PART ONE

Anti-Narcissus

Chapter One

A Remarkable Reversal

I once had the intention of writing a book that would have been something of a homage to Deleuze and Guattari from the point of view of my discipline; it would have been called *Anti-Narcissus: Anthropology as Minor Science*. The idea was to characterize the conceptual tensions animating contemporary anthropology. From the moment I had the title, however, the problems began. I quickly realized that the project verged on complete contradiction, and the least misstep on my part could have resulted in a mess of not so anti-narcissistic provocations about the excellence of the positions to be professed.

It was then that I decided to raise the book to the rank of those fictional works (or, rather, invisible works) that Borges was the best at commenting on and that are often far more interesting than the visible works themselves (as one can be convinced of in reading the accounts of them furnished by that great blind reader). Rather than write the book itself, I found it more opportune to write about it as if others had written it. *Cannibal Metaphysics* is therefore a beginner's guide to another book, entitled *Anti-Narcissus*, that because it was endlessly imagined, ended up not existing—unless in the pages that follow.

The principal objective of *Anti-Narcissus*, in order to place my mark on the "ethnographic" present, is to address the following question: what do anthropologists owe, conceptually, to the people they study? The implications of this question would doubtlessly seem clearer were the problem approached from the other end. Are the differences and mutations internal to anthropological

theory principally due to the structures and conjunctures (criticohistorically understood) of the social formations, ideological debates, intellectual fields and academic contexts from which anthropologists themselves emerge? Is that really the only relevant hypothesis? Couldn't one shift to a perspective showing that the source of the most interesting concepts, problems, entities and agents introduced into thought by anthropological theory is in the imaginative powers of the societies—or, better, the peoples and collectives—that they propose to explain? Doesn't the originality of anthropology instead reside there, in this always-equivocal but often fecund alliance between the conceptions and practices that arise from the worlds of the so-called "subject" and "object" of anthropology?

The question of *Anti-Narcissus* is thus epistemological, meaning political. If we are all more or less agreed that anthropology, even if colonialism was one of its historical *a prioris*, is today nearing the end of its karmic cycle, then we should also accept that the time has come to radicalize the reconstitution of the discipline by forcing the process to its completion. Anthropology is ready to fully assume its new mission of being the theory/practice of the permanent decolonization of thought.

But perhaps not *everyone* is in agreement. There are those who still believe that anthropology is the mirror of society. Not, certainly, of the societies it claims to study—of course no one is as ingenuous as that anymore (whatever …)—but of those whose guts its intellectual project was engendered in. We all know the popularity enjoyed in some circles by the thesis that anthropology, because it was supposedly exoticist and primitivist from birth, could only be a perverse theater where the Other is always "represented" or "invented" according to the sordid interests of the West. No history or sociology can camouflage the complacent paternalism of this thesis, which simply transfigures the so-called others into fictions of the Western imagination in which they lack a speaking part. Doubling this subjective phantasmagoria with the familiar appeal to the dialectic of the objective production of the Other by the colonial system simply piles insult upon injury, by proceeding as if every "European" discourse on peoples of non-European tradition(s) serves only to illumine our "representations of the other," and even thereby making a certain theoretical postcolonialism

the ultimate stage of ethnocentrism. By always seeing the Same in the Other, by thinking that under the mask of the other it is always just "us" contemplating ourselves, we end up complacently accepting a shortcut and an interest only in what is "of interest to us"—ourselves.

On the contrary, a veritable anthropology, as Patrice Maniglier has put it, "returns to us an image in which we are unrecognizable to ourselves," since every experience of another culture offers us an occasion to engage in experimentation with our own—and far more than an imaginary variation, such a thing is the putting into variation of our imagination (Maniglier 2005b: 773-4). We have to grasp the consequences of the idea that those societies and cultures that are the object of anthropological research influence, or, to put it more accurately, coproduce the theories of society and culture that it formulates. To deny this would be to accept a particular kind of constructivism that, at the risk of imploding in on itself, inevitably ends up telling the same simple story: anthropology always poorly constructed its objects, but when the authors of the critical denunciations put pen to paper, the lights came on, and it begin to construct them correctly. In effect, an examination of the readings of Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) and its numerous successors makes it impossible to know if we are once again faced with a spasm of cognitive despair before the inaccessibility of the thing in itself or the old illuminist thaumaturgy where an author purports to incarnate a universal reason come to scatter the darkness of superstition—no longer that of indigenous peoples, rest assured, but of the authors who proceeded him. The de-exoticization of the indigenous, which is not so far from all this, has the counter-effect of a rather strong exoticization of the anthropologist, which is also lurking nearby. Proust, who knew a thing or two about time and the other, would have said that nothing appears older than the recent past.

Disabling this type of epistemo-political reflex is one of the principal objectives of *Anti-Narcissus*. In order to accomplish this, however, the last thing we should do is commit anthropology to a servile relationship with economics or sociology whereby it would be made, in a spirit of obsequious emulation, to adopt the metanarratives promulgated by these two sciences, the principal function of which would seem to be the repressive recontextualization

of the existential practice(s) of all the collectives of the world in terms of "the thought collective" of the analyst (Englund and Leach 2000: 225-48).[1] The position argued here, on the contrary, affirms that anthropology should remain in open air continuing to be an art of distances keeping away from the ironic recesses of the Occidental soul (while the Occident may be an abstraction, its soul definitely is not), and remain faithful to the project of the externalization of reason that has always so insistently pushed it, much too often against its will, outside the stifling bedroom of the Same. The viability of an authentic endoanthropology, an aspiration that has for numerous reasons come to have first priority on the disciplinary agenda, thus depends in a crucial way on the theoretical ventilation that has always been favored by exoanthropology—a "field science" in a truly important sense.

The aim of *Anti-Narcissus*, then, is to illustrate the thesis that every nontrivial anthropological theory is a *version* of an indigenous practice of knowledge, all such theories being situatable in strict structural continuity with the intellectual pragmatics of the collectives that have historically occupied the position of object in the discipline's gaze.[2] This entails outlining a performative description of the discursive transformations of anthropology at the origin of the internalization of the transformational condition of the discipline as such, which is to say the (of course theoretical) fact that it is the discursive anamorphosis of the ethnoanthropologies of the collectives studied. By using the example, to speak of something close at hand, of the Amazonian notions of perspectivism and multinaturalism—the author is an Americanist ethnologist—the intention of *Anti-Narcissus* is to show that the styles of thought proper to the collectives that we study are the motor force of anthropology. A more profound examination of these styles and their implications, particularly from the perspective of the elaboration of an anthropological concept of the concept, should be capable of showing their importance to the genesis,

1. See also Lévi-Strauss' distinction between anthropology, a "centrifugal science" adopting "the perspective of immanence," and economics and sociology, the "centripetal sciences" that attribute a "transcendental value" to the societies of the observer (1978[1964]: 307-8).

2. This does not at all mean that the former and the latter are epistemologically homogeneous from the point of view of the techniques in play and the problems implied. See Strathern (1987).

now underway, of a completely different conception of anthropological practice. In sum, a new anthropology of the concept capable of counter-effectuating a new concept of anthropology, after which the descriptions of the conditions of the ontological self-determination of the collectives studied will absolutely prevail over the reduction of human (as well as nonhuman) thought to a *dispositif* of recognition: classification, predication, judgment, and representation…. Anthropology as comparative ontography (Holbraad 2003: 39–77)—*that* is the true point of view of immanence.[3] Accepting the importance of and opportunity presented by this task of thinking thought otherwise is to incriminate oneself in the effort to forge an anthropological theory of the conceptual imagination, one attuned to the creativity and reflexivity of every collective, human or otherwise.

Thus the intention behind the title of the book I am describing is to suggest that our discipline is already in the course of writing the first chapters of a great book that would be like its *Anti-Oedipus*. Because if Oedipus is the protagonist of the founding myth of psychoanalysis, our book proposes Narcissus as the candidate for patron saint or tutelary spirit of anthropology, which (above all in its so-called "philosophical" version) has always been a little too obsessed with determining the attributes or criteria that fundamentally distinguish the subject of anthropological discourse from everything it is not: *them* (which really in the end means us), the non-Occidentals, the nonmoderns, the nonhumans. In other words, what is it that the others "have not" that constitutes them as non-Occidental and nonmodern? Capitalism? Rationality? Individualism and Christianity? (Or, perhaps more modestly, *pace* Goody: alphabetic writing and the marriage dowry?) And what about the even more gaping absences that would make certain others nonhumans (or, rather, make the nonhumans the true others)? An immortal soul? Language? Labor? The *Lichtung*? Prohibition? Neoteny? Metaintentionality?

3. This perspective on immanence is not exactly the same as that of Lévi-Straus in the passage cited above.

All these absences resemble each other. For in truth, taking them for the problem is exactly the problem, which thus contains the form of the response: the form of a Great Divide, the same gesture of exclusion that made the human species the biological analogue of the anthropological West, confusing all the other species and peoples in a common, privative alterity. Indeed, asking what distinguishes us from the others—and it makes little difference who "they" are, since what really matters in that case is only "us"—is already a response.

The point of contesting the question, "what is (proper to) Man?" then, is absolutely not to say that "Man" has no essence, that his existence precedes his essence, that the being of Man is freedom and indetermination, but to say that the question has become, for all-too obvious historical reasons, one that it is impossible to respond to without dissimulation, without, in other words, continuing to repeat that the chief property of Man is to have no final properties, which apparently earns Man unlimited rights to the properties of the other. This response from our intellectual tradition, which justifies anthropocentrism on the basis of this human "impropriety," is that absence, finitude and lack of being [*manque-à-être*] are the distinctions that the species is doomed to bear, to the benefit (as some would have us believe) of the rest of the living. The burden of man is to be the universal animal, he for whom there exists a universe, while nonhumans, as we know (but how in the devil do we know it?), are just "poor in world" (not even a lark …). As for non-Occidental humans, something quietly leads us to suspect that where the world is concerned, they end up reduced to its smallest part. We and we alone, the Europeans,[4] would be the realized humans, or, if you prefer, the grandiosely unrealized: the millionaires, accumulators, and configurers of worlds. Western metaphysics is truly the *fons et origio* of every colonialism.

In the event that the problem changes, so too will the response. Against the great dividers, a minor anthropology would make small multiplicities proliferate—not the narcissism of small differences but the anti-narcissism of continuous variations; against all the finished-and-done humanisms, an "interminable humanism" that constantly challenges the constitution of

4. I include myself among them out of courtesy.

humanity into a separate order (see Maniglier 2000: 216-41). I will re-emphasize it: such an anthropology would make multiplicities proliferate. Because it is not at all a question, as Derrida opportunely recalled (2008), of preaching the abolition of the borders that unite/separate sign and world, persons and things, "us" and "them," "humans" and "nonhumans"—easy reductionisms and mobile monisms are as out of the question as fusional fantasies—but rather of "unreducing" [*irréduire*] (Latour) and undefining them, by bending every line of division into an infinitely complex curve. It is not a question of erasing the contours but of folding and thickening them, diffracting and rendering them iridescent. "This is what we are getting at: a generalized chromaticism" (D. G. 1987). Chromaticism as the structuralist vocabulary with which the agenda for its posterity will be written.

The draft of *Anti-Narcissus* has begun to be completed by certain anthropologists who are responsible for a profound renewal of the discipline. Although they are all known figures, their work has not at all received the recognition and diffusion it deserves—even, and especially in the instance of their own countries of origin. I am referring in the last case to the American Roy Wagner, who should be credited with the extremely rich notion of "reverse anthropology," a dizzying semiotics of "invention" and "convention," and his visionary outline of an anthropological concept of the concept; but I am also thinking of the English anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, to whom we owe the deconstruction/potentiation of feminism and anthropology, just as we do the central tenets of an indigenous aesthetic and analysis forming the two flanks of a Melanesian anti-critique of Occidental reason, and even the invention of a properly post-Malinowskian mode of ethnographic description; and to that Bourguignon Bruno Latour and his transontological concepts of the collective and the actor-network, the paradoxical movement of our never-having-been modern, and the anthropological re-enchantment of scientific practice. And to these can be added many others, recently arrived, but who will

go unnamed since it would be largely impossible to do otherwise without some injustice, whether by omission or commission.[5]

But well before all of them (cited or not) there was Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work has a face turned toward anthropology's past, which it crowns, and another looking into and anticipating its future. If Rousseau, by the former's account, ought to be regarded as the founder of the human sciences, then Lévi-Strauss deserves to be credited not only with having refounded them with structuralism but also with virtually "un-founding" them by pointing the way toward an anthropology of immanence, a path he only took "like Moses conducting his people all the way to a promised land whose splendor he would never behold" and perhaps never truly entered.[6] In conceiving anthropological knowledge as a transformation of indigenous practice—"anthropology," as he said, "seeks to elaborate the social science of the observed"—and the *Mythologiques* as "the myth of mythology," Lévi-Strauss laid down the milestones of a philosophy to come (Hamberger 2004: 345) one positively marked by a seal of interminability and virtuality.[7]

Claude Lévi-Strauss as the founder, yes, of *post*-structuralism…. Just a little more than ten years ago, in the afterward to a volume of *L'Homme* devoted to an appraisal of the structuralist heritage in kinship studies, the dean of our craft made this equally penetrating and decisive statement:

> One should note that, on the basis of a critical analysis of the notion of affinity, conceived by South American Indians as the point of articulation between opposed terms—human and divine, friend and foe, relative and stranger—our Brazilian colleagues have come to extract what could be called a metaphysics of predation. […] Without a doubt, this approach is not free from the dangers that threaten any hermeneutics: that we insidiously begin to think on behalf of

5. An exception must be made for Tim Ingold, who (along with Philippe Descola, about whom we will have occasion to speak later) is doubtlessly the anthropologist who has done the most to undermine the ontological partitions of our intellectual tradition, particularly those that separate "humanity" from the "environment" (see Ingold 2000). However insightful, Ingold's work as a whole nonetheless owes a great deal to phenomenology, which means that its relations with the concepts and authors at the heart of the present book are largely indirect.

6. This allusion to Moses can be found in *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (L.-S. 1987a).

7. On the philosophy to come of Lévi-Strauss, see Klaus Hamberger (2004).

> those we believe to understand, and that we make them say more than what they think, or something else entirely. Nobody can deny, nonetheless, that it has changed the terms in which certain big problems were posed, such as cannibalism and headhunting. From this current of ideas, a general impression results: whether we rejoice in or recoil from it, philosophy is once again center stage. No longer our philosophy, the one that my generation wished to cast aside with the help of exotic peoples; but, in a remarkable reversal [*un frappant retour des choses*], theirs. (L.-S. 2000: 719-20)

The observation marvelously sums up, as we will see, the content of this present book, which is, in fact, being written by one of these Brazilian colleagues.[8] Indeed, not only do we take as one of our ethnographic axes this properly metaphysical use South American Indians make of the notion of affinity, but we sketch, moreover, a reprise of the problem of the relation between, on the one hand, the two philosophies evoked by Lévi-Strauss in a mode of non-relation—"ours" and "theirs"—and, on the other hand, the philosophy to come that structuralism projected.

For whether we rejoice in it or recoil from it, what is really at stake is philosophy…. Or, rather, the re-establishment of a certain connection between anthropology and philosophy via a new consideration of the transdisciplinary problematic that was constituted at the imprecise frontier between structuralism and poststructuralism during that brief moment of effervescence and generosity of thought that immediately preceded the conservative revolution that has, in recent decades, showed itself particularly efficacious at transforming the world, both ecologically and politically, into something perfectly suffocating.

A double trajectory, then: an at once anthropological and philosophical reading informed, on the one hand, by Amazonian thought—it is absolutely essential to recall what Taylor (2004: 97) has stressed are "the Amerindian foundations of structuralism"—and, on the other, by the "dissident structuralism" of Gilles Deleuze (Lapoujade 2006). The destination, moreover, is also double, comprising the ideal of anthropology as a

8. See my (2001a) "A propriedade do conceito: sobre o plano de imanência amerindio" for another commentary on this passage, which has also been brilliantly discussed by Maniglier (2005a).

permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought, and a proposal for another means besides philosophy for the creation of concepts.

But in the end, anthropology is what is at stake. The intention behind this tour through our recent past is in effect far more prospective than nostalgic, the aspiration being to awaken certain possibilities and glimpse a break in the clouds through which our discipline could imagine, at least for itself qua intellectual project, a denouement (to dramatize things a bit) other than mere death by asphyxia.