From Paper to Pulp: A Report from No Man's Land

Writing a novel, often, isn't much fun. You pen a sentence, write a scene – and even as your fingers strike the keypad, as the words dribble across the screen, you're confronted, in an instant feedback loop, with the irremediable fact of their excruciating awfulness. Dutch literary culture has a colloquial term for first drafts: de eerste pannenkoek – the first pancake. When you're cooking pancakes, the first cupful of batter to be poured into the pan won't end up being eaten; it's just to make initial contact, prime the iron, establish working temperature. Those things achieved, you throw the scrambled mess away. So it is with a first draft. As William S. Burroughs more directly counsels: cut it into very small pieces and hide them in someone else's trashcan.

Most of the 'fun' – or, to use a more respectfully Lacanian term, pleasure – comes much later, when the novel is read. Or, to be precise: when you, the author, join the ranks of the book's readers. This relation to a work seems more honest, since this is what you, as author, were in the first place: a reader – namely, a conduit or channel through which other histories and bodies flowed and coalesced until they found some kind of form which, still provisional (always provisional) nonetheless seemed fixed enough to be read – or rather, since it was already a form of reading in the first place, re-read. There are no writers – only readers: isn't this what critical thinking from at least Heidegger onwards, never mind Derrida, has ceaselessly been telling us? As a writer who's gone out there, dived into the pan and tested the veracity of these claims, I can testify with absolute conviction that they're one hundred per cent true.

But pleasure. I'm not really thinking, here, of reviews, which, when they're good ones, give the kind of pleasure that cocaine might – gratifying but short and utterly unsatisfactory. Nor even academic critical engagement, although that's more interesting, since it transposes currents moving through the work, conveys them elsewhere, cutting channels through to other bodies, thus continuing the work's own work. No, I have found – quite unexpectedly – that what affords me as a writer – sorry, reader, channel or transposer – the most fundamental type of pleasure is translation; in other words, the process of watching my novels being translated. If a literary text is made of metonymic chains, a balanced architecture of allusion, correspondence, semantic displacements playing out at verbal level, taking up and modifying each other, in a kind of echolalia – what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their brilliant study of Freud's Wolf Man, call "cryptonymy" – then the most propitious, or faithful, mode through which to attend to this text's demand, to carry forth and outwards its own logic, would be translation. As the critic Fritz Senn pointed out back in the '80s: to best understand Joyce, you shouldn't read through Ulysses or Finnegans Wake to some supposed scene of Dublin life or Irishness or personal experience or even universal wisdom; rather, you should look at how these books have been translated. When you do this in intricate detail, at the level of the sentence, comparing (say) Italian with German versions, then the variants, the paths and faultlines opened by each – what's


Anglistik, Volume 32 (2021), Issue 3
© 2021 Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH Heidelberg
gained, what's lost – reveal the resonances, tensions, and associative meshes constitutive of the work in the first place. Most importantly, they show that there's no 'true' or 'right' translation, that each path or track will generate as many blind spots as it cuts plain clearings. It's all, to use Joyce's own term, "transluding." To quote the full phrase from the *Wake*, "transluding from the Otherman or off the Toptic" – i.e. dealing, negotiating exchange terms, with an other who's both playful, ludic, but also elusive; doing this across a surface, a topography that, like a skewed or cambered field, is conducive more to run-off than to presence or retention.

Which brings me to my own translation story, my own small patch of transluding. I've been lucky enough to have my work translated into several languages, and thus to work with many translators. With almost all of them, some kind of dialogue has opened up about the best way to reproduce, in French or Spanish or Korean, such-and-such an associative chain running through this novel, or a sonic doubling or half-doubling or deliberate leakage joining up two scenes or contexts in that one. It's during such dialogues that I feel most intensely in, 'amidst,' the work of literature – whence the pleasure. Until recently, each dialogue was different, attuned to the quirks and settings of the language into which the text was going. With my last book, though, *Satin Island*, I found the same question coming at me from all corners of the globe: what had I meant by the term "offslew"? It appears in a passage where the protagonist, a corporate anthropologist tasked with writing his, our, era's "Great Report" – a task he signally and systematically fails to carry out – wonders aloud about the status of the text that he *is* writing, what he calls "this not-Report you're reading now, this offslew of the real, unwritten manuscript." "I can't find this word," each translator told me. And with reason: it's not in the dictionary; I made it up, a sub-Joycean portmanteau: offslew. I was thinking – again – of run-off; sluices through which excess water overflows; of slurry spilling down unloading ramps of trucks; of sloughing, as of snakes discarding old skin, or Deleuze and Guattari's schizoid body shedding its organs (in the English translation, "the moment the body has had enough of organs and wants to slough them off, or loses them"). In a broader sense, I was thinking that this hybrid word, this off-road or even off-map term, might serve to name the status of a literary or fictitious body: dirty, amputated, ab- or disject, quarantined, sequestered, like some kind of Stalkerish Zone full of detritus, toxic and perhaps miraculous as well, but either way quite inconsistent, even incompatible, with the regime or the reality principle under whose umbra it's settled, to which it is bound but across whose outer boundary (to borrow Julia Kristeva's formulation) it has simultaneously been thrown. This, more or less, is what I emailed back to my translators: find a word for that.

While writing *Satin Island*, I was drawn to books that aren't what they're supposed to be, that (to invert the popular advertising slogan) don't do what they say on the tin. Thomas Bernhard's *Concrete*, for example. Rudolf announces in this novel's opening passage his intent to write the definitive scholarly work on the composer Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Airing out his house, he (as he tells us)
set about arranging everything I needed to carry out my plan, arranging the books and articles, the papers and the piles of notes on my desk in precise accordance with those rules which I had always observed as a precondition for starting work.

The passage, the trajectory of this book, *Concrete*, we're given in no uncertain terms to understand, will be concomitant with that of the scholarly tome on Bartholdy's arising and completion: if they're not one and the same, at least the one will contain or narrate the other's coming into being. But first insomnia, then anxiety about the possibility of a repeat visit from his philistine sister who's just left, then adverse reaction to medicinal tablets that he's taking in order to help him work, then hunger, then contemplation of the texture of his floorboards, then fear that, if not his sister, then a neighbour will call, then a decision to visit one of these very neighbours, long reflections on the putrid state of Austria and, eventually, a trip to Mallorca undertaken to release the blockage that's preventing him from writing but in fact resulting in reprisal of a fascination with a German tourist whom he met there two years previously, whom he tracks down to the grave in which she is now buried – all these things prevent Rudolf from so much as even *starting* the Mendelssohn Bartholdy study. Two hundred and twenty pages later, this book's finished but that other's not begun. Or rather: the book we read is generated from the very ghost or buried body of the other, corpse to corpus. It's as though we'd bought tickets to a film, and been shown all the out-takes instead; or gone to a restaurant or butcher's shop, ordered a steak and been served a big pile of bone and gristle, cut from the very slab that's being withheld from us.

To take another example, also Austrian: Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*. Here, too, a monumental work is contemplated, its composition's undertaking establishing the host novel's parameters: the heroine, a writer, sets out to pen a joyous book, whose title, her boyfriend Ivan tells her, should be EXSULTATE JUBILATE. Tantalisingly, we're shown this book's pre-stirrings, its gestation:

A shower of words starts in my head, then a flickering, some syllables begin to glow, and brightly coloured commas fly out of all the dependent clauses and the periods which were once black have swollen into balloons which float up to my cranium, for everything will be like EXSULTATE JUBILATE in that glorious book I am thus just beginning to find. Should this book appear, as someday it must, people will writhe with laughter after just one page, they will leap for joy, they will be comforted, they will read on, biting their fists to suppress their cries of joy, it can't be helped, and when they sit down by the window and read still further they'll begin to throw confetti to the pedestrians on the street, so that they, too, will stop, astonished, as if they had walked into a carnival, and people will start throwing apples and nuts, dates and figs just like St. Nicholas' Day, they will lean out of their windows without getting dizzy and shout out: Hear, hear! look and see! I have just read something wonderful, may I read it to you, everybody come nearer, it's too wonderful!

Then again, it might not be so joyous: other working titles lying around the author-protagonist's study include "Three Murders," "Darkness in Egypt" and (capital letters) "DEATH STYLES." Either way, dazzling or dark, the book is to-be-written: that's the steak we're promised by this novel's menu, the stake or stakes at play in its roulette game, which will turn out to be a Russian one, and doubly so: by *Malina* the protagonist has, like Bernhard's German tourist, vanished into her own sepulchre,
enclosed within the very plaster of her study's walls; and, on top of that, the reader is almost certainly unable to ignore the fact of Bachmann's own death following a house fire not long after the novel's publication. Most importantly, though, from a strictly textual point of view: by the book's end the to-be-written book, the JUBILATE-Murders-Egyptian-Darkness-Death-Styles manuscript, has not been delivered. Just like Concrete, Malina's text is a record of the non-writing of this other, yearned-for, necessary, urgently-demanded book to and from which it simultaneously both irrevocably bound and irrevocably separated; its discarded, dead skin: offslaw.

That both Bachmann and Bernhard are post-war Austrians is perhaps not insignificant. A revision for national culture, for the German language, an overwhelming sense of inexpungeable guilt whose weight bears down at every moment, saturates Concrete as it does most of Bernhard's novels (this is the man who posthumously disallowed all publication and performance of his work within the borders of his homeland). The abyss or (Bernhard's preferred term, as for Abraham and Torok) crypt that yawns open within Malina, interrupting and voiding its heroine's project, is also history, transposed onto a mythical scale: gas chambers in which fathers rip out daughters' tongues, great cracking frozen lakes, dead libraries whose bookshelves and, by extension, all culture collapses and implodes, Kleist, Hölderlin, Balzac, Lucretius and Heidegger tumbling and ripping to cries of Heil Book! It's tempting to see Bachmann and Bernhard as testing and affirming Adorno's famous dictum about the impossibility of lyric poetry after Auschwitz. And to frame their work this way would not be wrong – but nor would it be the whole picture. There's an older scene, an earlier, nineteenth-century staging of the drama of the book-to-come, and of not just this book's impossibility but of this impossibility's constitutive role or function in the very possibility of literature tout court. For me, certainly, it was this older drama that served as a hub or template for Satin Island's late-capitalist, corporate-ethnographic staging of the Great Report's non-composition.

I'm thinking, of course, of Mallarmé. His dictum, no less famous than Adorno's, from his 1895 essay "The Book, Spiritual Instrument" declares that "everything that exists does so in order to end up in a book [aboutir à un livre]." Mallarmé is not just thinking of some book or other, but (as he puts it in an 1885 letter to his friend Verlaine) "the Book, convinced as I am that in the final analysis there's only one […] architectural and premeditated […] the orphic explanation of the earth." From 1894 onwards, as is well known, he was dedicating all his energy to this project's realisation, amassing an extraordinary set of notes and instructions charting the ways in which this "Book" (this very term has to be placed in speech marks) might be iterated through an ongoing array of ritualised performances or "séances" in which theatre would overlap with dance, the written word with mime, music with mathematics, and so on. In the combinatorial, totalising aspect of this endeavour, he has Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk concept for a model – but where Mallarmé's vision seems to me to differ from the older template, in a way that makes it eminently modern, is its implicit understanding of interdisciplinarity; or, to give it an even more contemporary descriptor, multi-media or cross-platform practice. The idea isn't that dance should merge seamlessly with poetry, or theatre with music; rather, that the prize, the longed-for epiphanic miracle, lies in the
very passage of transferral, the interstice between one form, language or mode of representation and another; that its mystery might be revealed not when safely transposed or translated into its destination syntax, but rather in the movement, necessarily unfixed and undetermined – that is, not yet legible – of the transposition or translation itself. In other words, and in a proto-Heideggerian way, that "saying" or revealing might take place only in unsaid, concealed ways. Or in proto-Joycean, as "transluding," from the other, "off the Topic."

This is the great paradox running through the remarkable, and almost impossibly opaque, prose pieces that make up Mallarmé's collection *Divagations*. His reflections on the transformative potential of theatre are (as their title, *Crayonné au Théâtre*, suggests) scribbled in a theatre while not watching the play that's taking place there – Mallarmé hates contemporary theatre, considers it a useless bourgeois form. It's precisely by creating a pocket of asidenseness or adjacency within and yet without the space of theatre – literally through writing, taking a notebook from his pocket and turning his side-box into a study at the expense of paying attention to the official or announced performance – that he is able to envisage "an art, the only or pure art, according to which uttering signifies producing: it shouts out its demonstrations through its practice." Having teased this vision into words, he immediately places it under a veil of unsay- or unrevealability: "The instant the miracle happens," the next sentence reads, "to say even that it was that and nothing else, will invalidate it." In another short piece, "An Interrupted Performance," he senses, in an unintended suspension of another play, in which a live bear's momentary threat to its stage-handler creates a hiatus, the tantalising possibility of an invasion of the theatre by some other space entirely: "the absence of a single breath united with space to make me wonder what absolute place I was living in, where one of the dramas of astral history could elect to take place" – but, of course, the bear retreats, the dreary show continues, and the great metaphysical drama does *not* take place, or takes place only in negative form, as potentiality.

Thus, for Mallarmé, the logic of suspension, of between-ness, of adjacency is *temporal* as well as spatial: interruption is time set beside itself, off-set: another passage in *Divagations* pictures Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, his great anticipated master-work forever withheld, kept apart, knocking at the front door "like the sound of an hour missing from clock faces:"

Midnights indifferently thrown aside for his wake, he who always stood beside himself, and annullèd time as he talked: he waved it aside as one throws away used paper when it has served its function; and in the lack of ringing to sound a moment not marked on any clock, he appeared […]

This *décalé* or out-of-sync appearance, "from the point of view of History," is *not* "untimely" but "punctual" – for, Mallarmé continues, "it is not contemporary with any epoch, not at all, that those who exalt all signification should appear." To Verlaine, again, he writes: "I consider the contemporary era to be a kind of interregnum for the poet." In "Action Restrained," grappling (albeit aslant) with the question of direct political engagement, Mallarmé interrupts his own text with an aside, a parenthesis, that reads:
Outside, like the cry of space, the traveler perceives the whistle's distress. 'Probably,' he persuades himself, 'we are going through a tunnel – the epoch – the last long one, snaking under the city to the all-powerful train station of the virginal central palace, like a crown.'

The era is recast as a literal topography, an urban one, to be experienced only in traversal or transition, in suspense, in a mode of non-revealment (tunnels afford no overview or vista). The passage continues:

"Time unique in the world, since because of an event I have still to explain, there is no Present, no – a present does not exist [...] Lack the Crowd declares in itself, lack – of everything. Ill-informed anyone who would announce himself his own contemporary, deserting, usurping with equal impudence, when the past ceased and when a future is slow to come, or when both are mingled perplexedly to cover up the gap [...] So watch out and be there.

The interstitial passage, this no-man's land between fixed territories, no-man's time between all measurable temporalities, is also the open crypt or cryptic opening, abyssal gap from which (and this is why Badiou loves Mallarmé so much) the event might, albeit in some kind of unsayable form, emerge.

I love Mallarmé too, and took the tunnel passage for Satin Island's epigraph. I love not just its sense of in-betweenness, but its promise: at the tunnel's end, the crown, the palace. But we're in the tunnel: that is the condition of the epoch – or perhaps the epoch, epochality, historical consciousness itself, is conditional upon the tunnel, and the state of being-in-the-tunnel the only true Dasein. It's the poet, and the poet alone, who, dwelling in and occupying the interregnum, gets this. Writing is both the naming of the tunnel, its unsayable or non-revealing nature, and the promise to deliver that which would transform tunnel-waste to central station-palace. Mallarmé's name for this transforming element was simply "Book." And yet his Book, his interdisciplinary, multi-media book-beyond-the-book, despite the years of planning, never arrived. Even the epochal text Un coup de dés is not the Book itself; rather, as Blanchot puts it, "it is its reserve and its forever hidden presence, the risk of its venture, the measure of its limitless challenge." It's not just me: everyone loves Mallarmé: Marcel Duchamp and Broodthaers, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Vito Acconci, not (once more) to mention Derrida, Kristeva and so on. As Barthes put it in 1960: "All we do [in the 20th century] is repeat Mallarmé – but if it's Mallarmé we repeat, we do right." But in "repeating" Mallarmé, it's not as though we're finishing an uncompleted project – rather, renaming and re-occupying the no-man's land of interstitiality, unsaying it in new ways.

One way, perhaps, in which this occupancy, this tunnel-traversal has been carried out, one that Mallarmé himself might not have anticipated as the territory hadn't really been invented, formed or designated as such when he was around, is anthropology. This discipline's founding father, Bronislaw Malinowski, issued a First Commandment remarkably similar to Mallarmé's "aboutir à un livre" one, namely: Write Everything Down. The end-point of anthropology, even if it is never reached, is to turn the world into writing. Not for nothing does Michel de Certeau explicitly credit Mallarmé as he casts late-modern civilisation's (i.e. capitalism's) governing order as a "scriptural enterprise," a Kafkaesque writing machine that both inscribes and reads or scans all
surfaces, not least human ones, such that all objects, subjects, spaces and events "will thus be transformed into texts in conformity with the Western desire to read its products." Not for nothing, either, is the greatest of all anthropologists, Claude Lévi-Strauss, a novelist manqué. My anthropologist's reflections, musings and actions (or, rather, inactions) in *Satin Island* are so indebted to those of Lévi-Strauss that the latter more or less functions as one of the novel's characters. What struck me most about reading *Tristes Tropiques* was, firstly, the sense that, even on purely 'literary' terms if one can talk of such a thing (style, register, poetic-ness, all those creative-writing metrics that are not entirely useless), Lévi-Strauss's prose is far and away superior to that of virtually all his 'proper' novelist contemporaries. Secondly: Lévi-Strauss's fundamental logic of cross-disciplinarity or in-betweenness. If psychoanalysis, for him, can be understood by recourse to geology – histories buried in seams and strata – then geology itself, its own topography, "sheer cliff faces, landslides, scrub or cultivated land," profilers and withholds a "master-meaning, which may be obscure but of which each of the others is a partial or distorted transposition." Anthropology in its entirety seems to arise from this logic: not a territory itself but a set of transpositions around a set of shifting border-zones above or beyond which the legend or decryption key hovers, never quite attainable.

Thirdly: that Lévi-Strauss's thinking is shot through with an awareness of performativity and spectacle – like Mallarmé's, with a sense that some kind of unnamed work is taking place elsewhere and at another time than where we might expect to find it. Thus his famous sunset passage casts sky and horizon as a theatre in which clouds "like the flats of some stage set," "drifting scaffoldings […] made of carved and gilded wood" serve to "conceal the sun," the whole thing a "negative," re- or pre-playing in absenta some other time, some other space, "reconstitution of a distant landscape on which the sun would set once more" – before revealing, with the sun's complete departure, the clouds' artificiality, "all their shoddy, provisional fragility when the [theatre] lights have been extinguished, so that one can see that the illusion they created depended not on themselves but on some trick of lighting or perspective." Culture, too, of course, is ritualised performance, spectacle and artifice, one that – again – coyly holds out and simultaneously retracts the offer of being read – that is, of being cross-read, Delhi's core syntax transposed onto Rio's, that of an Amazonian tribe onto Arctic Circle Inuits; of human society's entire grammar being fixed within the matrix – or, one more, metrics – of a universal grid.

It's entirely fitting, then, that reading and writing, as activities, play central roles in *Tristes Tropiques*’s drama. As Derrida has notably pointed out, in Lévi-Strauss (just as for Plato and the history of Western thinking overall) writing is the thing that unravels the very metaphysical or totalising project posited by the writing in the first place. This is spot-on – but what interests me about this unravelling is the way it opens up, just as in Mallarmé, around a space of in-between-ness, untranslatability; around a décalage that is both temporal and spatial. Walking the newly-electrified streets of Lahore Old Town in the 1950s, trying to piece together, long after the event, a vanished purity – of local colour, texture, custom, life in general – from nothing but leftovers and debris; or living among the semi-modernised Nambikwara, Lévi-Strauss confesses to a sense of having come 'too late' – although he knows, from having read a previous account of life.
among the Nambikwara, that the anthropologist (that account's author) who came here fifty years earlier, before the rubber-traders and the telegraph, was struck by that impression also; and knows as well that the anthropologist who, inspired by the account that Lévi-Strauss will himself write of this trip, shall come back in fifty more will be struck by it too, and wish – if only! – that he could have been here fifty years ago (that is, now, or, rather, then) to see what he, Lévi-Strauss, saw, or failed to see. This leads him to identify a 'double-bind' to which all anthropologists, and anthropology itself, are, by their very nature, prey: the 'purity' they crave is no more than a state in which all frames of comprehension, of interpretation and analysis, are lacking; once these are brought to bear, the mystery that drew the anthropologist towards his subject in the first place vanishes.

The key lesson of the celebrated "Writing Lesson" episode is similar: Lévi-Strauss meets a tribe who don't know what writing is; this tribe's chief, wanting to maintain his elevated status, takes up one of Lévi-Strauss's pads and starts to scribble on it, figuring that his subjects won't know the difference: he can con them into thinking that he's versed in this activity. This episode, its theme of duping, is taken up and amplified by a later reflection: having encountered endless tribes who aren't 'strange' enough – tribes who, once decoded, lose all their mystique – Lévi-Strauss finally alights on a tribe so strange he can't make head or tail of them. This exasperates him too, of course: incomprehensible is no better than banal – it's just its flip-side. But maybe somewhere in between too little and too much understanding, there might be a perfect middle. "Between these two extremes," he muses, "what ambiguous instances provide us with the excuses by which we live?" It's a complex formulation: the "ambiguous instances" would provide "excuses," which excuses, in turn, would entail the life-blood of anthropology itself. But, of course, he immediately undoes even this fantasy, reasoning that these excuses would be instances of duping too. But who's being duped? Is it his readers who would be in the position of the hoodwinked tribal followers? Or is it he himself?

Who, in the last resort, is the real dupe of the confusion created in the reader's mind by observations which are carried just far enough to be intelligible and then are stopped in mid-career [...]? Is it the reader who believes in us, or we ourselves who have no right to be satisfied until we have succeeded in dissipating a residue which serves as a pretext for our vanity?

Carrying "far enough" – the metaphor is eminently topographic, just like metaphor, carrying-across, itself (in Athens, trucks have Metaphor written across their sides); only here, it's carried not quite far enough, stranded in limbo, like some DHL packet disappeared into the void of we-called-but-you-weren't-in slips and en-route-back-to-depot tracking messages. But it's the word residue that most interests me here. It's not an abstract term: a residue is always something quite material. It's material in a base, Bataillean way: the gunk or effluent that's left after a physical process (manufacturing, alchemy, sex or even dying) has been carried out, its slough or excess. Lévi-Strauss's thinking, everywhere, is deeply enmeshed in material processes – wood and paint of stage-sets, as we've seen, and as we've also seen, chthonic minerality of rock-fragments
and sedimented peat or coal of landscapes. But it's to base materiality that his most striking passages turn. Pondering the rise of fascism in Europe, he writes that its instances

were starting to ooze out like some insidious leakage from contemporary mankind, which had become saturated with its own numbers and with the ever-increasing complexity of its problems, as if its skin had been irritated by the friction of ever-greater material and intellectual exchange brought about by the improvement in communication.

Or meditating on the concreting-over of Polynesia, the destruction of the American and Melanesian forests and the blighting of Africa with shanty-towns, he writes, in an extraordinary paragraph:

The order and harmony of the Western world, its most famous achievement, and a laboratory in which structures of a complexity as yet unknown are being fashioned, demand the elimination of a prodigious mass of noxious by-products which now contaminate the globe. The first thing we see as we travel round the world is our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind.

The warning against the type of colonial ecocide that we're seeing reach such levels of toxicity and virulence today is clear. But isn't a more subtle sub-text lurking here, or at least lurking in the relay between this passage, its imagery, and the other one, the culmination of the duping sequence? Residue: isn't it the process of anthropology itself, conducted through the act of writing, both the physical practice and its material props or substrate, that generate the landscape of thresholds not reached, territories not passed over, murky interregna that are both the swamp or no-man's land in which it (anthropology) flounders and the very eco-system within which it ekes out its existence? What if the filth, the mud, the overspill or slough or husk, were writing, and vice versa?

This is the suspicion that Satin Island's corporate anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss's bastard offspring, carries to its own threshold of intelligibility and lets drop in mid-career, through his obsession with an oil-spill that is happening, somewhere in the world (isn't it always?), concurrent with the novel's own events, or non-events. Staring, fascinated, at the images that saturate the TV screens in the airport lounges in which he endlessly waits, the newspapers he picks up on tube trains as they make their way through tunnels, his computer screen as he tries to compose his Great Report, even his dreams, he sees in spilled oil not just nature's Benjaminian archive — ancient trees, dinosaurs and whole back-catalogues of Vendian biota, Precambrian urolites and coprolites and burrows — but also, since most objects in our world, from furniture to clothes to cars, the entire spectrum of our habitus and dwelling, are oil-based, the formless possibility of all form; then beyond that, he sees in the implicit aesthetic underlying these media representations of oil-draped birds and fish (that is, of animals remade in oil), or montages showing as-yet-untouched ones frolicking on pristine shores, oblivious to the approaching tide, a base reduction of painterly and sculptural and heroic narrative codes, of pathos, the sublime, hubris and destiny. But most of all, in the most simple image of all, that of black oil hitting a snowy coastline, he sees nothing other than writing at its most basic: ink polluting paper, words marring the whiteness of a page.
I'll end by way of a return to the passage in which this impure, dirty word, *offslew*, appears. It also comes by way of Lévi-Strauss. My corporate anthropologist, still failing to write his Great Report, is pondering another writing episode from *Tristes Tropiques*: the one in which Lévi-Strauss, stranded in mid-Amazon for months on end, no prospect of escape in sight, falls prey to what he calls a "mental disorder." Out of the blue, he (Lévi-Strauss) has the mad idea of penning an epic drama in the manner of Corneille or Racine. For six days, he actually does this, writing from morning till night. What he writes it *on* is the back or reverse-side of the sheets of paper that contain his research notes. The drama's plot involves a Roman emperor and his assassin, and a grand exploration of the themes of glory, power, nature and annihilation – but that doesn't really matter, since on the seventh day, like the Manichean God, he gives up. My anthropologist pictures him writing it, cold and rheumatic on interminable afternoons. In fact, that's not quite right: what he actually pictures is the paper that he writes it on, magnified twenty or a hundred or a thousand fold: on one side, columns of Nambikwara words and phrases, transcriptions of tattoos, diagrams of the village's huts' layout, with attempts to correlate these with the tribe's wider myth and kinship structures, which Lévi-Strauss has extrapolated and laid out in graphs and tables – then, on the other side, the play. On one side, scientific, evidence-based research; on the other, epic art. Eventually, my hero's viewfinder moves inward from the sides, towards the middle of the paper: the damp, pulpy mass that forms the opaque body at whose outer limits, like two mirages, the two sides hover. What he doesn't say, and perhaps doesn't need to, but I will now, is: if there is a space of literature, that's it.