

*Ethnography and Anthropology**Nicola Gess***The Discourse of the 'Primitive' around 1900**

'They *are* what we *were*.' Friedrich Schiller's famous dictum, in his poetological treatise 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry' (1795), summarizes a view that is prominent across European history: a primordial condition of human existence can be found among peoples elsewhere on the globe, and often this state is deemed to include children, animals, and parts of the natural world. '[P]lants, minerals, animals, and landscapes, as well as . . . children . . . the customs of country folk, and . . . the primitive world', Schiller writes, 'we were nature just as they.'¹ This figure of thought transfers the foreign of the present to the past of the familiar; the category of the 'foreign' can be filled in any number of ways, but it always lies outside history: it is either undeveloped or stands at the very beginning of such a process. Its 'proper' place is at the point of origin; inasmuch as it persists in the present, it proves an anachronistic remainder. Such a view readily translates into the opposition between nature and culture. The foreign is conceived as nature; in contrast, the familiar is understood as culture.²

Notwithstanding its long existence, this figure of thought varies according to historical and scientific circumstances. In medieval times the pre-cultural state was seen not as the starting point for evolution but as lying outside historical space. Until the late eighteenth century a clear demarcation between nature/the state of nature and culture/history was maintained, but around 1800 occurred the onset of a way of thinking, according to Michel Foucault (1926–84) marking the 'age of history',³ when the 'source' or 'origin' of human civilization was no longer located outside, but inside the sphere of historical development.⁴ Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) took an interest in the foreign because it promised to reveal something about the familiar, i.e. about the present: the study of faraway peoples now furthered self-understanding. But at the same time, this self-understanding destabilized identity for it incorporated matters that ultimately remained

alien – and alienating. The modern conception of origins is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, foreign peoples epitomize the opposite of Europeans' self-image as 'mature', reasonable, self-disciplined, socialized and cultivated, and yet these foreign 'children of nature' – irrational, governed by emotion and drives, and potentially antisocial – formed part of European culture inasmuch as they are supposed to represent Europe's own point of departure. And so, encounters with 'others' meant to affirm European identity by revealing its origins actually unsettle its native sense of self.

This version of 'they are what we were' pervades nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cultural history. However, it took on a new form in the context of the human sciences and their historical and developmental focus. Around 1800, equating humanity's origins with the way non-European peoples still lived was often just an analogical gesture. But over the course of the century, it came to stand as a matter of positive fact. Anthropology and ethnography (and, later, developmental psychology and psychopathology) now declared that so-called 'primitive' peoples offered empirical proof of how mankind had existed in its primal state. Behaviour and thinking from prehistoric times were thought to have endured among indigenous peoples, which had not progressed and therefore had no history. By the same token, the development of children was thought to cycle through the evolution of the species. Finally, the mentally ill – especially schizophrenics – were supposed to suffer from having fallen back into earlier stages of development archived in the unconscious mind and primitive organs. And so, enlisting these figures as examples, the human sciences followed either a genealogical orientation (in other words, they sought to retrace the development of the human species) or an ontological one (in other words, they sought to understand the 'true' – and timeless – essence of mankind).

Around 1900, the 'primitive' emerged as a key paradigm in the fields of anthropology, developmental psychology and psychopathology for explaining the thinking and behaviour of modern society's 'others'. Whether applied to indigenous peoples, children or the mentally ill, the term referred to a supposedly distinct, prelogical way of thinking based on relational networks determining perception and worldview. The ethnographer Karl von den Steinen (1855–1929), for instance, claimed that members of the Amazon tribe he studied thought they *were* red parrots; Ernst Kretschmer (1888–1964), a psychologist, held that schizophrenics believed magical, telekinetic powers were influencing them; and according to developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980), children believed they could talk to animals, control the sun's course and transform one object into another. By turns, 'primitive' thinking qualified as magical (Piaget,

Karl Theodor Preuss, Kretschmer), mythical (Ernst Cassirer, Wilhelm Wundt), or prelogical and mystical (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl). Commonly, a direct connection was posited between this form of thought and the essence of creativity. In *Genius in the Child* (1922), the educator Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub wrote: 'this general imaginative power of the child . . . is preserved only in the poet and the artist . . . The "artist" alone knows how to retain a greater or lesser degree of access to the gigantic and monstrous inner life of childhood.'⁵ Kretschmer thought Expressionism might be explained in terms of schizophrenia and the mental processes of prehistoric humans, which such art brought (back) to life.⁶ And according to the ethnologist Edward B. Tylor, the primitive mentality could unlock the mysteries of poetic language: 'In so far as myth is the subject of poetry, and in so far as it is couched in language whose characteristic is that wild and rambling metaphor which represents the habitual expression of savage thought, the mental condition of the lower races is the key to poetry.'⁷

If the human sciences in general took an interest in connections between artistic/creative processes and the ways indigenous peoples, children and the mentally ill supposedly think, scholars of art and literature expressly looked to develop new aesthetic concepts. In *Philosophie des Metaphorischen* (*Philosophy of the Metaphorical*, 1893), Alfred Biese argued that figurative usage is primary and underlies language; indeed, poetry promises privileged access to 'true reality'.⁸ By enlisting anthropology, ethnography, developmental psychology and psychopathology, scholars of art and literature found new ways to classify and justify their objects of study. Writers did much the same. By turns, they styled themselves as the inheritors of 'primitive' cultures, as the heirs of an animal- or even plant-like existence (Gottfried Benn), or as childlike beings (Rainer Maria Rilke); others trumpeted how close they stood to madness (Robert Müller). Artists renewed their creative vision by taking primitive works as models. Paul Klee's declaration is representative:

There are also primitive beginnings [Uranfänge] of art, such as one is more likely to find in ethnographic collections or at home in the nursery . . . parallel phenomena are the drawings of the mentally ill . . . All that, in truth, must be taken far more seriously than all the museums when it's a matter of reforming contemporary art.⁹

Literary Primitivism in the Works of Franz Kafka

By the time that Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* appeared in 1938, the concept of 'primitivism' was firmly established. William Rubin's authoritative exhibition catalogue, *Primitivism in*

Twentieth Century Art (1984), presents 'primitivism' as a school of art that took artefacts from tribal cultures in West Africa and the Pacific Islands as models, mainly for formal inspiration. Nothing comparable could be realized in literature. European observers deemed objects to be directly accessible, but linguistic barriers prevented them from understanding foreign, non-Western literature. Few authors knew the relevant languages, and translations were scarce; those that did exist paid little attention to particularities of style.¹⁰ There are, however, other models of primitivism that fed into literature, for the 'primitive' could also be found closer to home: in folk art, drawings by children or the mentally ill, and in works dating from earlier periods, such as the Middle Ages. As Colin Rhodes observes, 'there is a large body of Primitivist art, particularly among Dadaists and Surrealists, which bears no direct relationship to primitive art – its Primitivism lies in the artists' interest in the primitive mind and it is usually marked by attempts to gain access to what are considered to be more fundamental modes of thinking and seeing'.¹¹

This broadened definition makes it easier to incorporate the concept of primitivism into the history of literature, where the model of intellectual primitivism – that is, one related to 'primitive thought' – found entry into the works of modernist writers such as Franz Kafka. Kafka's texts exhibit what contemporary discourse called 'primitive thinking' in multiple ways: animate objects (for example, Odradek, the spool of thread), the possibility of being two things at once (Gregor Samsa is both a man and a beetle) and of reality and dream becoming fused (for instance the bailiffs' punishment in the storage room of K.'s office building). Yet at the same time, the texts do not assign this way of thinking to figures marked as 'alien'; as a rule, it belongs to the narration itself, which prompts the reader to perceive his or her own life as strange.

Searching for an affinity between this mode of thought and the three figures mentioned above, for Kafka the figure of the child proves especially relevant. Even though Kafka's protagonists are rarely children, they often realize childish fantasies – for example, of riding on an inanimate object, as in 'Der Kübelreiter' ('The Rider on the Coal-Scuttle', 1917). Also, childishness is often associated with another 'primitive' group of characters: Kafka's animals. The protagonist of 'Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse' ('Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People', 1924) is described as a 'frail, vulnerable creature', for whom her people 'care . . . as a father does, accepting a child who stretches out her little hand towards him' (*HA 70/NSII* 660); she is seen acting 'the way children behave and show their gratitude' (*HA 70/NSII* 661); indeed, her song cannot be distinguished from

'childish peeping' (*HA* 68/*NSII* 656). The dog-narrator in 'Forschungen eines Hundes' ('Investigations of a Dog', 1922) describes his inquisitiveness as something left over from younger years (*HA* 127/*NSII* 434–5), adding: 'perhaps in my old age there beckons to me, as the reward earned by a hard life, more childlike happiness than a real child would have the strength to bear' (*HA* 128/*NSII* 436). While Kafka also invests childhood with a negative charge – most famously, the dominion wielded by fathers over sons – his recourse to 'childish thinking' at the same time has utopian connotations, suggesting a discursive bridge between the child and the artist. Both 'Investigations of a Dog' and 'Josefine, the Singer' describe the search to grasp the mystery of art, a search driven by a 'yearning for happiness which, it may be, flows from music' (*HA* 65/*NSII* 651). Josefine not only 'loves music' (*HA* 65/*NSII* 651) but knows how to bestow this gift onto her people as the joy of a community: 'We too immerse ourselves in the feelings of the crowd, fervently listening, bodies packed close, hardly daring to breathe' (*HA* 69/*NSII* 658).

If many of Kafka's works, then, are drawn to the notion of 'primitive thought', two groups of texts bear directly on questions concerning anthropology and ethnography. The first comprises texts in which the narrator investigates a foreign culture – as in 'Schakale und Araber' ('Jackals and Arabs', 1917), 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' ('At the Building of the Great Wall of China', 1917), 'In der Strafkolonie' ('In the Penal Colony', 1914) and 'Ein altes Blatt' ('An Ancient Manuscript', 1917). The second consists of works that reverse the ethnographic gaze and direct it at familiar cultures and institutions. Here, animal narratives again prove especially relevant, as in 'Ein Bericht für eine Akademie', ('A Report to an Academy', 1917), 'Der Bau' ('The Burrow', 1923–4), and *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*, 1912).

As John Zilcosky has demonstrated, Kafka avidly read popular accounts of colonial expeditions, a fascination reflected in the numerous traveller and explorer figures in his texts. Even though the author devoted little attention to anthropological writings in the narrower sense, his works bear the imprint of contemporary encounters with foreign cultures: colonialism, a fascination with the exotic and ethnographic observation. The latter project in particular is cast in a critical light, for instance in 'At the Building of the Great Wall of China', whose protagonist is an amateur ethnographer 'interested . . . almost exclusively, in comparing the history of different nations' (*HA* 107/*NSI* 348). In the course of his narrative, he reflects on the riddle of the Great Wall's incompleteness, the enigma the Emperor represents, and the people's relation to their ruler. While some of

the country's institutions are 'uniquely lucid', others are 'uniquely obscure' (*HA* 107/*NSI* 348), making his task so difficult that he finally breaks off his investigation. The text underlines the unsteady relation between the ethnographer and his object. First, he takes the stage as a chronicler, speaking at a distance, but then increasingly becomes a 'participant observer' (Bronislaw Malinowski, 1884–1942) – and finally the subject of his own report, which surreptitiously turns into an autobiographical narrative. Kafka's text thus thematizes the fundamental problem of ethnography, namely 'the implication of the observer in the observed' and, as a consequence, 'the transformation, the deformation, of the object of observation through the figure of the isolated observer'.¹²

The narrative also communicates the fascination the foreign exercises on the ethnographer, which prompts him to seek its utopian potential: 'to some extent a free life without the constraints of government' prevails among the country people, 'a life governed by no laws of the present day, [which] obeys only the decree and direction that come down to us from ancient times' – even if this means 'arbitrarily' raising up an Emperor who, long dead, 'only survives in song' to be the 'lord' of the village (*HA* 109–10/*NSI* 352–4). Here, the text articulates the same insight proposed by French anthropologists at the time (such as Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), who described how collective ascriptions of meaning confer magical power upon objects in indigenous societies. Once again, the narrator's ethnographic pursuits relate back to his childhood; he recalls his father telling him about the wall's construction: 'Of course, I have no exact memory of his words, but their meaning sank in deeply because the circumstances were so extraordinary, compelling even the child, so that I can nevertheless still trust myself to repeat the gist, more or less' (*HA* 112/*NSI* 357). But instead of repeating what he has been told, he falls into silence; the narrative stops abruptly.

Encounters with the foreign, be it as part of another culture or through one's own childhood, remain enigmatic and difficult to grasp by means of language. This is also the case in narratives where a foreigner suddenly appears in a familiar setting. One example is the undead huntsman Grachus – who might be read as a figure for ethnography inasmuch as he is constantly forced to look at the 'picture' of a 'bushman' (*HA* 116/*NSI* 312) – who is condemned to sail the seas after his ship took a wrong turn on its way to the underworld. Another, similarly mysterious figure is the hunter Hans Schlag featured in an untitled fragment (*ON* 123/*NSI* 272–3), who is discovered in an attic by a group of children. His speech only becomes understandable 'retrospectively' and his story remains untold; also, his

introduction conjures up the promises of childhood once again ('The children had a secret', *ON* 123/*NSI* 272) as well as the defamiliarization of familiar environments, the child Hans suddenly encountering another, utterly strange Hans (*ON* 124/*NSI* 273).

The defamiliarizing inversion of perspective at work in such ethnographic (or childhood) narratives is intensified in Kafka's animal stories. Animals occupy an interesting position in the modernist discourse of 'primitive thinking' insofar as they often represent the apex of regressive yearning; they stand for a state *before* all thinking, when the animal-human has not yet been estranged from the world and lives in the eternal present of gratified drives. In contrast, Kafka's animals do not embody a sense of renewed intimacy with the world, but rather a sense of profound alienation, in turn generating estrangement in the reader. Here, the ethnographic perspective turns into a critical view of social institutions and the ways modern societies erect borders (for example, between human beings and animals) for the purpose of exclusion. In 'A Report to an Academy', the trained ape Rotpeter tells his life story, from the moment he was captured until he became a celebrated performer at the circus. In the process, he lays bare the illusory notion of freedom, with which 'all too often humans deceive themselves' (*HA* 40/*DL* 304). After his capture the ape can no longer experience an animal's 'great feeling of [true] freedom on all sides' (*HA* 40/*DL* 304); in a painful process, he adopts human behaviour, which he exposes as forced and self-destructive (such as smoking and drinking). Animal stories that do not present direct encounters with the human world also allow reflection on cultural paradigms by way of parable. 'Josefine', for instance, simultaneously foreshadows and subverts an aesthetic ideology and political practice gaining in currency when Kafka wrote: the fabrication, by way of (musical) performances, of a *völkisch* ('folkish') identity that is centred on a leader seeking to orchestrate the nation as a 'total work of art'.¹³

Within the modernist discourse on 'primitive' thought, Kafka warrants special notice because his works not only take up the magical thinking characteristic of children and their 'functional equivalents', but also feature traveller and explorer figures and their proto-ethnographic perspective on foreign cultures. What is more, they also add a fourth figure already implicit in contemporary discourse: the animal. Kafka's animal texts display a different kind of relation from, and understanding of, the 'primitive'. Instead of promising renewed intimacy with the world, they express an intense feeling of estrangement. They turn ethnography on its head in order to direct curiosity and manifest bewilderment at the institutions of modern European life.

NOTES

- 1 F. Schiller, 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry' in H. S. Nisbet (ed.), *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, and Goethe* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 177–232: 180, 181.
- 2 The first part of this chapter draws on research presented in N. Gess, 'Sie sind, was wir waren: Literarische Reflexionen einer biologischen Träumerei von Schiller bis Benn', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 56 (2012), 107–25. See also N. Gess, *Primitives Denken: Kinder, Wilde und Wahnsinnige in der literarischen Moderne* (Munich: Fink, 2013).
- 3 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 217.
- 4 This paragraph and the next draw on the reflections of S. Werkmeister, *Kulturen jenseits der Schrift: Zur Figur des Primitiven in Ethnologie, Kulturtheorie und Literatur um 1900* (Munich: Fink, 2010), pp. 57–70.
- 5 G. F. Hartlaub, *Der Genius im Kinde: Zeichnungen und Malversuche begabter Kinder* (Breslau: Hirt, 1922), p. 30.
- 6 E. Kretschmer, *Medizinische Psychologie* (Stuttgart: Thieme, 1922), pp. 137ff.
- 7 E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: Murray, 1871), vol. II, p. 404.
- 8 A. Biese, *Die Philosophie des Metaphorischen: In Grundlinien dargestellt* (Leipzig: Voss, 1893).
- 9 Quoted in A. Hueneke (ed.), *Der blaue Reiter: Dokumente einer geistigen Bewegung* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1989), p. 170.
- 10 See E. Schüttpelz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven: Weltliteratur und Ethnologie (1870–1960)* (Munich: Fink, 2005), p. 360.
- 11 C. Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), p. 7.
- 12 G. Neumann, 'Kafka als Ethnologe' in H. Bay and C. Hamann (eds.), *Odradeks Lachen: Fremdheit bei Kafka* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2006), pp. 325–46: 325.
- 13 See N. Gess, 'The Politics of Listening: The "Power of Song" in Kafka's "Josefine the Singer"' in S. Corngold (ed.), *Kafka's Selected Stories* (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), pp. 275–88: 288.