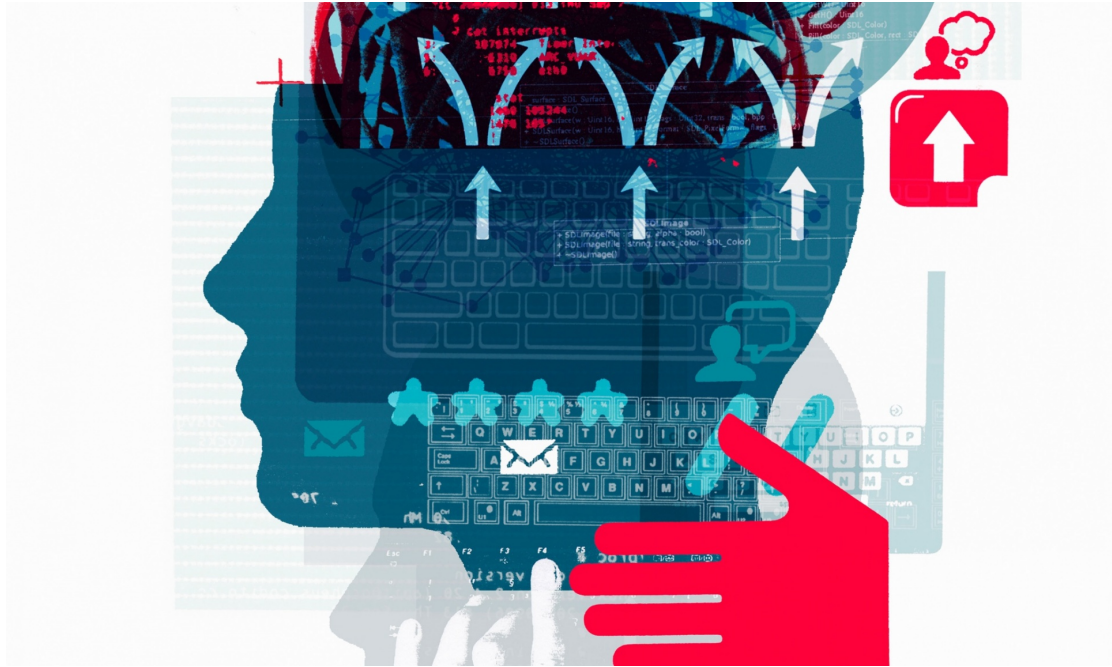


‘The death of writing – if James Joyce were alive today he’d be working for Google.’

Tom McCarthy, *The Guardian*. March 2015



If, five years ago, you'd asked me to name the most important French mid-20th century writer, I'd have mentally dipped a hand into a hat in which names of contenders such as Camus, Genet, Duras and Robbe-Grillet had been tossed, and pulled one out at random. Not any more. Right now I'd answer without hesitation: Claude Lévi-Strauss. An odd choice, perhaps: an ethnographer by calling, Lévi-Strauss wrote neither plays nor novels. Yet, for my money, his work displays a richer, deeper literary sensibility than that of his "proper" literary contemporaries. Not only is his prose better than theirs (his lyrical descriptions of the "leprous crusts" of buildings or the "supernatural cataclysms" of sunsets and sunrises), it is also infused with meditations on the very act of writing – the blindspots that it opens up, the traps or pitfalls that it sets. Infused, too, with a sense of structure, pattern, system (the narrative of *Tristes Tropiques*, for example, zaps from culture to culture, continent to continent, as it remaps the entire globe along lines of association: between the layout, concentric or concyclic, of a village's huts, the transgenerational rhythms of exogamy and endogamy of the tribe to whom these huts belong, and the symmetry or asymmetry of a caste system on the far side of the world). And infused, beyond even this, with a tantalising sense that, if only he could correlate it all, plot the whole

system out, some universal “master-meaning” would emerge, bathing both him and his readers in an all-consuming, epiphanic grace.

As a novelist, I am fascinated by the figure of the anthropologist. What he or she embodies for me is a version of the writer minus all the bullshit, all the camouflage or obfuscation – embodies, that is, the function of the writer stripped down to its bare structural essentials. You look at the world and you report on it. That’s it. You spend time with a tribe, observe the way they fish and hunt, discern the contours of their rituals, beliefs and superstitions, tune into their unspoken and taboos. Then, after a year or so of this, you lug your note-packed trunk down to a dilapidated jetty from which a series of small rubber-trading boats and giant ocean liners carry you back to your study, where, khakis swapped for cotton shirt and tie, saliva liquor for the Twinings or iced scotch your housekeeper purveys you on a tray, you write the Book on them: the Great Report that maps the world you have been observing at its deepest and most intimate level, sums the tribe up, speaks its secret name.

Certainly, Bronisław Malinowski, the father of modern anthropology, understood the discipline that he was forging as essentially a literary one. His first commandment was: write everything down. You never know (he reasoned) what will turn out to be important and what won’t; the smallest, most trivial-seeming episode or situation might contain the key to understanding larger cultural enigmas – so capture it all, turn it all into data, into text. In this respect, his thinking was remarkably close to that of the man many would credit as the father of modern literature, [Stéphane Mallarmé](#).

In his landmark essay-cum-manifesto *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*, Mallarmé claims that everything that exists does so in order to end up in, or as, a book. This book-to-come, he continues, using language that foreshadows Lévi-Strauss’s, would be “an immaculate grouping of universal relationships come together for some miraculous and glittering occasion”, in which typography itself “becomes a rite” (he also calls the book “a tomb in miniature for our souls”). Mallarmé spent the final decades of his life plotting the form this uber-book might take: books in their current state being inadequate for the task of containing everything, he called for a radical dismantling

and reconfiguration of the shape and format of the medium itself, envisaging ways in which the page might be unfolded and expanded into performance, social practice, even cult activity. In so doing, he laid the foundations for the 20th-century avant garde, from Cage's extra-literary activities or Burroughs's revolutionary ethnographically inflected provocations to that most immaculate and glittering grouping of all universal – and quotidian – relations, *Ulysses*, in which Joyce repeatedly states his ambition to make a whole culture, at micro- and macro-level, from its advertising slogans or the small talk in bars to its funerary rituals and the way the entire past and future are imagined, to use Mallarmé's words, *aboutir dans un livre*.

The writer as vanguard ethnographer; the novel as all-containing Great Report – it's a lovely idea. The problem is, the anthropological model is fraught with problems; there's an almost systematic unworkability inscribed within it – a fact that Lévi-Strauss recognised all too well. What makes his work so fascinating is not so much its colourful accounts of Nambikwara ceremonies or Caduveo body art as its constant, melancholic undermining of itself (whence the *tristes* of his signature tome's title). Walking the streets of Lahore's old town, festooned by the 1950s with electric cables, he describes being struck with a sense of having come "too late" to see the vanished, "real" Lahore; although he knows that the ethnographer who came here 50 years before him felt the same thing, and that the one who'll come 50 years later will wish he'd come 50 years earlier to see what he, Lévi-Strauss, failed to see right there in front of him. This leads him to write of a fatal "double bind" afflicting anthropology: the very "purity" it craves is no more than a state in which all frames of comprehension, of interpretation or analysis, are lacking; once these frames are brought to bear, the mystery that drew the anthropologist towards his subject evaporates. Meeting a tribe that doesn't know what writing is, and seeing the tribe's chief borrow his pen and scribble on a sheet in order to dupe his subjects into thinking that he is versed in this activity, Lévi-Strauss realises that his own writing is itself no more than a form of duping – not just of readers but of himself too, carrying meaning to the point of ambiguity again and again in a bid to generate the very type of mystery on which it thrives.

If these problems – essentially literary ones, it should once more be noted, problems of perceiving, describing, writing – plagued anthropology in its mid-century heyday, how much more so do they now? Since Lévi-Strauss's era (and due, in large part, to the systems of equivalence he drew up that allow all cultures to be viewed through the same grid), the ethnographic viewfinder has shifted its gaze from the “primitive” world to the developed one, and to the very societies of which anthropologists themselves form part. The tribe is us. Where, then, is the dilapidated jetty? Where the rubber boat and ocean liner, and the study with its Twinings and its scotch? For decades now, the distinction (so vital to classical anthropology) between “field” and “home” has imploded – a collapse that goes hand-in-hand with that of the academy as a seat of “pure”, unsullied knowledge. As any contemporary British academic will tell you, thanks to a double whammy of drastic cuts in public funding for and creeping privatisation of higher education, universities have become businesses – and not very good ones. Conversely, businesses, and particularly those at the leading edge of innovation, have taken over universities' former role as society's prime sites of knowledge generation. That the best engineers, mathematicians and visual designers should end up working in business is perhaps unsurprising – but a more eyebrow-raising statistic is that more than half of all anthropology graduates now work for corporations too. Not on but for: deploying ethnographic knowledge to help companies achieve deeper penetration of their markets, to advise cities how to brand and rebrand themselves, and governments how better to narrate their policy agendas.

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That last term – narrate – should bring this whole discussion back to the point it never really left. As for the world of anthropology, so for the world of literature. It is not just that people with degrees in English generally go to work for corporations (which of course they do); the point is that the company, in its most cutting-edge incarnation, has become the arena in which narratives and fictions, metaphors and metonymies and symbol networks at their most dynamic and incisive are being generated, worked through and transformed. While “official” fiction has retreated

into comforting nostalgia about kings and queens, or supposed tales of the contemporary rendered in an equally nostalgic mode of unexamined realism, it is funky architecture firms, digital media companies and brand consultancies that have assumed the mantle of the cultural avant garde. It is they who, now, seem to be performing writers' essential task of working through the fragmentations of old orders of experience and representation, and coming up with radical new forms to chart and manage new, emergent ones. If there is an individual alive in 2015 with the genius and vision of James Joyce, they're probably working for Google, and if there isn't, it doesn't matter since the operations of that genius and vision are being developed and performed collectively by operators on the payroll of that company, or of one like it.

The rise of corporate capitalism, and the astonishing, almost exponential rate of its recent acceleration, I would argue, present a huge challenge to the writer, forcing him or her to rethink their whole role and function, to remap their entire universe. There is no space outside this matrix, no virgin territory of pure "aesthetics" or neutral "reflection" on which it hasn't impacted. If this situation isn't entirely or categorically new (writers have been dependent on some kind of marketplace since time immemorial, of course), one aspect of it has (I'd suggest) reached tipping point: the issue of data saturation. Western literature may have more or less begun, in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, with a lengthy account of a signal crossing space, and of the beacon network through whose nodes the signal's message (that of Troy's downfall) is relayed – but now, two and a half millennia later, that network, that regime of signals, is so omnipresent and insistent, so undeniably inserted or installed at every stratum of existence, that the notion that we might need some person, some skilled craftsman, to compose any messages, let alone incisive or "epiphanic" ones, seems hopelessly quaint. Malinowski may have urged his craft's practitioners to Write Everything Down – but now, it is all written down already. There's hardly an instant of our lives that isn't documented. Walk down any stretch of street and you're being filmed by three cameras at once – and the phone you carry in your pocket is pinpointing and logging your location at each given moment. Every website that you visit, each keystroke and click-through are archived: even if you've hit delete or empty trash it's still there, lodged within some data fold or enclave, some occluded-yet-retrievable avenue of

circuitry. Mallarmé, the first to introduce the category of the “virtual” into poetics, would have gasped (and not entirely joyfully) at the unfolded and expanded, omnipresent, omniscient “book” or data tomb within whose soft walls we live now – and gasped most loudly at the irony that this “book” renders the role of its writer redundant. Who, nowadays, maps our tribe’s kinship structures, our systems of exchange, the webs of value and belief that bind us all together? Software does, tabulating and cross-indexing what we buy with who we know, and what they buy, or like, and with the other goods that are bought or liked by others who we don’t know but with whom we cohabit a shared buying or liking pattern. Far from being unwritable, the all-containing Great Report is being written around us, all the time – not by an anthronovelist but by a neutral and indifferent binary system whose sole aim is to perpetuate itself, an auto-alphaing and auto-omegating script. The surrealists might have pioneered a form of “automatic writing” – but that now seems quaint too. The issue has become one of automatic reading. The script, the Great Report, is here, there, everywhere – but who can read it? From what jetty leading to what study (since all jetties and all studies are already written into it) could it be viewed, surveyed, interpreted? None. Only another piece of software could do that.

[Michel de Certeau](#), perhaps the leading claimant to Lévi-Strauss’s crown, a visionary thinker whose writing blurs the boundaries between anthropology, philosophy, politics and even theology to such an extent as to make it virtually uncategorisable, advances a similar argument. In his key 1980 volume *The Practice of Everyday Life* De Certeau presents all the various apparatuses and axes of society – its laws and institutions, trading systems and technologies – as parts of a giant “scriptural system”, a “scriptural enterprise”, a “scriptural project”. “Modernisation,” he states with a nod to the historian François Furet, “modernity itself, is writing.” The scriptural system, like the giant writing machine of Kafka’s [“In the Penal Colony”](#), inscribes its mark across all surfaces, be these inanimate or human, that come within its frame (in other words, across all surfaces), ensuring that every single aspect of experience “will thus be transformed into texts in conformity with the western desire to read its products”. This machine is not in the service of any operator; rather, “by an inversion that indicates that a threshold has been crossed, the scriptural system moves us forward on

its own ... it transforms the subjects that controlled it into operators of the writing machine that orders and uses them”.

Does anything escape this system's, this scriptorium's, clutches? No, De Certeau claims – not even our mute bodies, since all bodies are already seized hold of and written, transformed into code (a situation that, since De Certeau's time, has become all the more loaded with the rise of bioinformatics). But, intriguingly, De Certeau ponders what might happen when bodies turn what he calls “obscene” – that is, when they become the carriers (not unlike those of Lévi-Strauss's tattooed Caduveos) of half-forgotten legends that have not yet been decoded, floating through everyday life as disconnected clusters whose data compatibility or legibility has fragmented into “audible citations”, “reminiscences”. These fragments, he continues speculating, might then lodge themselves within the script “like white pebbles dropped through the forest of signs ... incised into the prose of the passage from day to day, without any possible commentary or translation”. He sees this turn as ultimately an “amorous” one when he writes, with haunting beauty: “There are everywhere such resonances produced by the body when it is touched, like ‘moans’ and sounds of love, cries breaking open the text that they make proliferate around them, enunciative gaps in a syntagmatic organisation of statements ... the linguistic analogues of an erection, or of a nameless pain, or of tears: voices without language, enunciations flowing from the remembering and opaque body ... an aphasic enunciation of what appears without one's knowing where it came from ... without one's knowing how it could be said except through the other's voice.”

If this sounds vague, it is – deliberately so. Careful not to fall back on some naive escapist fantasy (of individual self-expression, or the transcendent human spirit, or art-as-redemption and so forth – in other words, the very fantasies to which a conservative view of fiction still clings), De Certeau is nonetheless groping his way towards some kind of resistance to or rupture of the machine's logic. And, increasingly, he finds this resistance lurking in the vicinity of Mallarmé's tomb. In a section titled (after Beckett) “The Unnameable”, De Certeau invites us to consider the role and status of the dying man. “Set aside in one of the technical and secret zones (hospitals, prisons, refuse dumps) which relieve the living of everything that might

hinder the chain of production and consumption”, the dying man finds his own body transformed from a palimpsest on which the scriptural enterprise has stamped its law into a liminal, disgusting and yet almost miraculous new space in which the binaries of life and death break down.

*The Practice of Everyday Life* is ultimately, just like *Tristes Tropiques*, a meditation about writing – not only the meta-writing of the scriptural system of control, but also, as a form of opposition-from-within, an errant counter-writing that is born of traditional writing’s own collapse. To put it another way: it is a meditation about writing in the wake of its own death. As early as the dedication page, De Certeau describes “the straying of writing outside of its own place ... the metaphor and drift of the doubt which haunts writing, the phantom of its ‘vanity’ ... the relation that writing entertains with all people, with the loss of its exemption, and with its death”. Towards the end he picks up this sentiment again, claiming: “To write [this book], then, is to be forced to march through enemy territory, in the very area where loss prevails, beyond the protected domain that had been delimited by the act of localising death elsewhere. It is to produce sentences with the lexicon of the mortal, in proximity to and even within the space of death.” And, so as to leave us in no doubt as to the inspiration for this march through enemy territory, the flag under which it advances, he adds: “Since Mallarmé, scriptural experience has deployed itself in the relation between the act of moving forward and the death-dealing soil on which its wandering leaves its track. In this respect, the writer is also a dying man who is trying to speak. But in the death that his footsteps inscribe on a black (and not blank) page, he knows and he can express the desire that expects from the other the marvellous and ephemeral excess of surviving through an attention that it alters.”

These thoughts are difficult, elusive, hard to parse. Yet I suspect they are vital if we want to think of what it means to write today – to write, that is, in the shadow of omnipresent and omniscient data that makes a mockery of any notion that the writer might have something to inform us, and of a technologically underwritten capitalism that both writes and reads itself. We could quite easily dismiss these thoughts as French bollocks, brush them aside and pen great tales of authenticity and individual affirmation, even as the sands in which we’d need to bury our heads in order to do so

are being blown away. Alternatively, we could explore, with trepidation and with melancholy joy, this ultra-paradoxical and zombie-like condition, this non-life-restoring resurrection that, if De Certeau is correct, is writing's true and only lot, its afterlife. What would this afterlife look like? What forms might these melancholy-joyful explorations take? It is impossible to prescribe these – nor would I want to. I just hope they happen: let a thousand zombies bloom.

I'll stop altering your attention in a moment – but I want to leave you with a scene from *Tristes Tropiques*. At one point, stuck deep in the Amazon with no prospect of escape in sight (the rainy season, rivers flooded and unnavigable, all the perks he has brought with him – tinned food, wine, cigarettes – consumed or traded off, bored out of his skull and starting to fall prey to what he calls a “mental disorder” that can afflict anthropologists, Lévi-Strauss decides to compose an epic drama, in the style of Racine or Corneille. For six days he writes, from morning till night, on the back of sheets of paper containing his research notes. The drama's plot involves a Roman emperor and his assassin, a grand exploration of the themes of glory, power, nature and annihilation. On the seventh day he gives up; he'll never finish it. Let's picture him writing it, cold and rheumatic on interminable afternoons. No, scratch that: let's picture the paper that he writes it on: on one side, columns of Nambikwara words and phrases, transcriptions of tattoos, diagrams of hut layouts and larger schematic attempts to correlate all these with the tribe's (and with humanity's) greater myth structures – then, on the other side, the play. On one side, scientific, evidence-based research; on the other, epic art. Now let's imagine taking a microscope and magnifying that paper, 10-, 100- or 1,000-fold, until the middle of it turns into a landscape: a damp, pulpy no man's land of neither-nor. There, I'd suggest, rendered in three dimensions, like some rich digital map, is the space of contemporary literature.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/tom-mccarthy-death-writing-james-joyce-working-google>