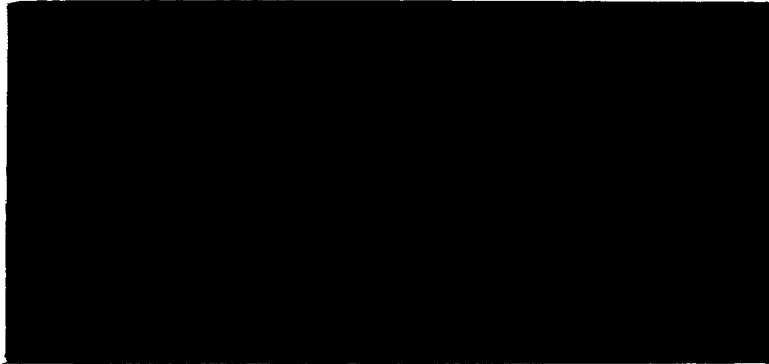




**TRANSFORMATIONS**  
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**"Crushed Glass or Is There  
a Counterpoint to Culture"**

**E. Valentine Daniel**

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Crushed Glass  
or  
Is There a Counterpoint to Culture?\*

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Not long ago it was the privilege of anthropologists to celebrate and take credit for weaning the concept of "culture" from the clutches of literature, philosophy, classical music and the fine arts--in other words, from the conceit of the Humanities. Our discipline's founding father initiated this emancipatory project, I believe, unbeknownst to himself. He rescued the concept from its joint monopoly by the opera-house on the one hand and the petri-dish on the other. Sir Edward Burnett Tylor proffered a definition:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1878)

For all its unwieldiness, its omnibus character, and despite its embeddedness in the evolutionary paradigm of the day to which Tylor himself paid ample homage, the definition generated the now famous view that culture is relative, it defines the *human* condition, that all human beings have it, or rather that it has them, and that one human being's culture is no better nor worse than another's. To be fair, it was Franz Boas who, though never offering a definition of his own, breathed life into the implications of the Tylorean definition by putting it into the practice of his craft.<sup>1</sup> Of course, I am sure he did not foresee the silliness into which relativism, freed of its original polemical context, was to degenerate a generation later. And then there was Branislow Malinowski, who, though

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\* This is a modified version of a talk delivered as the Second Wertheim Lecture at the University of Amsterdam in the summer of 1991.

<sup>1</sup> See George Stocking (1968).

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never calling himself a cultural anthropologist, introduced the discipline's methodological *sine qua non*, participant-observation.

The Humanities, for its part, was vaguely aware of the scandal brewing in anthropology but, perhaps chalking it down to eccentricity (something many an English anthropologist and a few Americans were guilty of), it was content to continue refining the Arnoldian view of culture<sup>2</sup> in practice if not in theory.

History shared much of the prejudice of the Humanities.<sup>3</sup> To support my argument with an extreme case, take, for instance, that most prestigious of think-tanks, The Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. It has four schools: Mathematics, Physics, History and the Social Sciences. At "The 'tute," as some of the locals call it, "History" means European history. European history is more historical, not in the sense of temporality but in the sense of an imputed cultural richness; "cultural," in the Arnoldian sense. Even more to the point, historians of classical Greek and Rome are the "real historians" there and, by the time we get beyond the Renaissance, "History" begins to lose its empyrean dignity. Thus we find the only French social historian, whose work happens to be centered around the 18th to 19th centuries, housed in the Social Sciences. But even among the "less than sterling" historians who chose to write on the more recent past, the Arnoldian viewpoint persisted in only a slightly different form. Their histories, for the most part, privileged the scripted voices of the powerful and the "cultured." If this bias is true of European historiography, it is even truer of those working on the histories of non-European peoples, up to and including the very latest of historiographies, colonial history. Oral history, even when available, would be suspect and would most likely be relegated to that degenerate form, "folklore."

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Arnold (1932).

<sup>3</sup> I owe thanks to Prof. Eric Hobsbawm and, especially, to Dr. Miri Rubin for substantive discussions of this and the following paragraph. The responsibility for errors in interpretation is entirely mine.

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Speaking of European social historians, however, it is to some of these that the anthropological concept of culture began to make sense and in whose works its implications have been the most profound; more profound, I think, than in anthropology itself. Tylor's name was rarely invoked and the phenomenon in question was called "social" rather than "cultural." But as it was to subsequently become clear the sense in which "social" was employed was more akin to "culture" than to the concepts of "social" or "society" that were employed by British structural functionalists. It was "social" in the Durkheimian sense that was to influence the *Annales School* of history, especially through Marcel Mauss. The move beyond the history of the middle ages to the creation of a space for what came to be known as Early Modern History was simultaneously the move from ecclesiastical history to *histoire seriale*.<sup>4</sup> Marc Bloch's two-volume work on Feudal Society was to become an anthropological canon in the sixties and seventies. Culture found its counterpart in the *longue duree* of history. On the English side, history from below was to find its finest embodiment in E.P. Thompson's classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*. The strikingly similar influence of "culture" on European historian Carlo Ginzburg on the one hand, and the Americans Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis on the other, is remarkable. What distinguishes all these historians is their ability to "hear" the voices not of those who were bearers of Culture (with a capital "C"), but of those who found themselves embedded in culture (with a small "c"), those whose voices were inscribed in minuscule: the witches, the women, the shepherds, the serfs, peasants, the poor, the popular and the public.

Enter Cultural Studies and its counterpart, Literary Study. Scholars in Cultural Study, like the anthropologists and the social historians I have referred to, began to take

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<sup>4</sup> See Emmanuel L. Ladorie (1974 and 1979)

<sup>5</sup> See Fernand Braudel (1976).

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seriously the culture of the neglected. In this case it was the culture, mainly in the west, of the many over that of the privileged few. If the Arnoldian definition were a decanter, students in cultural studies chose to study and appreciate the dregs, not the sublimate. Their topics of interest included, among others, the media, film, billboard advertisements, reggae and rap, potters and punks, gangs and televangelists, wine, beer and cheese. "Culture," in Raymond Williams's words, became "ordinary."

If Cultural Studies, paralleling Anthropology's turn away from the privileged west, thumbed its nose at the high, the mighty and the refined, Literary Study thumbed its nose at conventional literary criticism by emulating anthropology (at least some branches of anthropology) in emphasizing the context in which texts are written and, more importantly, in which they are read.

The story I have told thus far may sound as though all is triumphant in anthropology: its goals reached, its intentions vindicated. Anthropologists teach; others, sooner or later, learn. Alas, it is not so. Allow me to back-track a bit to Roger Keesing's review essay of almost twenty years ago, and in the interest of convenience recommit all his sins of slight--of Linton, Lowie, Kluckhohn, Kroeber, White, and most regrettably, Sapir. Keesing divided the culture theorists into two broad camps: the adaptationalists and the ideationalists. Marvin Harris and a few archaeologists were the leading spokesmen of the former, while the major sub-divisions among the ideationalists were headed by the cognitivists, the Levi-Straussian structuralists, the Schneiderian symbolists and the Geertzian interpretivists. The adaptationalists *de riguer*, who had attempted to define culture as merely adaptation to economic, demographic, technological and ecological forces, have by now, for all practical purposes, fallen by the wayside. Human beings turned out to be as incorrigibly maladaptive as they were adaptive, and the way they went about being adaptive and maladaptive was as capricious as the proverbial weather in certain

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temperate zones. As for the cognitivists, their early high hopes of finally making the culture concept scientific--and that too by not having to resort to analogies from the physical or biological sciences but by identifying it as a system of rules along linguistic lines--fell faster than they rose. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay's *Basic Color Terms* (1969) was the last "love story" that came out of those heady days of ethnoscience. Cognitive anthropology survives today in a much more modest but vital form in the fields of ethnobiology cognitive psychology and similar sub-fields. Structuralism, which, in one of its extensions, came paradoxically close to a kind of biologism--with the imputed binary structure of the mind seeking kinship with the bicameral structure of the brain, triune-brain notwithstanding--has been superseded by post-structuralism and postmodernism in intellectual circles. Schneiderian insights, articulated in increasingly confused, confusing and quaint astronomical terms,<sup>6</sup> were both better stated and overwhelmed by Michel Foucault's writings where *epistemes* and epochs. Schneiderian anthropology's disregard for history, its essentialism, its unabashed idealism, its hypernominalism and its absolute disregard of questions of power, rendered it parochial and largely irrelevant in the nineteen-eighties. It is not that Foucault was innocent of at least some of these apparent drawbacks but the range of his power and intellect converted them into interestingly defended assets.<sup>7</sup> For Geertz too, culture was symbolic. But as against Schneider, however, he played down the systematicity of culture. He belittled the cognitivists' emphasis on the rule-governedness of culture. He found structuralism's commitment to universalize Culture and to locate it in the "human mind," dangerously close to biologism. (I for one am not against making a place for both "Culture" and "culture" but am wary of structuralist construction

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<sup>6</sup> See, for onstance, consider this: "It should be stressed that these concepts rest on the premise that any symbol has many meanings, on the premise that symbols and meanings can be clustered into galaxies, and on the premise that galaxies seem to have core or epitomizing symbols as their foci; " or this: "I am now dealing with a galaxy [American Culture] in which coitus is the epitomizing symbol." David Schneider (1976: 218 & 216 respectively).

<sup>7</sup> See, in particular, Michel Foucault (1972, 1973 and 1980).

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of it.) As against all these co-ideationalists (if we accept Keesing's label in this regard), Geertz was committed to taking "culture" from out of the private, especially from within people's minds or heads, and recognizing it as public. And then there is the persistent presence of Geertz's prose style in his brand of interpretive anthropology. This, more than any other single factor--more even than the Weberian and Diltheyan roots of his interpretive anthropology--I believe is responsible for the wide appeal his writings have had, especially in the Humanities. What is of lasting significance in this aspect of Geertz's work is the unapologetic incorporation of the ethnographer with and in the ethnography. Once, when asked about ethnographic objectivity by one who still believed that there was an objective/scientific prose, Geertz replied, "I don't want anyone to mistake any of my sentences as having being written by anyone else but by me."<sup>8</sup> Every line bore his signature, so to speak. Thus "culture" was no longer something out there to be discovered, described and explained, but rather something into which the ethnographer, as interpreter, entered. "Self indulgence,!" cried the traditionalists. "Not enough reflexivity,!" cried the new reflexivists. But culture had become dialogic, less in the much heralded Bakhtinian sense but more in the lesser known Peircean sense, a sense in which the consequences of conversation is shot through with --that rhyming word--"tychasm."<sup>9</sup> Tychasm is that element of chance contained in the "play of musement," --a free kind of doing, much like Lord Siva's *leelas* ' "mindless" eroticisms and asceticisms, acts of wanton love and wonton war, and the cosmic dance that spans it all--that is more fundamental than the gentle persuasion of *agapism* and the mechanistic necessity of *anancasm*.

It is this dialogic aspect of culture, culture not as a given but as something made or, rather, co-created anew by anthropologist and informant in a "conversation," which I in

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<sup>8</sup> Overheard from a conversation between Geertz and this other scholar during which I was present.

<sup>9</sup> One of C.S. Peirce's several neologisms which he triangulates with *anancasm* (the force of mechanical necessity) and *agapism* (loving lawfulness/mindfulness) See C.S. Peirce 6:302.



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my own work attempted to elaborate (1984). I argued for a conversation in which what was generated, exchanged and transformed consisted not only of words but the world of non-verbal signs as well, not only of symbols--those arbitrary or conventional signs--but also of icons and indexes and a whole array of other, more or less motivated, signs. Built into such a semeiotic conceptualization of culture is an argument against a certain kind of essentialism. Given the silliness of some of the forms of relativism that are on the prowl in anthropologyland and beyond, it behooves me to stress that the anti-essentialism I advocate is not directed at what is essentially human--a debatable and refinable list which should include, besides language, a sense of dignity, a need to love and be loved, the capacity to reason, the ability to laugh and to cry, be sad and be happy. My anti-essentialism is directed against those who advocate *essential* differences between and among cultures, or rather, against those who believe that the differences are essential and more or less everlasting.<sup>10</sup> The Schneiderians are most guilty of this kind of essentialism. Their position may best be described as essential relativism, which is fundamentally irrational and immoral--a charge I don't have the time to explicate, but which will become clear to anyone who ponders a little on the moral implications of such a position. What I envisage is a dynamic relativism which does not essentialize differences but believes in the essential humanity of humankind, a humanity that is not merely biological but Cultural (with a new kind of capital "C"). Most cultural anthropologists, in focusing their accounts on culture with a small "c", have been guilty of neglecting, even if not denying, the importance of this kind of "Culture."

At this point allow me to interject what appears to be a radical critique of such a semeiotic view of culture. The charge is that the governing metaphor in such a view,

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<sup>10</sup> If the essentialist treatments of cultures are wanting and deserving of interrogation, so do comparable treatments of "class" and "gender." In this regard, see Joan Scott 1988:Part II but also the back and forth between Scott Laura Lee Downs (1993).

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"conversation," exalts consensus at the expense of contestation. One response to this charge is an elementary one. "Conversation" entails communication or even communion in the widest sense of those terms, a sense that includes agreements and disagreements, consensus as well as contestation; but on shared grounds. Such a defense is neither very ingenious nor thoroughly ingenuous. For it is true that most cultural accounts in anthropology have given scant attention to contestations, even if they were only a subset of a larger consensual matrix. Yet, the "contestators" must concede the argument in principle. But the critique in question suffers from a more serious infirmity. It suffers from what we may, following Hobbes, diagnose as "bagpipitis," "a going along with the prevailing windy cant, with whatever passes for [radical] *afflatus*, [becoming] indistinguishable from the tamest of *bienseance*." (G. Hill, p.17). Contestation itself has become a cliché, a call to combat with phrases "on tap," an obliging mannerism, part of a higher order consensus. Both, consensualists and contestators sleep in the same bed of complaisance.

Furthermore, regardless of whether we see ourselves as consensus theorists or as contestatory types, and even as we concede that we are culture co-making processualists rather than culture-finding essentialists, we cannot afford to be unaware of our collective logocentric inclinations, our privileging of language over labor, words over acts. True, the culture-making that the ethnographer or the poet engages in parallels the culture-making of the artisan and the farmer. Both are engaged in trimming or cutting the over-luxuriant and in coaxing the stubbornly unproductive to yield. And in both domains, there are the craftsmen and the hacks, both of whom have a bearing on the production of culture. The significant divide, however, is--not between the consensus theorists and the contestatory ones but--between those who privilege the word--a group to which most academic scholars belong--and those who privilege the deed. I introduce the deed here in order to facilitate our movement to culture's edge, to what I shall call, its counterpoint. Words are symbols,

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which even at the edges, pull one towards culture's center. Deeds, even when culturally centered,--"habitus" notwithstanding--threaten to push against culture's limits. The deed I shall employ for making this point clear is the act of violence. But first I must return to my story about the culture-concept..

This brief diversion, apart from other matters, was also intended to make the caveat about essentialism clearer. What then do we have? A series of paired terms: culture as given and culture as emergent, culture as reality and culture as realizing, culture as essentially relative and culture as relatively (and dynamically) essential. The second in each of these paired terms could hold its own, even if only by means of various adjustments and equivocations. The first would falter. But for those of us who advocate the second set of terms and thereby think that we are on the winning side, it is too early to gloat. There is a worm in the apple, a bomb in the banana.

The problem lies at the core of the culture concept itself. The problem lies in what Tylor called "that complex whole." For the essentialists, the whole is an existent, a done thing, a thing of the past. For the processualists, "the whole" is something towards which the culture-makers and culture-seekers move. It lies in the future. The movement is toward this realizable entity, a foretaste of which is provided in what the hermeneutician calls "understanding." The dialectic is what guides one toward it. In other words, there is a teleology to the cultural process. You and I may not live long enough to see its completion, its *summum bonum*, but it is moving toward such an end, however long that end may be deferred. It is this logic and this faith upon which culture, emergent, dynamic and processual, is built.

Regardless of the difference, both ideas of "culture"--culture as essence and culture as process--partake of a Kantian cum Hegelian project. With respect to Kant, I have in mind the implications of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, whereby we are

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invited to see the beautiful as the sublime,<sup>11</sup> and wherein when we contemplate an object and find it beautiful, there is a certain harmony between the imagination and the understanding which leads us to an immediate delight in that object. That whole which we call culture is supposed to end up, in anthropological analysis, to have a certain harmony, not unlike the Kantian object of beauty. If we can only make it true, then we will also have made it beautiful. Or is it the other way around? In our monographs, how much time do we spend "rounding it all up," especially through the crafting of a closing statement or conclusion? This ideal is most poignantly captured in W.B. Yeats's description of a poem's reaching this moment of the sublime in a letter of September 1936, to Dorothy Wellesley: "a poem comes right with a click like a closing box." So would we like our cultural accounts, our monographs, our arguments, to end in a moment of beautiful finality.

Ah beauty! For John Keats, "the aesthetic impulse is encapsulated in the coldness and sterility of his Grecian Urn" (Steven Shaviro 1990:10). The point is made even better yet by Shaviro's reading of that marvellous poem by Emily Dickinson. First the poem:

I died for Beauty--but was scarce  
Adjusted in the Tomb  
When one who died for Truth, was lain  
In an adjoining room--  
He questioned softly, "Why I failed"?  
"For Beauty," I replied--  
"And I--for Truth--Themselves are One--  
We Brethren, are", He said--

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night--  
We talked between the Rooms--  
Until the Moss had reached our lips--  
And covered up--our names--

Now to Shaviro's interpretation:

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<sup>11</sup> As far as the interesting distinction that Kantr draws between the beautiful and the sublime, and in so far as he aligns the former with woman and the latter with man, it is but one step away from the Hindu resolution of the dichotomy in the androgynous divinity of Ardhanarisvarar.

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It is only insofar as they are ironically "Adjusted in the Tomb," assigned their fixed boundaries under the power of death, that beauty and truth are one. "I died for beauty": does this mean that the speaker and her interlocutor died for the sake of beauty and truth (as martyr or witness)? Or, more perversely, did they choose to die *in order that* they might thereby attain truth and beauty? A desire for death is perhaps the hidden *telos* of beauty and truth (1990:11).

The desire to find culture, either as a present reality or as a deferred ideal, to find it in any case, as a coherent whole, true and beautiful, is the desire to find a corpse. The work of culture becomes the "lifeless residue in which the process of creation is lost" the spark of tychasm is denied. (Shaviro 1990:10)

The same moral is conveyed in a well known folktale in South Asia. It probably has a common Indo-European origin. There was once a young man whose quest for truth was insatiable. He crossed the seven seas, climbed every mountain, dared the wildest of jungles and traversed several deserts until he finally came to a cave where he found a toothless old hag, dressed in rags, with matted hair, holding a chain of beads in her gnarled hands with over-grown fingernails. To the young man's surprise and delight, the old woman spoke. She uttered her words with caution and care, pausing to make every syllable true. After a spell-binding session of truth-hearing, the young man worshipped the old woman, thanked her profusely, and pleaded with her to allow him to do something for her in return for having so kindly and so completely slaked his thirst for truth. "Yes," replied this woman, this fount of all truth. "You can do me a favour. When you return to your people, tell them that I am beautiful; will you please?"

You may well object, holding that all this about the sublimation of truth and beauty in an objectified culture may be true enough of the essentialists, but not true of the processualists. You may even be kind enough to count me among those exempt from the charges in question because, in *Fluid Signs*, I described the fixing of culture as something that is forever deferred. And to the heckler who might say, "but where in your book is

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chance?" my supporters could have chanted, "passim, passim, ubique!" I might have gloated in agreement, had I not confronted the task of writing an ethnography, or rather, an anthropography of violence. So I must demur. The culture concept, even in its processual mode, relies on a unifying metaphysical process called the dialectic. Culture totalizes. Culture is the emergence of higher and increasingly more adequate agreement from less adequate and less developed contradictions. At a more concrete level, a level in which my own fieldwork in Sri Lanka on the anthropology of violence is implicated, we see this Hegelian hope expressed in theories of the state. According to this view of the world, there is a metaphysical process that transforms tribal life, which is primitive and inadequate, into the more adequate and evolved rational nation-state. But the inter-national and intra-national strifes of the day and the violence they spawn has made a mockery of this hope. The contradictions inherent in the concept of the nation-state, constructed with the help of an imagined national past, demonstrate most clearly the operation of this exclusionary teleology. In nationalist discourse, the question is not who is a Sri Lankan or who is Dutch, but who is a *true* Sri Lankan and who is a *true* Dutch person. Mythohistories are invoked to help recast and relive an idealized past which is "constantly undermined by current and changing realities." And it is in these very imperfections--or, more correctly, in the perception of these "surpluses" or "excesses" as imperfections--that "nationalisms find their succour and sabotage." (Daniel, Dirks and Prakash 1991:6). Nationalism is a horripilation of culture in insecurity and fright; it is as much the realization of the power in culture as the lack thereof. In either case, culture is not power-neutral.

All this is not to deny the successes of culture's recuperative and appeasing capabilities. Marx's celebrated "opiate" is only one--even if the most poignant--case in point. Marxism itself, like the Hegelianism it turned on its head, is another case in point. Call it cultural or culturoid. Culture does make sense, even beauty, and sometimes, truth.

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But its totalizing mission and capacities is what is in question. And to question such capacities is not to invoke its opposite (whatever that may be) as the solution. All of which brings me back to the subtitle of my essay. Is there a counterpoint to culture?

Let me hasten to warn you, however, that the counterpoint to culture I have in mind must go beyond Bach and, ergo, beyond Wertheim who metaphorized Bach in a hope-filled paper on social change. (1974) The counterpoint I speak of is something that resists incorporation into the harmony of a still higher order of sound, sense or society. It resists the recuperative powers of culture, it runs parallel without ever crossing the dialectic. It resists normalization, in the Foucaultian sense of that term.

Allow me to indicate more clearly what I have called the counter-point of culture by the only way I know how: by intimation, by example. The example is violence, though violence is not the only event that is constituted of the culturally unrecuperable surplus I speak of. Let me plunge into ethnography, and tell you of an event that was described to me by two brothers. It concerns the senseless deaths of two men and the suffering of two survivors. These two brothers narrowly escaped being killed by a gang of Sinhalese youth during the 1983 anti-Tamil riots in a northeastern village in Sri Lanka. However, they saw their elder brother and father being murdered.<sup>12</sup>

Selvakumar is 22 years old and works as a teller in one of the local banks. When it was arranged for me to interview Selvakumar on the events that led to his father's and brother's deaths, I was not warned that whenever he recalled these events he suffered episodes of loss of consciousness. The day of my interview with him was no exception. During our interview which lasted for over four hours, Selvakumar lost consciousness thrice. The first time he lost consciousness was after the first half hour of the interview,

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<sup>12</sup> The killings took place in April 1983. My interview with Selvakumar was in December of the same year.

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and it took twenty five minutes for him to recover. On the second and third occasions, he remained unconscious for about 10 minutes each time. During these episodes his pulse and temperature fell sharply, his pallor drained to an ashen gray, he responded neither to pin pricks nor smelling salts, and he lost control of his bladder. By Dr. Rajasingam's orders, a warm poultice of medicinal herbs was applied to his temples and forehead and his lips were moistened with *tippili* tea. When Selvakumar regained consciousness he did not remember having lost consciousness.

What follows is a partial description of what happened on "that day," as he calls it:

That day my father and the chairman (of the Urban Council) went to the police and told them that we had heard with our own ears that this Gunesene had collected the other boys in the soccer team and had obtained long knives and sticks and that they were planning to come and beat up all the Tamils in this housing settlement. This Gunesene had already served some time in jail. He is not from this area. He is from Nawalapitiya, from where you come. He has been here for many years though. This place, this housing colony was in really bad shape when my father moved in. But he organized the place. He cleaned up the well, cleared the jungle, and cut drains for the rain water to flow. My brother. Oh, my brother they killed him. They killed him and I couldn't even help. I was afraid. They beat him to death: "thuk", "thuk". (He passes out)

(Later):

The police inspector told the chairman that if we had a complaint we should take it to the navy post. So my father and the chairman went to the navy post. The sentry did not let them through at first. They waited there all morning. Then the Commander's car came. He must have been going into town. The chairman waved him to a stop. They asked him if they could talk to him for a moment. The chairman had known him personally. "Say what you have to say. I have a lot of work." "Can we go into your office?" the chairman wanted to know. "There is no time for that," replied the commander. So my father and the Chairman told him what they had heard. The commander told them that they did not have any right to approach him on such matters and that he should have taken his complaint to the police station. They told him that they had already been there and the Police Inspector had told them to come to him (the commander). "If you are so smart, why don't you control your own people," said the commander to the Chairman. My father and the Chairman walked back to the police station. On the way, another friend, a Tamil, told us that some Sinhalese from Vavuniya had also joined Gunasene's gang and that he had heard Gunasene say to the boys not to worry, that he had taken care of the police. My father and the chairman walked back to the police station.



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We were met there by Nitthi (Selvakumar's younger brother), who came to tell us that all the Sinhalese taxi-drivers were telling the Tamil taxi-drivers that they were going to be killed today. There were no taxis in the Tamil taxi-stand. They (the Sinhalese taxi-drivers) had told my younger brother that the rain had delayed things a little, but when it stopped to be prepared for "Ilam"<sup>13</sup>. It was raining heavily. The inspector finally came out and said, "so what, the commander did not want to see the tigers?" The chairman said, "Look, you know all these boys. You know this man. They are good people. They have lived with the Sinhalese in peace. They are neither tigers nor bears. There are rowdies who are threatening to kill them." He said like that. The inspector laughed and said, "looks like the tigers are afraid. They have become pussy cats." The other constables joined in and laughed. "Why don't you go to Appapillai Amirdhalingam.<sup>14</sup> He will take care of you. What do *you* say? (He was talking to my brother). They tell me that you are the big man in the area. What, are you afraid too? " My brother did not say a word. He just clenched his teeth and looked down and walked away. All the constables were laughing. (Then he said) "now go home and take care of your women and children. And beware! If any of you dare call a Sinhalese a rowdy. I am warning you. That is how you start trouble." Then what was there to do? The chairman went to his home, my father and I came home and shut the doors and put bars against them. Then the rains stopped.

Then they came. About half an hour later. My father was old and not as strong as he used to be. He was not feeling well in his body. But my brother was very strong. He was a big man. He was a good soccer player. That was something else this Gunasene had against him. He used to play soccer with us. We heard this loud noise at a distance. It sounded like one hundred saws were sawing trees at the same time. They were shouting something in Sinhalese. Nitthi looked out through the crack in the front door and told us that there were two navy personnel standing on the side of the road. We felt relieved. Our neighbour, she is a Sinhalese woman who is married to a Tamil. Her husband works in Anuradhapura. He is a government servant. He used to come once in two weeks. So this little girl, about three years old, used to spend most of her time in our place. This woman treated my mother like her own mother and she used to leave this child with us. That day this child was with us. And the gang started coming closer and closer. My sister and my mother were hiding. Where can they hide? The house has only three rooms. They were in the kitchen behind the firewood. Then suddenly there was silence. All the shouting stopped. Nitthi looked through the crack in the door and the two navy personnel were talking to Gunasene. Then we saw the navy personnel leave. My father told my younger brother to bar the two windows. But then we heard footsteps in the mud outside. Then they started pushing down the door. My father had fallen to the ground. My brother was still holding the door. But they used crow bars to break it. I ran into the kitchen out of fear. Another

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<sup>13</sup>"Eelam" is the name that Tamil separatists have given to their separate nation-state.

<sup>14</sup> Mr. Amirdhalingam was the head of the Tamil United Liberation Front, which had constituted in 1975 of the former (major Tamil) Federal Party and several smaller parties and groups. In its 1976 platform the TULF proclaimed the right of self-determination for the Tamils, even if that were to entail the formation of a separate state. In August of 1983, the constitution was amended so as to outlaw parties advocating secession. Members of parliament were required to take an oath of allegiance to the new constitution. The elected members of the TULF refused and consequently the party was outlawed and the members lost their seats in the legislature, leaving the Tamils largely unrepresented.

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gang broke through the kitchen door. They surrounded the house. But the men who entered through the kitchen door didn't look for us in the kitchen, they walked on into the front room. Then I heard the beating. My mother and sister took the child and ran out of the back door into the fields. Then I heard the beating again. I slowly stood up and looked through the kitchen door into the front room. Nobody saw me. They were looking at the ground. I knew it was my brother on the ground. I wanted to help him. There was a knife in the kitchen. I wanted to take it and run and cut them all up. But I was a coward. I was afraid. My brother would have certainly done that for me. (He becomes unconscious. He is laid flat on the floor on a mat. A single tear trickles down his cheek. The man who had arranged this interview tells me, "The boy can't cry. That is the trouble.")

(Later):

Then someone said, "the old man is out there near the well." They looked out and laughed. "He is trying to draw water." They said things like that and were making fun of him. Some of them moved out, and now I could see my brother. They had cut him up. My younger brother had fainted behind the stack of firewood. I left him and ran into the field. Someone shouted, "there, over there, someone is running." I sat down behind some old tires. I must have fainted. When I woke up it was dark. There was smoke coming from where the house was. They had set their torches to it. I went looking for my mother and sister in the dark.

Nitthi is sixteen. He believes that he was in school, waiting for the rains to stop, when his father and brother were killed and his house was set on fire. Most of the time he has total amnesia about the events of that day. There are two exceptions. The first is when he wakes up with a start from a nightmare. From the time he wakes up he begins to describe certain events of that awful day in great and minute detail. And then, as suddenly as he has awoken, he falls back onto his mat and falls asleep. In the second typical occasion, he too loses consciousness during the day like his brother does, but he then wakes up, not into his wakeful amnesia but into detailed recall. The recalling and re-telling lasts for about five minutes and then he falls asleep. He may sleep for several hours before waking up again. What follows is several of Nitthi's accounts taped by his brother for me during several episodes. The statements are Nitthi's, but are drawn from four different "dream episodes" and two separate "post-unconsciousness" episodes. I was asked by the family not to play back the tapes to Nitthi. I have, with Selvakumar's help, edited the

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tapes so as to arrive at a narrative that makes reasonable chronological sense. Apart from rearranging the utterances for such a purpose, the editing is limited to omitting the highly repetitive utterances (ranging from exclamations such as "Aiyō", to phrases and full sentences) and those sounds that made no sense to either Selvakumar or me. In this edited version, shifts from utterances drawn from one episode to those drawn from another are marked by the first word of the changed episodic utterance being rendered in bold face type.

The middle hinge is coming loose. They are pushing the door. Someone is kicking the door. Listen. He has put his foot down now. Now he is lifting it out of the mud. Now he is kicking the door. **Kick, Kick, Kick.** Now he is resting his foot again in the mud. It is like a paddy field outside. For all the kicking the door is not loosening. . . . **The bottom hinge is still holding.** The screws in the top hinge have fallen. The wood is splitting. A crow bar is coming through. It appears that father has been poked in the back. He can't breath. He has fallen down. My elder brother has turned around and is trying to hold the door back with his hands. I see his (Gunasene's) toes from under the door. I know them from seeing him play soccer. He has ugly toes. Mud is being squeezed from in between his toes. **Knives are cutting through the wood of the window.** There is smoke coming through the window. Gunasene is shouting, "not yet, not yet" (*damma epa, damma epa*). My brother's leg moving. It is moving like the goat's leg. (He is supposed to have witnessed the slaughtering of a goat when he was younger). The front door is open and they are going around to the back. They are going to the back to kill my father. Look through the door. The two navy men are near the dhobi's house (a house at some distance across the main road). My eyes are filling with tears. The navy men look like they are very close. I squeeze my eyes. The navy men are far away again, near the dhobi's house. **Father is crying.** "Give me some water for my son, Sami. Kill me but give my son some water. Let me give my son some water. The son I bore, the son I bore, the son I bore . . ."  
Piyadasa is asking, "how are you going to draw water like this, lying in the mud. Stand up to draw water from the well; like a man." They are all laughing.  
**Karunawathi has come.** The tailor boy has come [The tailor boy is telling her] "they ran to the field with your child. They are alright. Don't go. They might follow you." They are kicking my father. Karunawathi is shouting, "Leave that old man alone. Leave him alone. He is almost dead." "We know your man is a Tamil too. And we'll do the same thing to him if we find him." Karunawathi is crying: "What a dreadful shame/tragedy this is" ("*mona aparadede meke*").  
Someone is calling the men to the front. They want someone to drag my big brother to the road and leave him there. Listen! Karunawathi drawing water from the well. She tells the tailor boy, "He is dead."

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I was not able to meet Gunasene. He was in police custody. However, I was able to find out two things about him. First, he was not from Nawalapitiya, where I had spent part of my childhood, but from a neighboring town called Kotmale. Second, using a police constable as a messenger he had sent Selvakumar Rs.500 and a message, the gist of which (according to Selvakumar) was:

What has happened has happened. Let us forget what has happened. This money is for you to rebuild your house. You can stay in our house if you want until you finish building your house.

Social scientists, yours truly included, have tried to understand or even to explain communal violence in Sri Lanka. The grandest, and in many ways the most admirable, attempt so far in this regard is the one recently put forth by Bruce Kapferer. It sought to understand Sinhala against Tamil violence in terms of Sinhala cultural ontology. He argued that Sinhala-Buddhist ontology required that it hierarchically encompass and dominate a subdued antithesis, in this case the Tamils. Were such a contained antithesis to rebel from within it was seen as demonic, and Sinhala Buddhism was called upon to exorcise this demon by ritual. The available ritual in the context of ethnic rebellion was violence. Such is a rough and shoddy summary of *Legends of People, Myths of State*. The thesis is perfectly Hegelian, except of course for its arrival not at a *summum bonum* in equipoise but in an ontology condemned to violence. The only problem was that, no sooner had this and similar theses been put forth, than Tamil violence rose to match Sinhala violence. Furthermore, violence was no longer inter-ethnic but intra-ethnic, with more Tamils killing Tamils and Sinhalese killing Sinhalese than Sinhalese killing Tamils or Tamils killing Sinhalese.

I must pause to emphasise here that my description of a violent event in which Tamils were victims and Sinhalese the aggressors is fortuitous. Conditions in 1983 and 1984 when I did fieldwork on this topic yielded more tales of Sinhala on Tamil violence.

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Rest assured that there are plenty of equally gory examples of violence in which the Sinhalese were the victims.

The point is this. Violence is an event in which there is a certain excess: an excess of passion, an excess of evil. The very attempt to label this excess (as indeed I have done) is condemned to fail; it employs what Georges Bataille called "*mots glissants*" ("slippery words"). Even had I rendered faithfully, without any editing, the words--both coherent and incoherent--of Nitthi, I will not have seized the event. Everything can be narrated, but what is narrated is no longer what happened.

I have also interviewed young men who were members of various militant movements and who have killed a fellow human being or human beings with rope, knife, pistol, automatic fire or grenade. "You can tell a new recruit from his eyes. Once he kills, his eyes change. There is an innocence that is gone. They become focused, intense, like in a trance." Such was the account of a veteran militant, who has since left the Movement in which he fought. Violence, like ecstasy--and the two at times become one--is an event that is traumatic, and interpretation is an attempt at mastering that trauma. Such an attempt may be made by victim (if he is lucky to be alive), villain or witness. We who are either forced or called upon to witness the event's excess either flee in terror or are appeased into believing that this excess can be assimilated into culture, made, in a sense, our own. Regardless of who the witness is--the villain, the surviving victim, or you and I--the violent event persists like crushed glass in one's eyes. The light it generates, rather than helping us see, is blinding. Maurice Blanchot, in *Madness of the Day* writes thus:

I nearly lost my sight, because someone crushed glass in my eyes. . . I had the feeling I was going back into the wall, or straying into a thicket of flint. The worst thing was the sudden, shocking cruelty of the day; I could not look, but I could not help looking. To see was terrifying, and to stop seeing tore me apart from my head to throat. . . the light was going mad, the brightness had lost all reason; it assailed me irrationally, without control, without purpose (Quoted in Shaviro 1991:3).

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More ethnography.

Piyadasa (a pseudonym) is a Sinhalese in his late twenties. I knew him as a young boy who played soccer in the town of Nawalapitiya, where I grew up. He lived in a village near Kotmale and used to ride the bus back and forth to his school with Tamil school children who came to Nawalapitiya from the tea estates. At times, after a game of soccer, he and his bus-mates would feel so famished that they would pool all their small change, including their bus fares, to buy and eat buns and plantains from the local tea shop. Then they would start walking up the hill to Kotmale, all of six miles. His village now lies buried under the still waters of a reservoir built by the Swedes as part of the Mahaveli river damming project.

In 1983, the *pantaram* (the boy who makes garlands) of the local Hindu temple was killed. I was informed by another Sinhala man, a close friend of one of my brothers, that Piyadasa was among those who had killed the *pantaram* and that he too had wielded a knife. I visited Piyadasa, who has been resettled in the North-central province, and asked him to describe to me what had happened. He excluded himself from having directly participated in the violence, but was able to give me a detailed account of the event. The following are a few excerpts:

He was hiding in the temple when we got there. The priest, he had run away. So they started breaking the gods. This boy, he was hiding behind some god. We caught him. Pulled him out. So he started begging, "*Sami*<sup>15</sup> don't hit. *Sami* don't hit." He had urinated. He pleaded, "Oh gods that you are, why are you breaking the samis?" They pulled him out to the street. The nurses and orderlies were shouting from the hospital balcony. "Kill the Tamils! Kill the Tamils!" No one did anything. They all had these long knives and sticks. This boy was in the middle of the road. We were all going round and round him. For a long time. No one said anything. Then someone flung at him with a sword. Blood started gushing (*Oo gaalaa lee aavaa*). Then everyone started to cut him with their knives and beat him with their sticks. Someone brought a tire from the Brown and Company garage. There was petrol. We thought he was finished. So they piled him on the tire and set it aflame. And can you imagine, this fellow stood up with

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<sup>15</sup>*Sami* means god.

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cut up arms and all, and stood like that, for a little while, then fell back into the fire.

The constant shifting from the including "we" to the excluding "they" is noteworthy. This was in the early days of my horror-story collecting and I did not know what to say. So I asked him a question of absolute irrelevance to the issue at hand. Heaven knows why I asked it; I must have desperately wanted to change the subject or pretend that we had been talking about something else all along. "What is your goal in life?" I asked. The reply shot right back:

"I want a V.C.R."

I have struggled to understand this event, to speak *about* it, and thereby to master it. But I have literally been struck "speechless." I am not alone, quite clearly. During my work in 1983-84 and since, in Sri Lanka, India, Europe and North America, I have met many witnesses of the excess of violence who have been stricken likewise. Shaviro puts it eloquently when he describes such a silence as, "not a purity before or beyond speech. It does not indicate calm or appeasement. It is rather a violent convulsion, a catastrophe that overwhelms all sound and all speaking." (1991:84).

There are, to be sure, interpretations of such events that friends and "friendly texts" offer me, but no sooner than I seize them, they escape the grasp of my understanding. There are times when I think that I do understand. But, to return in closing to the optic, there remains a blind spot in all such understandings, of which Georges Bataille says:

There is in understanding a blind spot: which is reminiscent of the structure of the eye. In understanding, as in the eye, one can only reveal it with difficulty. But whereas the blind spot of the eye is inconsequential, the nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it be more meaningful than understanding itself. To the extent that understanding is auxiliary to action, the spot within it is as negligible as it is within the eye. But to the extent that one views in understanding man himself, by that I mean the exploration of the possibilities of being, the spot absorbs one's attention: it is no longer the spot that loses itself in knowledge, but knowledge which loses itself in it. In this way existence closes the circle, but it couldn't do this

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without including the night from which it proceeds only in order to enter it again. Since it moved from the unknown to the known, it is necessary that it inverse itself at the summit and go back to the unknown. (1988:110-111)

"In this darkness and this silence," there is neither ontology nor epistemology, hermeneutics nor semiotic, materialism nor idealism, and most importantly, neither culture nor Culture. Herein lies (C/c)ulture's counterpoint, a slippery word in its own right. The counterpoint of which Wertheim wrote almost twenty years ago was a counterpoint of hope and human emancipation. He described it as a "tiny and apparently futile beginning" which had the capacity to "evolve into a powerful stream leading humanity, or part of it, toward evolution and, in more extreme cases, revolution (Wertheim 1974:114). The counterpoint of which I have written today is one that resists all evolutionary streams, be they of action or of thought. It will and should remain outside of all (C/c)ulture, if for no other reasons than to remind us that (a) as scholars, intellectuals and interpreters we need to be humble in the face of its magnitude, and (b) as *human beings* we need to summon all the vigilance in our command so as to never stray towards it and be swallowed by its vortex into its unaccountable abyss. The first is a sobering point that concerns observation, the second is a cautionary one that concerns participation: the twin terms that, hyphenated, constitute the *sine qua non* of the anthropological method. It is time for cultural anthropology to lose both its Hegelian conceit and its Malinowskian innocence.



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