

Dramas and Pilgrims

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Perhaps in some set of legends there is a story of some book that shrank or swelled according to the capacity of the person handling it to draw knowledge from it. If so, Victor Turner's new book is of the same stock, since, approaching it at different time, I seem to find some different message in it. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*¹ looks at first sight like a string of separate essays on matters ranging from the cosmology of the Dogon to the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket. On a second glance, it becomes clear that, while several of the chapters did originally appear separately, this is no mere collection of warmed-up leftovers, but does present a set of related themes which run, albeit with varying stresses and counterpointing, throughout the book. But even to describe the themes will be deceptive, since it might seem that Victor Turner has not really moved beyond the positions taken in his earlier books, notably *The Ritual Process*.² It may be granted that *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* largely makes explicit ideas which were implicit in the earlier books; but, even so, the book is certainly not *deja vu*.

I write 'the book', and physically, there is only one book; but one has an uneasy feeling that perhaps there are three books trying to get out of this one volume, the first a treatise on sociological method, the second an attempt to apply this method to particular historical episodes and social experiences, and the third a hymn to the power and value of 'communitas'. Perhaps my view of *Dreams, Fields, and Metaphors* as a book that merits an uneasy admiration that must fall short of full acceptance condemns me as one of the tidy-minded for whom any confusion of conventional categories has an unnerving effect. Perhaps I could have pulled even more books out of it with a little more trying; it may be that this is the book which comes by far the closest to giving the counter-culture a coherent intellectual framework, but I am not at all sure that this was Victor Turner's conscious intention. But let me cease looking for labels and, instead, open the bottle.

Victor Turner draws together three fundamental ideas from his earlier books. Society is to be seen not as something static but as a

¹*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors, Symbolic Action in Human Society*, by Victor Turner. Cornell University Press, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual. Ithaca and London, 1974, 309 pp., £9.60.

²Of the key ideas in this book, liminality and the nature of symbols come from *The Forest of Symbols* (Cornell U.P., 1967), social dramas and the way in which ritual, while being manipulated for personal ends, can still impose obligations on its manipulators from *The Drums of Affliction* (O.U.P. for International African Institute, 1968), and society, conceived as a process in which the two poles are structures and communitas, from *The Ritual Process* (Routledge Kegan Paul, 1969).

process, in which two modalities, structure and *communitas*,³ alternate and interact with each other. This process has as its analysable units social dramas and social enterprises, the former marked by conflict, the latter by cooperation. Finally, there is the significance of liminality, those periods and points in the social process when the pressure of social norms is suspended and *communitas* can present its own version of the human condition. *Communitas* itself needs a closer definition, and Turner gives this by distinguishing between 'existential *communitas*', which covers both the moral imperative of brotherhood and the sense of its existence at a given time and place, and 'normative *communitas*', the occasions which society sets for the purposive practice of fraternity and its appropriate institutional forms.

The individual ingredients of this set of ideas are not particularly novel. The 'communitas-structure' contrast is one that has bobbed up quite a number of times in the history of sociology under a variety of names, and the reasons for its continuing reappearances is itself a significant question in the sociology of sociology. Turner himself makes quite a number of acknowledgements, notably to Kurt Lewin for the concept of 'social field',⁴ to Max Black and Robert A. Nisbet⁵ for the importance of metaphor in social awareness, to Van Gennep (author of *The Rites of Passage*) for 'liminality'⁶ and to Florian Znaniecki for stressing the 'humanistic perspective'⁷ (as against a mechanistic functionalism) of the social sciences. However, these ideas are brought together with considerable skill, and form a reasonably consistent system. I am myself against system-building in social anthropology, since it seems to me that societies have different levels, or orders,⁸ of existence, and that no one theoretical system can be equally satisfactory for all levels; however, if system-building there is to be, Victor Turner does remarkably well.

A word about the structure of this book. There are seven chapters of which the first three and the last three both seem to have similar

³Victor Turner's own definition in this book (p. 274) of structure as 'all that holds people apart' as opposed to *communitas* 'desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person' seems unsatisfactory even in terms of his own usage, since, after all, people are held together by institutions as well as by desires. I do not think it would be unfair to Turner to define structure as the defined rights and obligations that can be enforced by social sanctions, while *communitas* includes all that holds society together without being regarded as being of obligation.

⁴Lewin's main service to the social science was to make people aware of the temptation inherent in the rather simple biological and mechanical metaphors used in theories of society.

⁵Max Black, *Models and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press, 1962, Robert A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History*, O.U.P., 1969. From Turner's account, Black seems to stress the creativeness of metaphors as a source of ideas, Nisbet rather to point to their deceptiveness.

⁶'Liminality' is actually a term introduced by Turner to cover what Van Gennep called 'état de marge' and what had been called in English 'marginality' or 'marginal situation'. Turner seems to find 'marginal' too negative in its connotations.

⁷Florian Znaniecki was a Polish sociologist who worked in America. He argued that social systems were qualitatively different from natural ones precisely by reason of the conscious participation of human beings.

⁸By this I mean that a society can exist as socio-geographical unit, as an ecosystem, as a set of power relations, as a network of person-to-person relations, as an assembly of ideas, part explicit, part implicit, in the minds of its members, as a shared vocabulary of symbols. The theories by which all these are to be analysed are likely at best to be loosely consistent, rather than constituting a fully integrated grand theory.

themes. The theme of the first three, or, rather, the common thread linking them together is the way in which conflict may relate to *communitas*. In the first chapter, we are shown how among the Ndembu the enduring bonds of *communitas* are renewed through ritual after conflict. In the second, we are given St Thomas Becket's conflict with Henry II as a case study of the use of old, and the emergence of new, symbols, of how martyrdom can become an accepted, even willed, event, and how from it can spring new *communitas*, expressed in the subsequent pilgrimages—and the book as a whole shows that pilgrimage has now become Turner's favourite model of *communitas*.

In the third chapter, this theme of willed violence flowering into new *communitas* is again illustrated by the case of a turbulent priest—this time, the Mexican revolutionary Miguel Hidalgo, who called the Mexicans to rise against Spain under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Turner's suggestions of how styles come to be set in revolutions and how history is obliged to repeat itself are fascinating and surely deserve application to other countries. Both Becket and Hidalgo are seen as examples of men led by 'root paradigms', imperatives existing in the 'deep structure' of cultures (rather than at the surface level of social pressure), by which an individual may feel himself obliged to sacrifice his life to the wider claims of *communitas*.⁹

Between the two sets of three chapters lies an extended review of publications on the cosmologically-minded Dogon of Mali, West Africa. This can be recommended to anybody who wants to get hold of the key ideas of Dogon thought without too much difficulty. It is, however, more than a summary, since Victor Turner poses the question of some historic link between Mediterranean Gnosticism and Dogon beliefs,¹⁰ and also points to what is now the major difficulty for 'British school' anthropologists in interpreting the Dogon material, the way in which this elaborate set of myths impinges on, and is manipulated in, the normal flow of daily life.

In the last three chapters the linking theme is 'pilgrimage' seen as a particularly appropriate occasion for the manifestation of liminality. The essay 'Pilgrimages as Social Processes' will surely be the standard study of pilgrimages for anthropologists, against which future work on the subject will have to measure itself. For Victor Turner pilgrimages seem to be for the world religions what initiation rites are for the primal religions, occasions when individuals and groups leave their customary places in society to live for a time under conditions where fraternity and spiritual growth are stressed, to return later to ordinary life with enhanced knowledge and status. The other two chapters, while drawing examples from a variety of societies, are, almost, an-

⁹The concept of root paradigms is not very well developed by Turner. It is not clear how far they are seen as belonging to particular cultures, how far as belonging to the psycho-biological foundations of human nature. Cultures without the concept of heroism or martyrdom seem to exist; see Elizabeth Colson's essay in *The Translation of Culture* (edited T. O. Beidelman, Tavistock, London, 1972).

¹⁰*Literacy in Traditional Societies* (edited by J. R. Goody, Cambridge University Press, 1969) has a number of suggestions as to how the spread of writing may carry with it a diffusion of magical practices and beliefs. This, rather than direct Gnostic missionary efforts, could explain the presence of Gnostic beliefs in West African religion.

thropological sermons on the importance of liminality, not only as a key to the understanding of society, but also as a means to self-knowledge and personal happiness. A society must have areas of liminality so that its structure does not grow too rigid and static; an individual must have pools of liminality in his life if he would retain a fully human personality. Liminality, of course, needs something to which to be liminal, and totally unstructured *communitas* can turn destructive, as indeed Turner suggested earlier about Hidalgo's insurgent hordes. Yet despite this warning, Victor Turner's heart is clearly with his 'liminals', whether they be beggars, gypsies, hippies or monks!

One feels that to attack such a book, in which acuteness of judgement, breadth of sympathies, width of reading and warmth of manner are so evident, would be evidence of the crabbed and curdled disposition ascribed to critics. Yet the better the book, the more it merits keen scrutiny. To start with, liminality is surely rather worrying, just because, with Victor Turner as an over-eager impresario, it ceases to be liminal and moves out towards the centre of the stage. In his preface, Turner stakes out an enormous territory in modern society for liminality, and, therefore, for the competence of that privileged huntsman of the liminal fields, the anthropologist. I quote: 'such "liminoid" genres as literature, the film, and the higher journalism—those liminal, or "liminoid" (post industrial revolution), forms of symbolic action, those genres of free-time activity, in which all previous standards and models are subjected to criticism, and fresh new ways of describing and interpreting sociocultural experience are formulated. The first of these forms are expressed in philosophy and science, the second in art and religion¹¹—this factor of "consciousness"—should lead anthropologists into extended study of complex literate cultures where the most articulate conscious voices of values are the "liminoid" poets, philosophers, dramatists, novelists, painters, and the like'.¹²

All this suggests that what we are at is not simply a rethinking of social anthropology's theoretical equipment, but rather yet another attempt to find some general theory of human behaviour drawn from some deeply felt set of personal experiences. And as with all the other general theories, this one loses its value in accordance with the degree that it is spread out to cover everything. To take the case of literary criticism, both Marxism and psycho-analysis have proved very helpful tools, but the critic who is always looking for the class struggle or sexual symbolism is likely, not merely to make a fool of himself (which, after all, we all do, sooner or later), but, somehow or other, to lose sight of his real task. Similarly, what anthropologists have to say about taboos as boundary markers, or the way in which the tie between brother and sister can counterpoint the tie between husband and

¹¹Despite Turner's efforts to define the concept of 'liminality', it still seems too vague. He does not distinguish between people who possess power, but also certain specific ritual obligations, and people who do not possess power, even though they may be of some symbolic significance.

¹²Preface, pages 14 to 17.

wife,¹³ could surely be of some use in the analysis of English nineteenth-century fiction, but a social anthropologist who had really mastered the skills required for literary criticism (as distinct from using novels as a quarry for material) would have become a literary critic. Precisely because Turner sweeps so much into liminality, it becomes a vague and unhelpful concept. Indeed, his taste for extensive but unclear ideas seems to lead him into such waffly pronouncements as ‘“Liberty, fraternity, and equality” were shouts that drove Bonaparte on to seize an imperial crown’.¹⁴

To make a detailed critique of Turner’s recommendation of polymath aspirations, one would have, not only to point to the limitations of human life (how many anthropologists really publish all the material they get?) but also to the specificity of the anthropologist’s vocation. The anthropologist has to undergo the experience of becoming at least partially participant in the daily life of a society usually radically different from his own, then to achieve an intellectual analysis of its structure and culture, while continuing to belong to his own society, to which he has, however, become intermittently liminal. The relation between the historian, or the literary critic, and the world of the past, or of literature, are surely very different. All three occupations do involve the development of a ‘feel’ for what is studied, what scholastic philosophy might have called a ‘connaturality of knower and known’; but this seems to me the result and reward of detailed knowledge over a limited range. A craving for very wide knowledge can breed Sunday paper pundits, for whom learning is the collection of items rather than growth in understanding.

Again, surely ‘*communitas*’ and ‘liminality’ are terms whose extension depends on the ‘structure’ with which they are associated? If pilgrimages in Catholicism are associated with folk-religion, and hence *communitas*, rather than ecclesial structure, it certainly does not follow that this applies to all religions. Thus, the pilgrimage to Mecca has to be seen as part of the structure of Islamic observance, even if it produces a sense of ‘existential *communitas*’ among those participating. Similarly, Turner himself seems dissatisfied with his attempt to fit sixteenth-century Protestantism into his pattern of structure, anti-structure, and counter-structure.¹⁵ There are certain sociological similarities between Calvinism and Islam, but it would seem that these could be better interpreted in terms of similar theories of truth—in both, the paramountcy of the given word of God leads to a devaluation of the sacramental element of religion¹⁶—rather than as attempts at *communitas* which underwent re-structuring.

¹³To judge from nineteenth-century English fiction, the tie between brother and sister was much stronger (at least, among the propertied classes) than it is now, possibly because of the greater importance of money considerations in the arranging of marriages. Formality in one relation in a system is likely to be balanced by a stress on affection in another relationship.

¹⁴P. 294.

¹⁵Pp. 250, 278, 288, for references to Protestantism. Main-stream Reformation Protestantism hardly fits Turner’s argument that rejection of specific structures leads to greater stress on *communitas*, though the Anabaptists would. It might be fair to say that Protestants rejected much of both structure and *communitas* in the Catholic tradition, while looking for a new social order (as at Geneva, or in New England), which would be both structure and *communitas*.

I am rather puzzled, also, why Victor Turner has not used, or, at least referred to, Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, whose interest in tracing out man's playfulness even in his most solemn pursuits is surely akin to Turner's delight in creative liminality. Studies of the playful and the serious, the open and the concealed, the directly true and the metaphorical, in different cultures, might prove more specifically revealing than the over-inclusive categories of *communitas*, structure, and liminality.

Yet *communitas* and liminality are clearly values that mean a great deal for Victor Turner, giving him an image of intersubjective freedom and spontaneity, and building a bridge between life and learning. Such bridges, though, even when the work of noble hearts and keen minds, can be insecure, by reason of the gap between what we can show, and what we feel, to be true. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* has a real kinship not of conclusions or of organisation, but of feel and tone, with Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols*. Each searches to analyse human culture, each unconsciously finds an individual voice. Professor Turner craves for the holy freedom of *communitas*, Professor Douglas yearns for the holy order of strong group and grid. Each of these books is a good book, in the sense of stimulating thought; each book is a good book in the rather deeper sense of throwing light, unintended though it be, on each author's struggle, not only to choose good but to understand the good that is chosen. But neither is a great book, because in each the *persona* of the author is still too present. Let me be clearer as to what I mean. A great book in social anthropology cannot be written without some sign of the author's *persona*, because of the crucial importance of the death-resurrection of fieldwork, but this personality must be, in so far as it appears, entirely subordinated to perceiving and communicating the culture in which it has been plunged.¹⁷ Social anthropology is the art of understanding understandings, not of testing other people's understandings against one's own.

I could go on commenting on this book for a long time, finding things both to praise and to blame. I think I can and should say that this does not give the exciting feeling of new territory opening up before one, as did Turner's books in the sixties, and one's sense of disappointment is strongest when one reflects on the ground lying just beyond his earlier explorations. Here are some peculiarly tantalising questions, as to the how and why of the self-imaging and self-understanding of oral cultures and the way in which ritual is the metaphor of societies, which social anthropology will be bumping into in the next ten years. The widening of interests proposed in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* might well lead to a dispersal of energies. But if we cannot follow Victor Turner on this stage of his pilgrimage, we should be grateful to him for sharpening our perceptions of the social drama.

¹⁶This would seem to tie up with the question of why some societies have more means of symbolic communication than others, and how such means of symbolic expression affect social consciousness and the evaluation of truth. A world where many powers are regarded as being active is different from one in which only one source of power is recognised.

¹⁷The nature of fieldwork means, I think, that the anthropologist's *persona* should appear in his work more than that of the historian or even sociologist, but less than that of the journalist or travel writer.