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Author

Krupat, Arnold

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Review Essay

Mythography and Dialogue in the Study of Native American Literature*

The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation. By Dennis Tedlock. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983. 365 pp. \$35.00 Cloth. \$14.95 Paper.

Arnold Krupat

With this book Dennis Tedlock establishes (or perhaps confirms) his position as one of the handful of indispensable commentators on Native American literatures. Not merely honorific, such an estimate means that it would be hard to imagine any important developments in this field, for the immediate future, that did not take account of Tedlock's work for its wide range and for the excellence of its particular parts.

The Spoken Word contains four sections, "Translation and Transcription," "Poetics," "Hermeneutics" and "Toward Dialogue," each of which contains four essays. Such an arrangement would seem both to invoke a widespread Native American pattern number, and a widespread Euroamerican pattern of disciplinary distinctions. The materials of Part 1, for example, are usually considered the province of social scientists; those of Part 2, of literary theorists; of Part 3, the philosophers; and Part 4—? Part 4 precisely calls into question the preceding distinctions as well as, most importantly, the presumptive distinction between the knower and the known that has founded Western anthropology from its inception until well into the twentieth century. Everywhere there are specifically valuable observations on the narrative practice of the southwestern Zuni, and the Quiche Maya of Guatemala, as there are subtle and finely argued observations on what it means to "do" anthropology—to study an-Other culture—in our post-colonial period.

*The author wishes to thank Claude Lehman for his research on Guatemala, 1975-82.

Arnold Krupat is a member of the faculty at Sarah Lawrence College.

Dennis Tedlock's work first came to wide attention in 1972 when the Dial Press published his *Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians* (the book was reissued in 1978 by the University of Nebraska Press and remains in print today). *Finding the Center* presented Zuni stories in what must have seemed something of a crazy-quilt fashion (almost as much so as the versions of Native materials in another important book published that year, Jerome Rothenberg's *Shaking the Pumpkin*), with uneven lines, ragged right margin, with larger type and small, with the very letters of many words themselves ascending or descending the page, and other such curiosities. Of course, anyone who had followed the progress of *Alcheringa*, the journal of "ethnopoetics" Tedlock had been editing (with Rothenberg), would not have been surprised at Tedlock's mythographic method—just as anyone who had read his essay of the preceding year, "On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative," in the *Journal of American Folklore* (the essay, with some additions, appears as the first in this book), would have been aware of the theoretical grounds for his practice. In this essay, as in his work with Rothenberg, Tedlock made clear his concern for the stress, pitch, duration and volume of the actual words as they were performed in oral narrative—for exactly those things which "the narrow linguistic view of style,"¹ as he termed it, obscured. Here Tedlock also criticized the Western tendency to associate *narrative* with *prose*, a tendency that could only work against appreciation of the qualities of Zuni stories. The new "Epilogue" to Chapter 1 of *The Spoken Word* offers a cogent summary of Tedlock's ". . . argument that American Indian spoken narratives are better understood (and translated) as dramatic poetry than as an oral equivalent of written prose fiction" (55). By 1972 Tedlock was well on the way to defining a commitment to what he would call, five years later, an "oral poetics."²

The Introduction to the present volume is true to this commitment and states clearly and forcefully Tedlock's belief that oral literature cannot be taken seriously unless it is taken as an art for the ear. Distancing himself from the text-oriented linguists, Tedlock is most concerned to produce a "performable text,"⁶ made up of "audible sentences"⁷ which, if they sometimes appear to the eye as "bad writing," nonetheless may strike the innocent or well-trained ear as "good speaking."⁷ To focus on the voice in this way is also to focus on the temporal nature of oral performances

which are, after all, not objects in space but events in time—although this is easy to forget, given the fact that non-Natives encounter traditional oral literature for the most part as a thing of paper and print.

In Part 2, essay 7, "Phonography and the Problem of Time in Oral Narrative Events," Tedlock criticizes a range of linguistic "phonologists" best represented perhaps by the world-renowned Roman Jakobson and post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida for their phone-phobia, as it were, their refusal to employ anything other than what Tedlock calls "a lettered ear" (197). What these thinkers call the voice, as Tedlock shows in a brilliant brief analysis, is not the voice of actual speech but a secondary reconstruction from writing.³ Their conception of the voice, to borrow an example from Father Walter Ong, amounts very nearly to calling horses "wheelless automobiles." But, of course, as Ong points out, ". . . starting backwards in this way—putting the car before the horse—you can never become aware of the real differences . . ." between the story as actually told by the voice, weightily material and dramatically temporal, and the story as text, apparently autonomous, detached from its teller, virtually an object in space.⁴

It is the passion for the performed that determines Tedlock's mythographic practice and animates, as well, his theoretical essays. It is this passion that the reader familiar with other workers in Tedlock's field—Donald Bahr, William Bright, Dell Hymes, M. Dale Kinkade, Leanne Hinton, David MacAllester, Anthony Mattina and Joel Sherzer, to name only a few—must keep in mind when considering the criticisms that have been made of his theory and practice, in particular by Hymes (who nonetheless remains quite sympathetic to Tedlock's work). This is to say that there is an inevitable dialectic between "experience" and "interpretation"—I take these particular terms from James Clifford's essay, "On Ethnographic Authority," to which I shall return⁵—in which Tedlock valorizes the experiential while Hymes (among others) valorizes the interpretative. For Hymes the central moment of one's work occurs not in the field but in the study, the library or on a plane bearing one to a lecture engagement, when suddenly one comes upon a powerful *interpretation* of the linguistic structure and/or the cultural function of the transcribed material. For Tedlock, however, the central moment occurs in the field when anthropologist and informant together

engage (confront, encounter, question, respond to, laugh at, defer to) or otherwise mutually *experience* a narrative or a text in some particularly affecting fashion. The value of "intersubjective" co-experience of dramatistic dialogue is at the heart of Tedlock's work with both the Zuni and the Quiche Maya as it is at the heart of his broad understanding of the legitimate aims of a post-colonial anthropology. The fourth and final section of *The Spoken Word* is called "Toward Dialogue," and I want now to turn to Tedlock on the subject of anthropological dialogue.

The final section of the book begins with an essay called "Ethnography as Interaction . . ." which may be seen as a late-stage variant of that ethnographic genre James Clifford calls the "fable[. . .] of rapport" (132), a type of narrative in which the anthropologist either documents the processes of his or her initial acceptance by the people under study, or, as here, modestly presents results which could not have been obtained without a considerable degree of acceptance. This is followed by "The Story of How a Story Was Made," an account of how the mythographer's very presence served to elicit a narrative and, moreover, a somewhat untraditional narrative at that. This sort of thing ("experience") obviously is fascinating to Tedlock (to me, too). The next-to-last essay of the book is called "Reading the Popol Vuh over the shoulder of a diviner and finding out what's so funny." The piece describes an incident in the practice of what Tedlock has earlier named "ethnopaleography," a technique close to Dell Hymes' "anthropological philology," in which, simply put, ". . . stretches of ancient texts . . . would be directly presented to consultants for interpretation" (128). These "consultants," like Don Andres Xiloj, the Quiche diviner here, must be modern-day traditionalists, as close to the ancient language forms and cultural practices as anyone living. Tedlock's essay ". . . answers the question as to why Don Andres laughed [at a passage Western translators and interpreters had not previously found funny] . . . while I [Dennis Tedlock] looked on at what he was reading" (313).⁶ Tedlock's "reading over the shoulder" thus becomes the example of what his book's final essay will examine in precept, that is, the practice of a "dialogical anthropology" ("The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of a Dialogical Anthropology").

Now, the image of "reading over the shoulder" as a metaphor for ethnographic work had earlier been presented by another

well-known American anthropologist in an essay that has become a virtual classic of the literature. I am referring to Clifford Geertz and his "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." Here is what Geertz has to say:

The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.⁷

A comparison of Tedlock's and Geertz's understanding of this phrase may add to an understanding of the possibilities and problems of a "dialogical anthropology."

Dialogue, from the Greek *dia-logos*, in the etymology Tedlock provides, means "a speaking across, or alternately" (322), while *ana-logos* is a "talking above," beyond or later than (324). "Analogical anthropology . . . involves the replacement of one discourse with another" (324), Tedlock writes, or, in the parallel terms of the great Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, an attempt to reduce the polyphonic "heteroglossia" of the world (of any particular culture or of Culture, as well) to the single or monologic voice of the anthropologist whose claim to speak authoritatively for others is always a claim that others keep silent.⁸ Unlike Tedlock's literal-descriptive use of the phrase, Geertz's "reading over the shoulder" is a metaphor that stands in processual relation to another metaphor (cultures are like texts); no one's shoulders are actually *there* (in the same way, cultures may not actually be texts). In Geertz's study of the Balinese cockfight, as Clifford notes, ". . . we are seldom made aware of the fact that an essential part of the cockfight's construction as a text is dialogical, talking face-to-face with particular Balinese rather than reading culture over the[ir] shoulders" (132-3). Or, as Tedlock himself succinctly puts it, in Geertz ". . . the natives have very little to say, and on the one occasion when they speak their own tongue, they do so collectively" (325-6), shouting "*pulisi, pulisi*" (to announce the arrival of the cops). Geertz's own discourse, subtle and sensitive as it is, entirely replaces the discourse of others; much as he may value the process or experience of "reading," it is its end product, the achieved *interpretation* of culture, that Geertz seems most to desire.

It is the rich particularity of polyphonic or dialogical *experience*, however, that Tedlock asserts as the validation of ethnographic practice which gives it its "authority." (Let me say again here

that "interpretation" and "experience" are not names for oppositions but for emphases; their relations are dialectical.) Thus he is impatient not only with Geertz's hermeneutical anthropology of "thick description" but, as well, with scientifically oriented anthropologies like Marvin Harris' "struggle for a science of culture," and with Dell Hymes' rule-oriented "ethnography of speaking."⁹ Just as Geertz's "readings" offer interpretations rather than the events, persons or actual texts themselves, so too must claims to offer scientific—which is to say rule-governed—conclusions proceed by processes of generalization which also transcend the particular instance. And it should be obvious by now that Tedlock is extremely suspicious of any tendency to generalize. This suspicion causes him to dismiss Harris' work somewhat too rapidly (and unfairly), as he similarly dismisses Hymes' aspiration to discover the rules governing the apparently disparate phenomena of ordinary speaking. It is Tedlock's belief that ". . . within the dialogical path, conversations will stand or fall on their own merits as the meeting ground of two worlds . . ." (333), and hence that this is the most promising "path" to pursue.

But if Geertz's model of interpretative authority excludes what Clifford calls the "circumstantial and intersubjective"—or dialogical—we must recognize that ". . . the reverse is also true: a purely dialogical authority would repress the inescapable fact of textualization" (134). In the present context this insight requires us to observe that conversations do not, after all, have "their own merits" inherently; rather, what "merits" they have (or do not have) are determined by those who participate in them. And, most importantly, their "merits," for those who overhear them on the printed page, are finally determined for the most part by that single privileged participant who gets to represent them. Clifford illustrates this by noting that although "Socrates appears as a decentered participant in his encounters, Plato retains full control of the dialogue . . ." (134), as Dennis Tedlock in his writing—even dialogical writing—does too. The problem of the representation and textualization of the cultural and historical Other cannot be solved by faith in the hegemonic authority—the monologue—of "science" or "interpretation" but it cannot either be solved by faith in the purity, the innocent self-evidency and self-sufficiency of dialogical experience. This is not to say that Tedlock's call for a dialogical anthropology demonstrates bad faith or error; rather, it is to indicate the questions it must more

openly confront. Clifford concludes his discussion of this particular point with the following:

But if it is difficult for dialogical portrayals to escape typifying procedures, they can, to a significant degree, resist the pull toward authoritative representation of the other. This depends on their ability to maintain the strangeness of the other voice and to hold in view the specific contingencies of the exchange (135).

Certainly Dennis Tedlock has tried to maintain specificity and strangeness and to avoid the assertion of authority—yet even so, does not undo the problem.

By way of conclusion, I would like to take up Tedlock's call for dialogue and extend it from the discipline of anthropology *per se* to that rather vaguely constituted interdisciplinary area called Native American studies. I am disturbed by some recent tendencies toward the monologic or "analogic" which take the form of calls for loyalty to "us" or to "them," to the American Indians or to the Anglos, to the "east" or the "west," the poets or the scholars, and so on.

My own discourse, for example, is obviously—and also unapologetically—academic, which is to say that I use a vocabulary derived from disciplines that have an institutional base, whose establishment can be historically traced. This discourse emphasizes interpretation (but does not exclude experience) and hopes to achieve that scientific status—strongly probabilistic and self-critical—to which both Marvin Harris and Dell Hymes, in their different ways, aspire. Its dialogue is more frequently with texts than with persons, but, to the extent that I value the voice-within-the-text, it is not barred from types of intersubjectivity. Like any discourse, mine has certain inherent capabilities and limitations that go beyond my own personal skill in its employment. While the use in this discourse of highly technical terms from philosophy, anthropology or critical theory, for example, obviously risks confusing or alienating those unfamiliar with these terms, the risk may well be worth running if the terms used help achieve a more nearly complete comprehension of the phenomena under consideration than a less specialized vocabulary might achieve. In just the same way it must be acknowledged that the use of a more familiar speech of "everyday discourse," although it may gain in accessibility, may nonethe-

less lose in adequacy. With Bakhtin and with Tedlock, I want to assert that there is simply no one appropriate monologue for all seasons; and a subject as rich and complex as the Native American literary heritage should welcome as many different speakers, each with his or her different and particular competence, as it can attract. It remains only to add that all these speakers need to make every effort possible to be aware of what they are saying and how they are saying it, so that they may know what their discourse inevitably excludes.

As Dell Hymes has written recently in relation to the anthology *American Indian Myths and Legends*, edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz,

. . . it will always be desirable to have both "insiders" and "outsiders" share the work. Accuracy and depth of insight require a dialectic between both. A world in which knowledge of each people was owned exclusively by that people itself would be culturally a totalitarian, not a democratic world. Just as it is indefensible to have an anthropology in which only outsiders know, and others are only known, so it is indefensible simply to reverse that inequity. None of us is able to stand outside ourselves sufficiently to know ourselves comprehensively.¹⁰

The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation is an important book, one which should be stimulating to students of Zuni and Quiche culture and to those engaged in a variety of considerations of mythography, poetics, hermeneutics and anthropological theory. In this latter regard, as I have tried to indicate, Tedlock's call to dialogue may be particularly important to consider at the present moment.

NOTES

1. Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 40. All further references will be documented in the text.

2. See "Toward an Oral Poetics," *New Literary History* 8(1977):507-19.

3. In other regards, however, Tedlock tends to provide rather eccentric, even inaccurate readings of Derrida. I have commented at length on one of these which is reprinted here ("The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation"), in an article called "Identity and Difference in the Criticism of Native American Literature," *Diacritics* 13(Summer 1983): 2-13.

4. Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 12–13.

5. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1(1977):127ff. Further references to this essay will be documented in the text. To say that these terms are in dialectical relation is to say that each contains elements of the other; they are not, therefore, in some putative relation of pure or "binary" opposition. Tedlock and Clifford are concerned with many of the same issues although neither mentions the other's work.

6. It should be mentioned that Tedlock's "looking on" at texts and listening in to stories do not seem to be accompanied by any looking out at the context of his and his informants' acts. Tedlock's work for this book, by his own account, "began in 1975" in "Chuuu 4, ak . . . more widely known as Momostenango" (14), in Quiché province, and went on until 1982. But it was just in those years that political activity—and violence—among Guatemala's American Indians, 55% of Guatemala's population, seems to have heated up. The E.G.P. (Guerilla Army of the Poor), according to the *New York Times* magazine, was ". . . formed in 1975 . . . [and] concentrated on political work among the Indians of Quiché" (8/24/80, 26); according to the *Nation* the E.G.P. has been "Active in Quiché since 1975" (3/14/81, 305). Some four years later, according to the same *Times* magazine essay, ". . . a group of Indians from Quiché province, one of the areas most affected by political violence" (22, my emphasis) was involved in an occupation of the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City that ended in the killing of thirty-nine people, many American Indians among them, by the police. As a result, the *Times* article claims, ". . . support by the Indians for the guerillas and militant peasant groups in the area immediately increased. But so did repression" (23). I am neither an historian nor a political scientist and I have quoted only from two popular, media sources. Still, it seems to me reasonable to wonder whether Tedlock and his "consultants"—the people to whom he listened and with whom he read—can have been entirely unaware of these events. And, if they were aware, as I tend to think likely, can they have been completely unaffected by them? Perhaps, traditionalists that they are, Tedlock's "consultants" spoke as if nothing special was going on, or at least nothing that might impinge upon their interpretation of a tradition which has withstood a very great deal of violence and disruption. But one might want to know this from Tedlock. And Tedlock's book has no allusion whatever to the terrible turmoil in Quiché province, Guatemala, in the years 1975–82.

7. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 452. This essay originally appeared in 1972.

8. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), passim. Clifford is attentive to Bakhtin; Tedlock does not mention his work.

9. Harris makes his case most directly in *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1979). Tedlock's reference to the "ethnography of speaking" here occurs on p. 337.

10. Dell Hymes, "Anthologies and Narrators," in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming).