



Victor Witter Turner (1920-1983)

Photograph by Edith L. Turner

VICTOR TURNER AS WE REMEMBER HIM

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Ce texte met l'accent sur la personnalité de Victor W. Turner. Il discute de ses impressions sur la conscience, sur la mort et la religion; il décrit ses mythes personnels: Peter Pan; le chevalier, la mort et le démon; la licorne. Turner a livré, par ailleurs, ses propres concepts de "liminalité" et de "communitas" qui ont maintenant une existence autonome. Il était un père généreux, un agréable humaniste et un poète. Politiquement, il était populiste et pacifiste. Il aimait tous les arts quoiqu'il appréciait surtout le folklore. La famille, ses amis, et ses collègues le regrettent profondément.

This memoir concentrates on the personal side of Victor W. Turner. It discusses his feelings about consciousness, death, and religion, and describes his personal myths: Peter Pan; the Knight, Death, and the Devil; and the Unicorn. Turner lived his own concepts of liminality and communitas, yet stood outside them. He was a generous father, a delightful humorist, and a poet. His politics were populist and pacifist, and he was omnivorous in his artistic tastes, although he especially liked folk art. He is deeply missed by his family, his friends, and his colleagues.

Those who knew Victor Turner only through his mainstream anthropological writings knew him as a remarkable ethnologist and scholar: a social scientist and heir of the great tradition of British anthropology, a master of fieldwork technique, and an intellectual whose unerring grasp of theory and method, erudition in several collateral fields, and analytic brilliance created several classic books. He was perhaps the foremost exponent of the comparative study of ritual of his time.

Readers who stepped further in and saw through the dense prose to the pleasurable play of thought, who took the poetic, philosophical, and mystical references in Vic's books seriously, and who investigated some of his more speculative and wide-ranging essays, might discover another layer to his thought. Vic was also a philosopher of religion and art whose work is becoming increasingly influential as an instrument of religious reform and renewal and as a significant new direction in hermeneutics and

semiotics. His work is also a theoretical foundation for exciting new directions in the performing arts.

Towards the end of his career, Vic was working in yet another direction: a new psychology based on the remarkable body of recent discoveries about the anatomy, function, and development of the human brain.

Personal memoirs such as this usually propose a sort of revisionist "inside view" which can lead the public to a "humanized" assessment of a major figure. By "humanized," we mean reduced, relativized, and subject to accusations of ideological bias or to personal attack. Freud and Frost, to name but two, have suffered in this way, and many readers are oddly relieved by an excuse to write off the uncomfortable presence of true originality in their midst. We can offer no such comfort here. The more one knows about Vic's life, the more entirely authentic it is, and the more convincing the personal warrant of his work becomes. Vic needs no humanizing. Not that he was without personal weaknesses, flaws, and secrets; but his weaknesses were the kind that made his friends love him even more, and his flaws were the natural result of the scale on which he had his being. His secrets never stayed secret very long, and were as much a cause for amusement and sympathy as for surprise when they came out.

For the record, Vic was a painstakingly conscientious and generous teacher, a faithful friend even when it meant breaking a friend's unhealthy dependence on him, a loving and beloved father, and a husband who was a friend, hero, conspirator, and lover. He himself believed that he was a wicked man and that his own feelings of love and generosity were invalid because he was so conscious of all his own thought processes (he believed his left hand always knew what the right was doing). Vic never believed in the authenticity of his own moral virtues because he doubted their spontaneity on the grounds of the clarity of his self-awareness. His very humility was one thing nobody could argue him out of; he was convinced of his own constitutional dishonesty. In fact, there has never been a more honest man.

Vic's only real flaw was his fear of death. This was related to the luminousness of his self-consciousness; he didn't believe he had a real being of his own, but that he was only his consciousness, and when that ceased, he would disappear. We think that he believed in the immortality of other people's souls, but not his own.

Yet Vic was a very pious man—a pious and honorable communist in his youth, and a pious Catholic with a devotion to the Virgin Mary in his maturity. His love for the Virgin Mary was from the outside, so to speak, as he affirmed a communion which he felt he was too wicked to share. Not that there was anything

limited in his piety; he was a pious adherent of the Ndembu cult of Kavula the thunder god, and in his own fashion, a good Hindu, a good Jew, a Shintoist, a Blakean or Eckhartian mystic, and a brilliant atheist humanist. His mind, like Walt Whitman's, embraced multitudes, and his deepest motto was "nothing human is alien to me." Contraries did not sit passively in his consciousness; his pluralism was an active and energetic source of positive ideas and testable hypotheses.

Three of Vic's personal myths are very revealing. All of his life he saw himself as Peter Pan, the boy who runs away from home, learns to fly, never grows up, and is forever locked out of the warm house of his parents and must stare from the dark through the window at those who have forgotten him. Vic's second myth found a reflection in Albrecht Dürer's etching of the knight, death, and the devil; death for Vic always rode at his shoulder, and though he kept the faith, he could not escape its scythe. The third myth was the unicorn in Rilke's marvelous poem. Vic felt himself to be a mythical beast, a chimera, something that didn't really exist. These are all myths of innocence, and they are accurate symbols of Vic's psychic world. It is very strange to say of one as intensely self-aware as Vic that he was an innocent, but that is true. He had perhaps a kind of innocence and spontaneity that lies on the far side of the most involuted self-analysis.

Many people knew Vic as the life and soul of the very best anthropological parties, and a grand drinking companion and raconteur. His Ndembu hunter's dance (which was done on his arthritic hip with undiminished *brio* in his later years), and his renditions of Robert Burns and the comedian Harry Lauder are legendary. His accent would shift into broad Scots as the party warmed up. In the words of one observer, he had a Dionysian vocation, but there is a sort of pathos in the Bacchus figure, a sacrificial quality, and even a touch of the scapegoat. Maybe there was something manic and addictive about him, as there was about the actor John Belushi. Although people warmed their hands at Vic, his parties were his attempt to create a communion which, because of his alienness (his single horn, or his wings), he could not fully share. Faust, too, was one of his myths: *O lente lente currite equis nocte*. Although Vic knew *communitas* when he saw it and was more talented than anyone at creating it, he always felt that it would justly reject him. Likewise, he believed Freud's theory that one day his sons would rise up against him and destroy him, and he always wanted to let his sons have their victory without incurring guilt for the crime.

We think that in his last months, after his first heart attack, Vic lost his fear of death. He became very quiet, cheerful, and gentle, like a child.

Vic was the most marvelous father one could imagine. He read all the great adventure stories and as much of the classics to us as we were old enough to take, including a great deal of Shakespeare. He read *The Lord of the Rings* three times, *The Once and Future King* twice, all of John Buchan, all of Kipling, *Hornblower*, Marryat, Selma Lagerlof, Tove Janssen, Grimm, Andersen, Jack London, Conan Doyle, and Rider Haggard. And he did this with an astonishing range of voices and accents. To this day, we cannot reread any of these books without hearing the characterizations he created. His mother, he reminded us, was an actress, and he was a ham at heart.

On weekends, Vic took us on long drives or walks with a picnic. We climbed Table Mountain in South Africa and explored the Capetown docks, made unauthorized forays by truck from Zambia into Angola and what was then the Congo, and rediscovered the sources of the Zambesi and the great Zambesi rapids in the Mwinilunga district of Zambia. We escaped brushfires and furious hornets and ate the delicious alien fruit of Africa: the mucha, the nshindwa, and the mfungu. In England, Vic took us up the mountains of the Peak District, up the witch-haunted hill of Pendle, and into the rich, creamy countryside of Cheshire. And then into America: Half Moon Bay and Crystal Springs Lake in California, Lake Cayuga in New York state, and the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

This was an extremely funny man. He was well known for his puns, which were complicated, vile, often multilingual, crusted with etymological excrescences, and liable to hideous variations and prologations. He told funny anecdotes with consummate timing and had fine lines in Rabelaisian and gallows humor.

Vic was constantly curious about other people. He must have remembered many hundreds of names, along with people's actions, marriages, nationalities, religious affiliations, and racial backgrounds. He loved and valued the differences in people, and had anecdotes about everybody that we can never remember as cruel, though they were often ridiculous. He was curious about all ideas, and would entertain any position to see how it worked and how fertile it might be.

Vic remained a populist and a pacifist all his life. He was a conscientious objector during the Second World War and volunteered for the very dangerous bomb disposal service. Although he was Old Left most of his life, there was a period when he was something of an ultramontane G. K. Chesterton conservative, and he had a great deal of sympathy for the radical Third World Left. But he had none of the intolerance and self-righteousness that characterizes the far left and right. Though he began as a classicist and student of English literature, and dearly loved high culture and the classics, he loved popular and folk culture even more.

In music and art, Vic enjoyed the vigorous, the colorful, and the full-blooded. He liked Gauguin, Rodin, and Dürer, demotic Hindu and Buddhist art, and Mexican and Brazilian folk art. He liked Mahler, Beethoven, Louis Armstrong, Harry Lauder, and Brazilian Samba music. His favorite poets were Rilke, Blake, Rimbaud, and Whitman; his favorite novelists were Dostoyevsky and D. H. Lawrence. But what he read most avidly when he could relax was science fiction, and he could engulf two or three science fiction novels at a time.

Although Vic loved all the forms of order and structure in the world and in human culture, he loved the chaotic forces which subvert and overthrow these forms even more. He felt intuitively that chaos was fertile, productive, and creative, and would have enjoyed the new discoveries in mathematics about fractals, strange attractors, period doubling, and the rich morphogenesis that flourishes unpredictably on the outside edges of predictable order.

It may seem strange that an anthropologist as distinguished as Vic always felt that he had missed his true calling. He often said that he really wanted to be a poet, but had fallen into anthropology, if not by accident, through following his interest and curiosity rather than his destiny. But this may have been a way of encouraging his children, all of whom are poets and writers of one kind or another, for he would say that it was up to us to achieve what he had failed to do. In actual fact, Vic wrote poetry all his life, but did not have the time or the contact with other literary people to prepare his work for publication. We believe that much of his poetry is remarkable and worthy of publication. In any case, when Vic was maturing as a writer, the available poetic forms did not provide sufficient scope for his remarkable powers as a creative scientist, philosopher, and storyteller.

Although Vic treasured the capacity his reputation gave him of being able to help bright graduate students of his own intellectual "tribe," he was totally uninterested in money, status, and power. He was unconcerned about his personal appearance (his clothes were a disgrace), but remained a little vain about his unflagging skill at table-tennis, and he always boasted about his youthful prowess at soccer (his nickname was "the Tank") and as a middle-distance runner. Because he never did things in an ordinary way, he was the despair of college administrators. He gave money away and then worried about it afterwards. Unless one counts a certain innocent and unconscious dignity that was the result of Vic's disinclination to waste time with what he called "bullshit," he never stood on his dignity.

Our family life was often stormy. Although his children felt very free to rebel against Vic, and did, we had a very loving family life with deep trust in the basic ties that made us

more willing to explore our differences, to try to convert others in the family to our own points of view, and even to launch unrestrained and glorious attacks on each other's opinions. Vic never stood above an argument. Instead, he always tried out the ideas of the other side on his own pulses, became interested and upset if these ideas made sense, and then incorporated them into his own position the next time.

No doubt every person's death is the archetypal death to his or her children or spouse. But to us, Vic's death seems especially to exhibit the steep contrast between the warm, astonishing, manifested vitality of life and the muffled and inexplicable darkness of death. It also means the contrast between the pathetic fleshliness, vulnerability, and grotesque comedy of the body, and the unforgettable and continuing dynamism of whatever it is we mean by the soul. Vic had two funerals. The first was a Requiem Mass in church, which was the best kind of farewell, with readings from Rilke's beautiful ninth Elegy on the Country of Pain, and from Ezekiel, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul's epistle on love to the Corinthians. There was another funeral at home afterwards, with Vic's family, students, and anthropological and theatrical friends re-enacting a full-scale Ndembu funeral for a tribal chief. All of this was done properly according to Vic's own field notes, with drums, masked dancers, ritual, and large quantities of beer and spirits. In that second funeral, we all felt Vic's spirit, dancing and singing among us as he would have done in life.