual and holy as the very prohibitions they violate. Like them, they can be called sacred.”⁴³ The two antithetical forms of the sacred are thus inextricably linked, and indicate the fundamental trait of the sacred, its ambiguity.

One of Caillois’s examples to illustrate this constant interplay between the prohibitive and the transgressive forces of the sacred is a Malagasy proverb, “The maternal uncle falls under the nephew’s as-segai,”⁴⁴ which, as he points out, not only exemplifies the eternal conflict of generations, but also the struggle between the two fundamental elements, static and dynamic, of social life. Although it is open to speculation, it is unlikely that Caillois could have found this example anywhere other than in Paulhan’s own translations and editions of Malagasy proverbs. By the time Paulhan had rewritten his *Expérience du proverbe* as the lecture “Of Sacred Language,” he had already fully worked out his theory of terror and rhetoric in the 1936 NRF version of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. The analogy between Paulhan’s articulation of an essential doubleness, or ambiguity, and Caillois’s own analysis of the sacred, is not lost on either writer, and generates a brief exchange of letters between the two. Paulhan asks Caillois in October 1937:

Do we basically agree? I mean: that the terrorist or the recalcitrant tends—whether he likes it or not—towards a power that he will have to one day assume. . . . And that this power [. . .] is expressed precisely by the very rhetoric which the terrorist rejected out of weakness. . . ?⁴⁵

To which Caillois replies:

Indeed, if one thinks about it, it contains a comparable reversal, at least formally, to the one in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*: it’s the same dialectic, applied by you to language, by me to social existence.⁴⁶

Caillois is at the time less convinced than Paulhan of the coincidence of their respective projects. He continues: "The points of application are so dissimilar that one would have to stop there," and almost reproaches Paulhan for using Rhetoric as a means of recuperating and defusing the active dynamism of Terror. Both writers, however, recognize a fundamental ambivalence as the essential trait of the sacred. Caillois talks of "its fundamentally equivocal nature,"⁴⁷ of the double impulse of fear and desire that it inspires. The two opposing yet complementary forces of the sacred act in league against the world of the profane, and at the same time function to preserve it. In the same way, the enigmatic status of the proverb derives from its continual metamorphosis from pure force into pure form. Proverbs could be said to exist in the mythic time of the festival, their wisdom and authority deriving from a primordial origin, while they at the same time restrain and preempt any originality. In effect, proverbs, or sacred language, act to both prohibit and make possible the renewal of ordinary, or profane, language. This triangular dynamic—in which two opposing yet mutually sustaining sacred forces work to perpetuate a third, the profane—characterizes both Paulhan's and Caillois's theory of the sacred.

Whereas Paulhan's sacred is available to the "first person to come along" (*le premier venu*), Caillois is at greater pains to trace its gradual dissolution, and reemergence, in the course of the history of civilization. *Man and the Sacred* ends by bemoaning the general spread of the profane across all facets of life in the civilized world, since it forces the sacred into more interiorized or private spaces. The sacred, according to Caillois, has lost its pre-eminence as a force that regulates the very rhythm and energy of social life, and has been replaced by pale imitations at best: "A general disorder is no longer appropriate: at best people tolerate its simulacrum."⁴⁸ In the first edition of Caillois's essay, before the war and in the wake of the Popular Front's adoption of paid holidays for the first time, this role appears to have been filled by the "empty" time of the holidays ("vacances"). After the war, however, Caillois revised the ending of the chapter on "The Sacred of Transgression"; in response to the question of what in modern life corresponds to the festival, Caillois states emphatically that it is not the social divisiveness and dispersion of vacations, but the concentrated energy and violence of war. Like the festival, war is a radical disruption of the continuum of everyday life; it is given an historical and, overtly or not, a religious justification in that it is seen as a necessary

prelude to national and spiritual regeneration; it mobilizes the total energies of a nation; and the usual standards of civilized behavior are flagrantly overridden. Modern society appears to have substituted the grim dialectic of war and peace for that of the sacred and the profane. Yet Caillois also stresses the absolutely opposed functions and outcomes of festival and war; war exacerbates existing hostilities rather than suspending them, it fosters hatred and conflict rather than alliance and cohesion, it is a source of death and devastation rather than of renewed life and fecundity. He is led to ask himself what is responsible for this perversion of the originally recreative force of the sacred, and continues to see the gradual secularization of Western civilization as one of the principal causes, along with the emergence of vast nation states whose centralized power structures enable easy abuse of ever more sophisticated techniques of destruction.⁴⁹ This development in his theory of the sacred allows him at the same time to distance himself from the untimely similarity between Nazism and the program for social regeneration he had set out in *Le Vent d'hiver*. War is seen as an inevitable historical evolution that stands in exact opposition to Caillois's own abortive call for an organized movement to tap into the hidden sacred forces of social life.⁵⁰ The analogy breaks down precisely because war is no longer a simulation of chaos, but an actual orgy of destruction.

This shift of focus away from a political activation of the sacred, to a recognition of simulacrum as its very ground, in fact realigns Caillois's interest in the sociology of the sacred with his earlier studies of insect mimetism, and the later texts on the formations and images of stones. It also, perhaps unwittingly, confirms Paulhan's intuition of the deep affinity uniting their respective projects. While Caillois before the war adopted the stance of the militant "recalcitrant," wanting to go beyond Paulhan's apparent restraint in confining his theory to the linguistic realm, after the war he comes to realize that Paulhan had gone further than him in understanding how close their theories were. It is because the sacred is essentially a question of simulacra, of metaphor (or to quote Paulhan again, of "that rhetoric which the terrorist rejected out of weakness"), that it is socially, or politically, so effective.

So what can be made of Paulhan's swerve away from pursuing the political or theoretical implications of his work, into a more general problematic of linguistic and literary expression? Marc Augé has pointed out the limits of Paulhan's linguistically oriented comparison

of Malagasy and French cultures in *Le Repas et l'amour chez les Merinas*, showing how Paulhan never quite takes the crucial step of using the model of language to explore the dynamics of cultural taboos.⁵¹ What is significant in Paulhan's "ethnographic" writing is the shift, which we observed in particular with *L'Expérience du proverbe*, to the narrative form of the *récit*, which assessments of Paulhan's writings do not normally take into account. Far from being a simple evasion, by a turn towards the fictional, of the methodological or political complexities of ethnography, the *récit* allows Paulhan both to engage with the practice of ethnographic writing, and to read in a sense beneath its surface, beyond the commonplaces of colonialist textuality. *Aytré qui perd l'habitude* (Aytré Who Gets Out of the Habit) does just this.

Written while Paulhan was in Madagascar, *Aytré* is in fact based on an actual unsolved murder case. Aytré, a colonial sergeant, is assigned to keep the log of the journey which he makes, together with two other Frenchmen, Guetteloup and an adjutant, escorting three hundred Senegalese women across Madagascar. He begins by simply recounting facts, such as the distance they cover, or the supplies they are low on, but the more he writes, the more attentive he becomes to Malagasy culture. His log is slowly transformed into a more searching personal journal, in which he "gets out of the habit" of seeing things as he is supposed to. As he says at one point: "The strangeness of things in Madagascar corresponds to the strangeness of men."⁵² His language reveals an increasing sensitivity to the lot of the Malagasies, and by the end of his journal he begins to question (and reverse) the hierarchy of the colonizing culture as civilized and naturally superior to that of the colonized. Aytré's log/journal is itself framed by two chapters which are narrated by the adjutant, who comments upon Aytré's writing, and who informs us of the murder of a French woman, Raymonde. We never find out who in fact murdered Raymonde, but the adjutant seems intent on proving that what he sees as the gradual "disintegration" of Aytré's log is evidence of the latter's guilt. However, the adjutant's language, in contrast to Aytré's clear-headed and increasingly politically aware narration, is far more troubled and incoherent. He admits to stealing from Raymonde, and even though Aytré seems to have been charged with her murder, we are left with a strong sense of suspicion about the credibility of the adjutant's version of the events. As he writes in the last chapter, for example: "Aytré was no longer enough for himself. I recognize signs put there for my benefit; they don't really mean anything, but they mean inquiry—

this other thing which has now been added to everything else that is happening to me, and even to my memories, thereby undoing them” (*Aytré*, p. 95).⁵³ At one level an intriguing murder mystery, this *récit* could also be read as an allegory of colonialism (through the representative colonial subject of the adjutant) cracking under the strains of its own system, the breakdown of an arrogantly Eurocentric view of the world when it tries to understand the strangeness of the culture and people it is attempting to “civilize.”

Paulhan was never to return to Madagascar, just as he was never to finish his thesis on the semantics of the proverb. This was not due to any loss of interest on Paulhan’s part, since he in fact produced plan after plan, and hundreds of pages of different manuscript versions. One is left to surmise whether there was not something interminable about the very enterprise itself, which continually generated more narratives, and seemed propelled by a kind of metonymic imperative always to analyze one more example. The inability to end testifies as much to the stuttering repetition of narrativity which Paulhan found himself caught in when he tried to draw some universal conclusion from his experiences, as to his unwillingness to leave behind the particularity of his experience, to translate it, and thereby to lose it. The tension of this dilemma—caught between generality and particularity, theory and observation, *récit* and proverb, self and other—is everywhere inscribed in Paulhan’s texts that come out of his time on Madagascar, and it indicates the acute—and perhaps premonitory—sense Paulhan had of the dilemma facing all ethnographic narration.