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Author(s): Michael Taussig

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Autumn 2010), pp. 26-33

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/656467>

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Critical Inquiry

The Corn-Wolf: Writing Apotropaic Texts

Michael Taussig

Truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways.

—BERTOLT BRECHT, “Against Georg Lukács”

Act One

Anthropology graduate student finishes two years of fieldwork and returns home with a computer full of notes and a trunk full of notebooks. Job now is to convert all that into a three-hundred-page piece of writing. No one has told her or him (1) how to do fieldwork or (2) that writing is usually the hardest part of the deal. Could these omissions be linked?

I mean—what a state of affairs! Here we have what are arguably the two most important aspects of anthropology and social science, and they are both rich, ripe secrets—secret-society-type shenanigans. Why so? Could it be that both are based on impossible-to-define talents, intuitions, tricks, and fears?

All the more reason to talk about them, you say.

Yes, but what sort of talk?

For is there not something else going on here, something connecting fieldwork to writingwork, something they have in common? For instance, fieldwork involves participant observation with people and events, being inside and outside, while writingwork involves magical projections through words into people and events. Can we say therefore that writingwork is a type of fieldwork and vice versa?

Act Two

In a commentary on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s thoughts critical of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, Rush Rhees cites him: “‘And when I

This is a modified text of a talk given on 27 March 2008 at a panel on “Meaning and Method in History” with Hayden White, organized by the Columbia University Center for the Humanities by Akeel Bilgrami. I would like to thank the editors of *Critical Inquiry* for their suggestions and also Peggy Phelan and Bina Gogineni for their love of the Corn-Wolf. I have just finished Dale Pendell’s fabulous little book on Hayden’s colleague, Norman O. Brown—whom I knew a little—and as I reworked this text I found myself thinking of him a lot, a Corn-Wolf if ever there was one. See Dale Pendell, *Walking with Nobby: Conversations with Norman O. Brown* (San Francisco, 2008).

Critical Inquiry 37 (Autumn 2010)

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read Frazer I keep wanting to say: “All these processes, these changes of meaning—we have them here still in our word-language.””¹

Wittgenstein continues: “If what is hidden in the last sheaf is called the Corn-Wolf, but also the last sheaf itself and also the man who binds it, we recognize in this a movement of language with which we are perfectly familiar.”²

What is Wittgenstein getting at? It is not altogether clear. He refers us to a movement or slithering and shaking that occurs in figures of speech, tricks you might say, which can occur with terms of reference that slip over into allied terms of reference such that cause becomes effect and insides outsides. Something like that.

The Corn-Wolf is:

- 1) That which is hidden in the last sheaf of corn harvested.
- 2) The last sheaf itself.
- 3) The man who binds the last sheaf.

When Wittgenstein says we are perfectly familiar with Corn-Wolfing in the moves our language makes, is he demagicalizing Frazer or, to the contrary, is he raising awareness about the magic in language, meaning the familiar moves it makes?

And there is another movement, as well, although we don’t necessarily pick this up from what I have said so far or from what Wittgenstein says in his commentary, and this is the notion of sacrificing a human being or animal standing in for the corn spirit. The person who binds the last sheaf is something more than a man or a woman with a sickle or scythe doing an honest day’s labor. You can find intimations of this in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe up to the time when Frazer published *The Golden Bough*, and according to Frazer you find it in many other times and places elsewhere—ancient Egypt, for example; think of Osiris, the corn god; ancient Greece, think of Dionysus. It is a momentous theme and Frazer spends two volumes on it. In an age of agribusiness and global warming, of environmental revenge following attempts to master

1. Rush Rhees, “Wittgenstein on Language and Ritual,” in *Wittgenstein and His Times*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Chicago, 1982), p. 69.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”* trans. and ed. Rhees (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1979), pp. 10e–11e; hereafter abbreviated *R*.

MICHAEL TAUSSIG teaches anthropology at Columbia University. He is the author of *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (1980); *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987); *The Nervous System* (1992); *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993); *Law in a Lawless Land* (1993); and *My Cocaine Museum* (2004).

nature, it is worth thinking about the disappearance of the vegetable god and its sacrifice. In the supermarket there is no last sheaf.

Act Three

A whole mythology is deposited in our language. [R, p. 10e]

This quotation from Wittgenstein is what intrigued me for many years in Rush Rhees's commentary before I got sidetracked by the Corn-Wolf. I have recalled it again and again: "A whole mythology is deposited in our language." It sticks in my memory. It has become part of my mythology. For this to me is the anthropological project: becoming aware of that presence in our lives, in our writing, and institutions, so as to neither expose nor erase but conspire with it, as does the wolf.

Always but always I find this Corn-Wolf tugging at my elbow. I am writing a five-page piece on obscenity for a conference in Iowa, and I cannot resist my tongue-in-cheek title before I have written a word: "Obscenity in Iowa." It carries me away into the heartland on account of the contradictions this word *obscenity* contains. So I write a Hayden White-type annals, a diary of four days in my life watching out for the obscene, all the time aware of the heave and shine of Wittgenstein's "mythology."

Or else I am writing about liposuction and cosmetic surgery as I hear ever wilder stories about these procedures in Colombia among poor young women. I am enthralled by the desperation of this search for beauty and the elimination of nature by artifice. There is so much to tell, so much to consider, but what stands out most is the fairy-tale resonance of this endeavor ending in disaster, same as the stories of the devil contracts that I heard in the Colombian sugarcane fields almost forty years before.

Or else I am thinking of the desperate need for cocaine, the mythologies this rests upon and creates, cocaine that has now made Colombia into a drug colony instead of what it was for four hundred years, a gold colony, and if you don't know or can't feel the mythic power of gold and the fairy tales it has spawned circling around God and the devil, then there is no hope for you.

And the wolf was there bristling hair and breathing fire whenever there was violence because if you write about violence, I found out quickly, if you are serious, it sticks to you no matter how hard you try to get the drop on it. Worse still, you so easily make it worse. How come? After all, common sense would tell you that writing is one thing, reality another. How could one bleed—as they say—into the other?

So, how much of a difference is there between Wittgenstein's mythology in our language and the mythic realities of these things?

They are exotic, you say. Not at all typical, you say.

But aren't they simple, everyday examples of life itself, of the lust for life and cruelty, of the value and beauty that makes the world go round?

And nothing is as exotic in this regard as agribusiness writing itself.

Yet what chance is there for my anthropological project given the prevailing agribusiness approach to language and writing that wipes out the Corn-Wolf?

Or so it seems.

Act Four

Agribusiness writing is what we find throughout the university and everyone knows it when they don't see it. "Even today," wrote Theodor Adorno in his essay on the essay, "to praise someone as an *écrivain* is enough to keep him out of academia."³ You can write about James Joyce, but not like James Joyce. Of course there is always "experimental writing" and "creative writing" and "this is just a work in progress," as if all writing is not a work in progress. "Expt. writing" is to real writing as the sandlot is to daddy's office. Licensed transgression.

Agribusiness writing knows no wonder that, when it comes to anthropology, is really a wonder. Agribusiness writing wants mastery, not the mastery of nonmastery. Compare with Wittgenstein on Frazer: "I must plunge again and again in the water of doubt" (*R*, p. 1e). Or Georges Bataille: "I resolved long ago not to seek knowledge as others do, but to seek its contrary which is unknowing."⁴

Agribusiness writing is a mode of production (see Marx) that conceals the means of production, assuming writing as information to be set aside from writing that has poetry, humor, luck, sarcasm, leg pulling, the art of the storyteller, and subject becoming object. It assumes writing to be a communicative means, not a source of experience for reader and writer alike (see Raymond Williams's critique of George Orwell, model of the English language at its transparent best, and, guys, watch out for those mixed metaphors, please!).⁵

And it assumes explanation when what is at issue is why is one required. What is an explanation and how do you do one, and how weird is that?

This is the main reason for Wittgenstein's beef with Frazer's view of magic. Wittgenstein singles out the assumption that we have to come

3. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols. (New York, 1991), 1:3.

4. Georges Bataille, "What I Understand by Sovereignty," *Sovereignty*, vol. 3 of *The Accursed Share: An Essay on Political Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1991), p. 208.

5. See Raymond Williams, *George Orwell* (1971; New York, 1981).

up with an explanation for exotic magics like the Corn-Wolf on which Frazer spends so much time. Wittgenstein goes on to say (1) we have this exoticism, too, this magic, right here in our language, only we don't see it, and (2) describe, don't explain. But then that's no easy task; witness the following: "we have only to put together in the right way only what we *know*, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself" (R, p. 7e). And (3) be open and be true to the emotional wallop we should get when we read about stuff like the Corn-Wolf.

Recall old wolf Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* choked up because in explaining, he claims, we generally reduce the unknown to the known because of our fear of the unknown. Even worse is that this procedure conceals how strange is the known. Agribusiness performs this in spades. It cannot estrange the known, that with which it works, its itselfness.

Act Five

Agribusiness writing wants to drain the wetlands. Swamps, they used to be called, dank places where bugs multiply. As if by magic the disorder of the world will be straightened out. Rarely if ever with such writing do we get the sense of chaos moving not to order but to another form of chaos.

This law 'n' order approach reminds me of mainstream anthropological approaches to magical healing ritual in non-Western cultures, seen as restoring order to the body and to the body politic. But isn't agribusiness writing resolutely rooted in science as anything but ritual?

Could agribusiness writing itself be magical, disguised as anything but? Pulling the wool over one's eyes is a simpler way of putting it, using magic to seem as if having none, is what I am getting at. Here I think of so-called shamans using sleight of hand to deal with malign spirits and sorcery. What we have generally done in anthropology is really pretty amazing in this regard, piggybacking on their magic and on their conjuring—their tricks—so as come up with explanations that seem nonmagical and free of trickery.⁶

Act Six

Hardly a sentimental traditionalist or antiquarian, in fact outrageously modern, Wittgenstein provides my anthropological self with a sense of

6. See the discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Victor Turner in Michael Taussig, "Homesickness and Dada," *The Nervous System* (New York, 1992), pp. 149–82 and "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic," *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (Chicago, 2006), pp. 121–56.

Nervous System writing as magic—of writing as the Corn-Wolf—of writing that agribusiness renders moot, cutting down the field in which there is now no last sheaf never, all sheafs the same, just corn, we might say. Say dollars. Might as well.

Or so it seems.

Nervous System writing, what is that? It is writing that finds itself implicated in the play of institutionalized power as a play of feints and bluffs and as-ifs taken as real in which you are expected to play by the rules only to find there are none and then, like a fish dangling on the hook, you are jerked into a spine-breaking recognition that yes! after all, there are rules. And so it goes. Not a system but a Nervous System, a nervously nervous Nervous System, impressed upon me negotiating military roadblocks in the Putumayo area of rural Colombia in the 1980s as the counter-guerrilla war heated up and reality was—how shall we put this—“elastic” and multiple, “montaged,” Brecht would say, a fact that had been strongly impressed upon me by the spasmodic flows of sorcery and its curing by shamans singing with the hallucinogens drunk in small groups, myself included. Think of a cubist drawing with its intersecting planes and disorganization of cherished Renaissance perspective. Think of a person changing into a jaguar, at least from the waist up. Or yourself outside of yourself looking at yourself. “The silence fell heavy and blue in mountain villages,” wrote William Burroughs, no doubt thinking back to his time in the Putumayo, with that “pulsing mineral silence as word dust falls from demagnetized patterns.”⁷ As I listened harder to my friends in agribusiness slum towns far from that sort of war and those hallucinations and that sorcery, I sensed how multiple real were their views of the world, too.

And what about me and my practice of writing? Wasn't I meant to straighten this mess out? A year or so later in my hometown of Sydney, for me one of the world's centers of order and stability anchoring the order/disorder paradigm we cherish—we have order, the other doesn't—I saw the graffiti on a ferry stop in the harbor: *Nervous System*, it said, ominous in its enigmatic might. A sign from the gods? A system on the verge of a nervous breakdown? What sort of contradiction and Corn-Wolfing play of words was this? At that time I was reading the British House of Commons Blue Books of 1912–13 with their testimony concerning the atrocities in the rubber boom in the Putumayo, Colombia, like those in King Leopold's Congo—over there, back then. British Consul Roger Casement up the Putumayo River reporting to Foreign Secretary, Sir Edmund Grey. The violence was too much to read, my mind shuts off, has to be exaggerated,

7. William Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York, 1964), p. 32.

but now it's not violent enough, whoa! where am I going with this? Only stories after all—stories Casement got from other people telling stories, and worst of all none of the motives made sense, leaving just violence, a nervous system there on the frontier, so many hearts of darkness and the ultimate violence was giving the Nervous System its fix, its craving for order, at which point it would spin around, laughing at your naiveté because the more order you found, the more you jacked up the disorder.

Could it be that the stories themselves were the aether in which violence operated, the real reality? What then would be an effective critical response? Check the archive to go beyond Casement's stories to prove . . . well, prove what? That reality does not come storied? That you can get the story behind the story and out-story it? And what sort of calculus of utilitarian logic could prove that rubber, like oil today, was the root cause? At once too easy and too crazy. Or could it be that violence became an end in itself aligned with demons and magics expelled by contemporary psychology but ever present in *The Genealogy of Morals* or Bataille's visions of excess, the sacred payoff that comes from breaking the taboo? In which case my question becomes, What sort of story can cut across and deflect those violence-stories, this being every bit as much a question of art and of ritual as it is of social science? The writer looks the history in the face at the receiving end of a chain of storytellers and has for a brief moment this one chance, the one permanently before the last, to make this intervention in the state of emergency, before the writer's story is swallowed up by the response it causes.

That is what I call Nervous System writing.

Roland Barthes said codes cannot be destroyed, only "played off."

But "only" is quite enough. More than enough.

Hidden inside the last sheaf, the Corn-Wolf knows this well—imagine the scene there in the corner of the field as the reapers close in. Think Breughel. Think Thomas Hardy. And the Corn-Wolf is also the sacrificed—that never to be understood activity, sacrifice, like the Nervous System itself.

Nervous System writing aims at being one jump ahead of the rules of rulelessness but knows at the same time this is a doomed pursuit. If it is true that there is a mythology deposited in our language, NS writing aims not at exposing that mythology but at conniving with it.

Act Seven

I have long felt that agribusiness writing is more magical than magic ever could be and that what is required is to counter the purported realism of agribusiness writing with apotropaic writing as countermagic, *apotro-*

paic from the ancient Greek meaning the use of magic to protect one from harmful magic. This is prefigured in the wolfing moves alluded to by Wittgenstein, moves that counter the other, as in a Chinese martial art that imitates so as to deflect.

Wolfing moves include the following:

- 1) Refusing to give the Nervous System its fix, its fix of order.
- 2) Demystification—fine—as long as it implies and involves reenchantment. Glossing Walter Benjamin, Adorno talks of trying to have “everything metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things.” Note the word “spell.”
- 3) Recognizing that while it is hazardous to entertain a mimetic theory of language and writing, it is no less hazardous not to have such a theory. We live with both things going on simultaneously. This absurd state of affairs is where the Corn-Wolf roams. Try to imagine what would happen if we didn’t in daily practice conspire to actively forget what Ferdinand de Saussure called the arbitrariness of the sign. Or try the opposite experiment. Try to imagine living in a world whose signs were “natural.”
- 4) We destroy only as creators, says Nietzsche. What he means is that by analysis we build and rebuild, in ever so particular a manner, culture itself. And nowhere will this be more pertinent than in anthropology—the study of culture. But what is also meant is the blurring of fiction and nonfiction, beginning with the recognition and appraisal that this distinction is itself fictional and necessary. That too is a Nervous System, the endorsement of the real as really made up. The ultimate wolfing move.

Act Eight

But are we capable of wolfing the wolf? For we are the last sheaf—are we not? And who will bind us? Is self-sacrifice the way out? After all, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss say that the god sacrificing itself is the origin of all sacrifice. Truly the mythology is one jump ahead. For as the world heats up, thanks to agribusiness, is it possible that subjects will become objects and a new—which is to say “old”—constellation of mind to matter, body and soul, will snap into place in which writing will be neither one nor the other but both, in the Corn-Wolfing way I have described in the previous act, the one permanently before the last?

The End