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# On Ethnographic Genre and the Experience of Communal Work with the Hutterian People

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### Article abstract

This paper takes the problem of describing Hutterite work as a point of departure to discuss several problematic aspects of ethnographic genre and writing. The analytic mode of ethnography when applied to Hutterians compounds the stereotype of a dour people so the author utilizes humour and pathos to describe Hutterites at work and moves throughout from description and dialogue to interpretation instead of from generalization to illustration as is more conventional in the format of ethnographic writing. The authoritative voice of the narrator eventually yields to the description of an experience where neither the ethnographer nor his subjects were in control of events. This final scene serves as a metaphor for fieldwork and suggests that many of the problems associated with writing as an inherently destructive analytical mode can be transcended. The nature of this transcendence is suggested by the writer who shapes a story and completed by the reader who hears what is said — if only in the mind's eye — through a suspension of disbelief.

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# On Ethnographic Genre and the Experience of Communal Work with the Hutterian People

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This paper takes the problem of describing Hutterite work as a point of departure to discuss several problematic aspects of ethnographic genre and writing. The analytic mode of ethnography when applied to Hutterians compounds the stereotype of a dour people so the author utilizes humour and pathos to describe Hutterites at work and moves throughout from description and dialogue to interpretation instead of from generalization to illustration as is more conventional in the format of ethnographic writing. The authoritative voice of the narrator eventually yields to the description of an experience where neither the ethnographer nor his subjects were in control of events. This final scene serves as a metaphor for fieldwork and suggests that many of the problems associated with writing as an inherently destructive analytical mode can be transcended. The nature of this transcendence is suggested by the writer who shapes a story and completed by the reader who hears what is said—if only in the mind's eye—through a suspension of disbelief.

*Cet article prend la description du travail chez les Hutterites comme point de départ pour examiner plusieurs aspects problématiques du genre et de l'écriture ethnographiques. Lorsqu'appliquée aux Hutterites, l'anthropologie analytique renforce le stéréotype d'un peuple qualifié d'austère. C'est pourquoi l'auteur utilise l'humour et l'empathie pour décrire les Hutterites au travail. Il passe constamment de la description et du dialogue à l'interprétation, plutôt que de partir de la généralisation pour en arriver à l'exemple, ce qui est la manière conventionnelle d'écrire l'ethnographie. Le narrateur arrive ainsi à la description d'une expérience au cours de laquelle ni l'ethnologue ni ses interlocuteurs ne contrôlent les événements. Cette scène finale sert de métaphore à l'enquête sur le terrain et laisse supposer qu'il est possible de transcender les problèmes que l'on associe à l'écriture en tant que mode destructif d'analyse. La nature de ce dépassement est suggérée par l'auteur qui façonne une histoire qui est elle-même complétée par le lecteur qui entend ce qui est dit grâce à la mise entre parenthèses de son incrédulité.*

## I

My first encounter with some Hutterian people came in the late summer of 1971 on a hot, wind-whipped August day, in Red Deer, Alberta, while standing at a small roadside farm market.<sup>1</sup> The conversation was short because the wind was picking up and beating a steady rumble and snap out of the peddler's canvas awnings. Red dust devils seemed to snatch bits of our yelled out dialogue and run out into the prairie with them.

What kind of berries are -----?

--- katoons?

Wha-?

Saskatoons!!

Well, I didn't know what Saskatoons were so I decided to buy some and find out.

How ----?

What?

How much are the ----- toons?!

You never --- any before?

I shake my head in an exaggerated no. The old man laughs in a great heave and his laughter sails off into the prairie on a particularly big dust devil... grinning, he finally yells at me,

Then there's no charge!!!

The young freckle-faced girl standing next to him smiles—first at him, and then at me, and then self-consciously at the Saskatoons. I guessed she had about as many freckles as I now had Saskatoons but they were fast melting into her blush.

I had been in Alberta for less than a week, having migrated north to escape a bleak future that appeared to promise a year dropping compression bombs on civilians in Hanoi or eventually prison. Arriving in Calgary on the opening of the Calgary Stampede I decided that a quiet tour hitch-hiking about the province was preferable to the hyper-cowboy ethos rampant in the city. I had actually heard of Hutterites before as a student—an admired professor had done some genetics research with them and had often talked of them with great fondness. So, after a short exchange with the berry sellers in the dust storm, held in the lee of a big mudcaked green van, I found myself being invited out to their “Colony” for supper.

“You can't say you 'seen Alberta 'less you 'seen a colony.”

“But where will I sleep?”

“Most likely in a bed, like most folks do.”

More laughter, but this time it was the awkward adolescent girl with freckles and once again pale skin (whose nick-name I later discovered to be “Turkey egg”), who laughed and then giggled. She suddenly became conscious of her solitary giggling and so everyone else now clustering around us started to chuckle at her, and finally, with her, and eventually she again laughed, along with all the rest.

Later I came to recognize this pattern of laughter being passed around small groups of Hutterites at work as a kind of charming game which was meant to amuse and also to celebrate their togetherness. It is a subtle control on individuals—gentle laughter—and it suggests a more or less constant assessment of how

one is related to the greater whole which ultimately culminates in the whole. Of course, standing behind the van in the wind and dust and laughter I didn't know any of this, but I could certainly feel their charm.

Nothing that I have done since then with the Hutterian people has ever been exactly what I might have expected and I have also found in presenting papers at conferences and in giving lectures, that the expectations of my listeners have always been at enormous odds with my experience as a fieldworker. What success my writing has had in changing this I cannot say, but I doubt that very many anthropologists ever even bother to read about them, because like most people, anthropologists often presume that Hutterites are simply boring. I spent a total of two and a half years working in and around the communes and yet have never felt adequately able to transcend the leaden stereotypes which are held by most outsiders about the Hutterians. Perhaps some of the features of style and the “blurring of genre” now being addressed in anthropology will allow me to loosen this ethnographic knot a bit.<sup>2</sup> To do this, the paper will be leavened with flashbacks to form a metacommentary on the more pedestrian prose. I hope that in this way the descriptions offered will register the analysis instead of merely illustrating it. In other words, the experiences described precede analysis for the reader, just as they did for the fieldworker in their first instances.

Thus my concern is with the topography of writing—its surface shape—as a possible means to overcome the reflex skepticism fostered by writing styles which place the first person experience of the reader at odds with the third-person generalizations of the writer, who writes last the introduction which is read first, and whose conclusion was reached before the paper was either written or read. I hope that a closer match between the form of the reader's experience and the description that I can offer will suspend disbelief in the interest of entering another worldview. This suspension of disbelief granted by the reader of fiction does not ultimately preclude criticism of an ethnographic piece anymore than literary criticism has been precluded. Are the characterizations believable? Can we credit this or that? One need not forego criticism, but it should follow an attempt to understand, not precede it!

The scope of recent concern with genre and the hazy lines between styles of presentation is wide, although rather unfocused (see Geertz, 1983), and it is not my intention to dilate the subject further here. I would suggest, however, that there are presently two broadly related and overlapping fields of interest. “Orality and literacy”, as Tyler (1986: 136) puts it:

are the contemporary reflexes of an ancient argument between the ear/mouth and the eye, between “saying” and “seeing”, between *kinesis* and *mimesis*. Ever since the Greeks learned to write, the eye has dominated the ear/mouth in the West. The argument reemerges now because writing, the instrument of domination, has undermined itself and is being challenged by new technologies of representation. The whole idea of writing and literacy, at the very moment when this hegemony seemed most assured, is now suspect in a way that it has not been for many centuries in the West.

This suspicion about writing also grows out of the formidable problem of adequately matching description and understanding when representing that which can only be spoken, via writing. The problem of rescuing the meaning of oral discourse from destruction by its very means of description—writing— affects scholars as diverse as those interested in Homer (Havelock, 1982) and Black American folk preaching (Rosenberg, 1970). This broad hermeneutical problem has turned into an epistemological nightmare for many anthropologists, historians, classicists, folklorists and linguists, thrusting them into the middle of a major philosophical revolution. Therefore, much writing on the subject has been trapped within the problem of writing itself (Derrida, 1974; Swearingen, 1986; Tannen, 1980, 1982). The philosophical revolution of modern German hermeneutics and the problems of interpretation and language addressed by Gadamer (1975) and Ricoeur (1976) which has both absorbed and guided much of this discussion naturally implies a second field of interest: “experimental” writing.

It is not my purpose to detail the many attempts to utilize topological form, change of voice, automatic writing, performance or verse, in the modern novel. But the range of “experimentation” is certainly as old as the century and includes, among many others, John Fowles’ entry into the midst of his novels, chatting with the reader, along with Graham Greene’s use of travel as a trope for the “journey” back through time to his childhood.<sup>3</sup> All of this playing around with form and meaning in fiction has had little impact on ethnographic writing, so attempts to try to actually do something about the problems which have drawn so much recent written commentary, do not exactly abound. It is to this small second group of forays into creative writing that the remainder of this paper is devoted. I won’t presume to proffer you a reading list to update the references given by other authors (Gatewood, 1984, for example). My point is ironic I suppose—some of us just want to be, in metaphorical effect, “heard”.

## II

The encounter with a small group of Hutterian

vegetable peddlers continued as we clambered into the van, hauling bags of radishes and chickens covered in “shake and bake” red dust with us. The booming canvas had proved a harbinger of the thunder which was now rolling over the Red Deer River Valley in a sky moving like a time-lapse photographic sequence. Then it rained. It rained so hard that we couldn’t drive anywhere. We simply sat in that steamy van in vegetative silence: seven of us; smelling of sweat, wet wool, and radishes.

I spent the weekend in the commune with my new acquaintances and then hitchhiked off into the mountains near Rocky Mountain House, Alberta to fish for cut-throat trout. The few days that I was with the Hutterians presaged our next meeting, which was my formal introduction to “fieldwork” several years later...

Southern Saskatchewan in early summer has a furry cover of new alfalfa and the scent of wet sage. A murmur of low German voices rises and the sounds of electric saws and hammers halt as a work party stops to have a snack of coffee and sandwiches. The smell of the Prairie replaces that of sawn wood and hot tools for fifteen minutes or so.

We are building a school house—a new school house for the flood of children in this fast growing colony of Sandy Bluff.<sup>4</sup> I don’t think that I have heard more than a phrase or two uttered all morning and most of these were in response to my questions: “Where do I put this? Where do you want these?” “Here” or “there” are always the answers. At first I thought that everyone was simply being shy but after some honey is dropped into their coffee and a few hot drafts sucked into mouths dry with sawdust, the smiles come out and the questions begin, and the laughter.

“Where ya from?”

“Calgary—States originally.”

“Where in the States?”

“Born in New York—lived all over.”

“You come up here ’cuz of the War?”

“Yeah.”

Warm smile. Then a serious look.

“Terrible.”

He shakes his head, slowly wagging a long grey beard which drops sawdust into his coffee, which by now he is also sharing with a lot of flies, some of which are struggling and drowning. There must be a dozen flies forming a glossy chitinous sediment in the bottom of my own cup too. I stare at them and swallow hard. He smiles and says,

“The worst part is the rest of ’em will be up all night!”

We laugh and quietly go back to work.

Hutterite work groups seem to alternate between

periods of quiet and efficient work punctuated rather naturally by periods of spoken sociability and food. Everyone is so used to working together that it sometimes seems to an outside observer as if the group is telepathic. This is more than just a matter of knowing one's part because a knowledge of the whole is necessary to work this way. It is more like jazz than chamber music. Everyone knows the plan—they all had a part in drawing it up. Everyone can use all of the tools. Everyone's children will use the school as will they for their church meetings every day. Everyone owns it. And so we build it in improvisation against a backdrop of children bringing messages, pies and coffee, and staring at me. Men leave to do other things; fix a broken axle, help with the milking because the assistant is sick or simply to take a break and talk with visitors from another colony. Others drop in and take up their places. Finally someone says,

"Let's go, Peter! It's time for church meeting, so we should wash up a bit!"

In a colony nobody says it's "quitting time", nobody announces that they are leaving to do something else, nobody asks what they should do when they arrive. This is not an "another day, another dollar" work environment. Work is never used for punishment and work is not rewarded with money. In fact, work isn't what we think of as work at all. The Hutterian experience of what we call work or labour is truly incommensurate with our own. It is not a commodity-based enterprise; they are rather ascetic communalists. It is not valued extremely as a means of self-expression or "self-actualization"; they have no careers. Most "work" is manual, much of it is with other people, and it generally results in something: harvest, wine, fence or cheese. Most solitary "jobs" are ongoing and repetitious and also associated with official statuses: eggs, chickens, dairy and the like are all operations run by some specific person. They are highly mechanized industrial processes which provide the commune with the bulk of its income. These individual "jobs", held by a minority of men, are a little more like our own careers but the experience of Hutterians in them has only the trappings of responsibility to connect them to us. Otherwise, they are meditative and part-time tasks, often fluctuating seasonally, and they also involve others as apprentices, permanent assistants, or in repair and maintenance activities.

Our own ideas about work are very ambivalent. We often say to others upon parting "Don't work too hard!" and yet at the same time most of us want to be known as "hard working" and to have a "fulfilling" career. The duality of the Protestant ethic in the latter part of the twentieth century is in extreme

contradiction in the world of work. The indolence of vacation and the style of the idle rich may be popularly sought, but the idea of being unemployed or without a career is also anathema to most of us. As children we are punished with work—"chores"—and then rewarded for exactly the same things with "allowances"—our first pay. Work is the universal double-bind of our culture. It seems that the incommensurate nature of Hutterian people doing what we call "work" and what they would just call "building a school" must summon forth some mediating term on my part. I don't think that one would be useful because I don't wish to build a bridge here with a misleading term. Our words for work, including the terms work and labour themselves, are loaded with negative connotations: tasks and duties. None of these readily apply for the Hutterians because their activities having been unrewarded cannot easily become unrewarding. The image of the sober-faced authoritarian in black clothes forcing his sons to the plow and condemning his daughters to a life at the stove, toiling out their days in grim anticipation of the final paternal death rattle seems to be easily conjured up when we think of the Hutterians. It is really a splendid literary theme from our own past but it is our idea of how we would take to the miseries of the single family farm in an earlier era of settlement. It has nothing to do with twentieth century communal farms of the Hutterian people whose lives are full of humour and wit as well as serious and poignant.

Popular images of the Hutterians, the Amish and the Mennonites are part of a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. They join with the Quakers to form a kind of bland Puritan version of ourselves which detracts seriously from what we might learn from all of these people about ourselves and about human potential in the arena of conflicting individual and group demands. Instead they represent porridge: dull and predictable.

Popular attitudes are not always as benign as the "dull" stereotype which I think permeates much of the ethnography devoted to Hutterites. Riley's study (1968) of farmers' attitudes towards Hutterites, and Mackie's work on the "accuracy" of folk knowledge about the Hutterites, suggests a widespread fear of the group by the "majority culture" of the Prairies. Indeed, I have often heard young mothers in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan tell their misbehaving children: "Stop that! Or I'll give you to the Hutterites!" This usually works.

The Hutterians are a rare and special people for many reasons but foremost, I think, is the simple fact that they are really a new culture, and this is, in part, what makes them suspect. After a troubled 400 years, they have become a whole, distinct people only over

the last century. In a world of languages, cultures, and entire peoples becoming extinct, whose fading from existence has been so well chronicled by anthropologists, the Hutterites have entered. Like many other utopian groups, they have been severely oppressed—nearly extinguished numerous times—and yet they now flourish. They have not fought for this in any conventional way because they are pacifists. They have not had great personal power or wealth—they are communal. So, the question is simple: How, against all odds, have they done it? I have been trying to answer that question for years because I think it is instructive. In a world threatened by war, oppression and grotesquely disparate distributions of wealth and power, they can be inspirational, but only if they are understood as multidimensional. However, the conventions of our analytical writings are dryly undimensional, serving only to perpetuate—even if unwittingly—the stereotype of a plodding personality and a restrictive culture.

For example, a review of those sections dealing with Hutterian relations with the “outside” in several major ethnographies on the Hutterites (Hostetler, 1974; Bennett, 1967) reveals that they inevitably lead up to discussions of “defection”, and so give the impression that “outsiders” are more vital and interesting people than Hutterites. I don’t think that this is the intention of the writers; the whole outside world is certainly more exciting than a Hutterite colony but individual “outsiders” on the Prairies are not necessarily exciting people. Nonetheless, the order of description and analysis yields the impression of an inevitable attempted escape from boredom. Indeed, Hostetler’s summary of Hutterite personality as, “extraverted rather than introverted, sensing rather than intuitive, feeling rather than thinking, and judgmental rather than perceptive... talkative, popular, conscientious, interested in everyone, a born co-operator, an active committee member...” (1974: 246-7) contradicts any unintended suggestion that the Hutterites are boring people. Most of Bennett’s vignettes likewise suggest people who like to celebrate and who are happiest when they can “work hard” (see Bennett, 1967: 78-105). Perhaps it is this equation of work with happiness which is so problematic when coupled to a mode of description which ‘employs’ work in our terms and uses our measures of productivity to evaluate work—dollars, hours, acres, and equipment arranged in tables and graphs. Where are the happy, sometimes comic people summarized as a personality profile by Hostetler? One would think them difficult to keep off the page; walking on like so many gregarious peasants with lilting accents and stories to tell. I know some of these people but they never appear

because neither individuals, nor dialogue, are really the subjects of these works—society and economy are their themes and so neither Paul, nor Rebecca (not their real names anyway, right?) say or do much in them. I run the risk of being accused of criticizing these authors for something they never intended to do, and rightly so, I am critical of their style and of a certain tradition in ethnographic writing. But this, I must emphasize, is a literary criticism. Judged within the canons of conventional ethnography these are among the best books ever written about any people. It is precisely because they are so well wrought within the framework of rock-bottom empirical thought, that they fail to evoke much of the flavour of local life.

And so, year after year, I face small groups of anthropologists at conferences from whom the perennial questions concerning the Hutterians seem to be “Aren’t their numbers declining?”, “Don’t they have genetic problems?” and, if we are friends, these are usually followed by the question “Where are you doing your next fieldwork?” The assumptions are pretty obviously related to a mistaken image of the Hutterians, who are flourishing and not declining, and whose genetic problems are no more severe than any other religious isolate, including the Jews. The implicit wish seems to be that their numbers should decline and the further remark manifests a belief that only a congenital idiot would live like that anyway. The last remark probably stems from the good wishes of my friends, who hope that I will study a more exotic and marketable group of people somewhere far away, like a true anthropologist. Anyway, this is where we stumble across the concept of “genre” as I wish to apply it first.

A genre is not merely a style, it is also a typology of styles produced by successful publication. Anthropologists garner a lot of style points from where they did their fieldwork. There is a kind of “star” mentality in our culture which fuses an initial success to “follow-up” works and so one good book about an “exotic” culture will attract a whole series of writers until small cultures of 400 people or single Mexican villages have been visited hundreds of times by anthropologists, novelists, film crews and eventually even *People Magazine*.

This aspect of genre is actually an uncomfortable one for us, as is the idea that numerous small groups of survivors from the last 500 years of the European wars of conquest have served as oddities for the purposes of commercial publishing houses who wish to market esoterica. This corresponds rather nicely, however, with the structure of many anthropological appropriations of whole cultures as “cases in point” and “exceptions to the rule.” In the hierarchy of “traditional” anthropological interests, certain “traditional” peoples stand out of all proportion in

importance relative to their numbers due principally to how their “exotic” qualities mesh with our own cultural agenda. This applies as much to what we ignore as it does to what we emphasize.

In a recent survey of Introductory texts in the social sciences, Minderhout (1986) uncovered what on the surface appears to be an appalling ignorance concerning what anthropologists do. The most commonly held stereotype was that anthropologists study “primitive people” and little else. The story we tell ourselves is quite different: we study clinics, city neighbourhoods, factory floors, resistance movements—indeed, we like to think that we study all of humanity—and so, along with Minderhout, we are tempted to protest that “our introductory texts should realistically and accurately emphasize both the differences among and common purposes within the social sciences” (1986: 15). But before you take such a laudable goal to heart, I would ask you to pull the introductory texts off your shelf and canvass them, just to see for yourself what they are about, and what they ignore. I have quite a collection of texts, sent to me without cost, as they are to most professors, by publishers most anxious to sell another hundred copies. Every year several of the more popular texts come out as “new” editions. I have on my shelf a sizable collection of multiple editions of these popular texts and at the moment William A. Haviland’s text, *Cultural Anthropology* (4th edition, 1983), lies on my lap, open to a numberless page serving as topological guide at the very beginning of the book. It is a map of the world with the “location of the cultures mentioned in the textbook” pinpointed. I am looking for the open spaces, where presumably either nobody lives, or at least nobody of much interest to anthropologists. This includes Western Europe, the U.S.S.R., China and the Islamic World encompassing the top half of Africa stretching across the middle east through Iran. Neither is there any mention of the “majority” cultures of the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, South America, Japan or New Zealand. In short, the majority of the world’s population is ignored in a popular text devoted to “the study of human beings”. Majority cultures are “presumed” to be (literally) the territory of sociology. In fact, all of the texts that publishers have sent me resemble Haviland’s book—his just has a map. But who, after all, produces these texts? The one in hand I see was produced by CBS, a major broadcasting corporation who has created a series of videos to accompany this text. CBS College Publishing is an umbrella organization which includes Holt, Rinehart and Winston; The Dryden Press; and Saunders College Publishing. Above the ISBN number on the copyright page I note that the production of this text required a Senior Project

Manager, a Design Supervisor, a Text Designer, a Senior Acquisitions Editor, a Production Manager, and a Publisher. So what we have here is a “designer” text created for a market by a “project team” and produced by a major multinational corporation. One might still be tempted to think that the journal literature could differ from the largely esoteric emphasis of our texts but a quick glance at the journals on display in any periodicals reading room of a university library should convince you otherwise.

If you require greater substantiation of my premise, I recommend a trip to the nearest bookstore which includes titles in anthropology. There you are likely to find the latest offering from Marvin Harris alongside works devoted to lost continents, “Indians”, apes, and a copy of two of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (that’s right, it’s still in print and, I am told, does a brisk trade). In short, the popular version of anthropology stretches from King Kong through cannibals to King Arthur (but just see Harris, *Cannibals and Kings*, 1977). The point is simple, Minderhout’s lamentations notwithstanding, the “stereotype” is really rather accurate. Careers are made by getting oneself sufficiently recognized in the journal literature to make it onto the pages of one of CBS College Publishing’s texts, which are published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston—the major “commercial” publisher of anthropology. “Holt”, as it is fondly known to most of us, publishes in New York/Chicago/San Francisco/Philadelphia/Montreal/Toronto/London/Sydney/Tokyo/Mexico City/Rio de Janeiro/Madrid—many of the places which are “blacked-out” on the map we began with. Our critical eye has not been much fixed upon ourselves—the pretense of “reflexive” anthropology and “interpretive” anthropology notwithstanding. I hope that a focus on the “genre” of ethnography can constitute a true literary criticism so that our concern with it can move beyond the stiff imposition of form over content. Without a critical approach we run the risk of reproducing the same set of traditional interests as a more saleable commodity... *The Golden Bough* with a new cover, *The Bible* in the vernacular. This implies that a historical approach to the shifting relations between form and content should be taken.

Genre eventually came to mean (1873) the depiction, in paintings, of “scenes and subjects of common life”.<sup>5</sup> And there is the rub! Depiction contains no theory of description and it presumes what common life is. It is the presumptuousness of a conventional ethnographic genre which I am opposed to because I think it has played havoc with our description of the human condition. To compress human cultural diversity into a highly programatic essay format is distortion on a vast scale which has

heretofore been treated as if it was actually an antidote for bias! A depiction does not involve dialogue and it does not involve sharing with the reader what has been shared in the field with others. An approach which includes the tradition of literary criticism as a necessary accompaniment to new forms of writing, may assist us in understanding the stories we tell ourselves instead of merely giving us a new form in which to repeat them. It may also help us to tell them better.

Joan Didion, writing in *The White Album*, put it so:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be "interesting" to know which. We tell ourselves that it makes some difference whether the naked woman is about to commit a mortal sin or is about to register a political protest or is about to be, the Aristophanic view, snatched back to the human condition by the fireman in priest's clothing just visible in the window behind her, the one smiling at the telephoto lens. We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. Or at least we do for a while. (1979: 11)

### III

I am very far north now.

The snow has stopped falling but it hasn't stopped blowing. It runs in giant streams over the hills, sometimes ankle deep and sometimes flowing way up over our heads. We have stopped in the bottom of the coulee where a Hereford is calving well ahead of season. The moon and the streaming snow are a surreal landscape moving to the accompaniment of the moaning cow caught up in a barbed wire fence. Her breath has formed hoar frost on the fencepost in front of her flared and frozen nostrils. Jake strokes her shaking head and gentles her as best he can and old Paul-vetter hands me the wire saw. I know he is arthritic and so I must do this. I put my hands into the exhausted cow and saw the calf into pieces. She is a good cow and I know—I suppose—I hope—that the calf is dead by now anyway.

The pieces come out and fall into the bucket and I pull my hands from inside the warm cow back out to the blistering icy wind. They are covered in blood and blue mucus. They freeze solid as I stare into the obscene steaming bucket. Paul rips open his jacket and grabs my hands thrusting them into his armpits.

He walks me stiffly to the truck with my hands jammed under his arms.

I am suddenly reminded of learning to dance while standing on my mother's toes.

Who leads?

Our eyes look straight into one another and our beards are full of the frost of our exertion mixed with the cow's.

What kind of embrace is this?

### NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented in a shorter form at the joint meetings of the Canadian Ethnology Society and the American Ethnology Society, Toronto, 1985 in a session devoted to "blurred genres". I wish to thank a number of the participants for their discussion and inspiration; notably, novelists Marie-Claire Blais and Thomas Sanchez, and ethnographers Janice Boddy, Michael Lambek, George Marcus and Richard Handler.

2. See Geertz (1983) for a thought-provoking commentary on the widespread dissatisfaction with contemporary forms of writing in many fields as well as in anthropology, and Parker (1985) for a similar commentary on Geertz himself as the principal exemplar of a critical approach to anthropological text-building.

3. Fowles' works (in particular, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *A Maggot*) raise an interesting problem in fiction which is reciprocal to the ethnographic or journalistic narrator's problem of presence in a text. Is Fowles' intrusion one which actually breaks the spell of the reader's suspension of disbelief, when the author insists on telling him that these are just characters in the author's mind and consequently the reader should choose the ending he likes from those the author will suggest? Or, is the author just another character overwhelmed by the shared pretense whereby authors of fiction get cozy with their readers? For either the ethnographer or the novelist there is an underlying similarity which stems from the tradition which their respective genres represents in a literate culture: they are threatened with invisibility by the conventions of their readers as much as by their own writing.

Greene's *Journey Without Maps* reverses the popular travel metaphor employed by an entire generation of British writers between the wars, who saw their lives as journeys. Instead, he finds in wandering a trope for self-exploration (see Fussell, 1980: 65-70). Although written in 1936, Greene's work sounds a radical note, even among current works by anthropologists like Dumont (1978) and Dwyer (1982). Indeed, what we can learn from fiction, as suggested by Handler and Segal's (1984) discussion of Jane Austin's narrative technique, is a pleasantly daunting prospect.

4. All names and places are fictitious.

5. This is the definition from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.



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