

When last February I came across the Vital Signs call for papers, I browsed around the website of “Real Life Methods,” and one of the first things that caught my eye was a recent issue of “Anthropology Matters” titled “Writing Up and Feeling Down.” The whole cluster of titles, culminating with this last one, made me eager to join this conversation that appeared *extremely* relevant to my own struggles with academic language and what it does to real life. In fact, since I’m in literature studies, for me it was always about what academic language does to *literature* – but a great part of the trouble for me is that academic criticism normally has to neatly cut off literature from “real life,” before going on to any further procedures. The tension between literary and academic writing, the different ways these two genres have of saying things and addressing an audience, will be my main concern today.

Precisely at the same time as I learned about “Real Life Methods”, we had an audiobook in the CD player of our car, which started running every time we got in, and made us reluctant to leave the car every time we got to our next destination. It was Vassily Aksyonov’s *In Search of Melancholy Baby*, an extremely rich, subtle, engaging narrative which was not exactly a fiction – but still less was it autobiography or documentary writing. It was a book about America, the first part of it being written by a Soviet visitor, a guest lecturer in UCLA in 1975, the second part – written already by an emigrant kicked out of his own country in 1980. The first part – *24 Hours Non-Stop*, was published in 1976, rather surprisingly, in the USSR, the second part – *In Search of Melancholy Baby* – was published in the United States by Random House in 1985 in English translation, then both parts united by a Moscow publishing house “End of the Century” under the title *In Search of Melancholy Baby*, in Russian in 1992. The latter title conveys the essence of Aksyonov’s quest, or research question in the book: coming to the United States after years of dreaming about it, watching the few available American films and listening to semi-underground jazz

– which is epitomized by the song “Come to me, my melancholy baby” – what will he find confirmed and what shattered by the real America?

I could not exactly call it travel writing, it was not exactly organized along a timeline of a journey, and it sprawled too far into history, geography, politics, culture and psychology to be an account of a single travel. Also, through both parts there ran fragments of a parallel, kind of mock-novel – called in the first book “Typical American Adventure,” TAA, then in the second, “Sketches for a Novel to Be,” with a hero abbreviated as HMN – Hero of My Novel. These loving-parody-like reflections on literary writing about America prevented me from classifying the text as regular travel writing – but they equally distanced this book from being a regular novel. It was, rather, a reflection on how novels about America are written, how they may relate to the writer’s actual experience of America on the one hand, and to various fantasies, stereotypes, loves and hatreds of America on the other. In fact, the abbreviations assigned to the *title* of the *first* novel and to the main hero of the *second* suggested, more than anything, a generalizing, scientific exploration of these literary phenomena. Then, after having seen anthropologists complaining about the inadequacy of the academic language they have to write in, it struck me that Aksyonov’s book is most like an anthropological study – but written by an established writer who is not constrained in his choice of style or genre. It could be called an anthropological study pretty much happy with its method.

In fact, the divide between anthropology and literature is not at all clear-cut. The genre of the novel, since it emerged in the early 18th century, has always been concerned with the study of society. As Stendhal says in *The Red and the Black*, “A novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet.” (vol.2 ch.19). And you probably know Conrad Phillip Kottak’s book “Mirror for Humanity: A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology”. The mirror metaphor obviously suggests that both genres of thought are

used by humanity to reflect upon itself, but there may be more resemblances between an anthropologist's and a novelist's work implied in this image. First, what you see in a mirror are whole images, faces, figures – they are not broken down by the mirror into elements or component parts. This suggests anthropology's holistic approach to human and social reality, treating it as a complex of phenomena that may not be understandable in separation. Insofar as anthropology prefers qualitative methods, its units of study are particular stories of particular people or groups of people, and that's also what *literature* has always been about. Stendhal's pronouncement introduces an additional idea about the mirror: it does not discriminate between the "high" and the "low" things, the sky and the dirt, in other words, its principle of representation is non-exclusion: every person or phenomenon is worthy of attention. Indeed, the great innovation of prose fiction since the 18th century is bringing into focus lower-class characters and their ways of life. The distinctive technique of the novel for examining society in its heterogeneity and complexity is heteroglossia. Heteroglossia is a term introduced by a literary scholar Michail Bakhtin to describe the novel's inclusion of different social dialects, or discourses of different social groups, without subordinating them to one dominating discourse. The trouble with academic prose is that it has always positioned itself as the overarching meta-discourse that has the final word in interpreting all other discourses. And the great promise of qualitative methodologies is that they challenge this domination, and may eventually position academic writing as a genre among other genres that can be used to understand and describe human life.

Getting back to Aksyonov: the satisfying-looking match between his subject matter and way of writing was not self-evident or easily achieved. The author makes it fairly clear that he had to navigate between a Scylla and a Charibdis in his writing – ideological constraints on the one hand and cheap stereotyped fiction writing on the other. At the start of the first book, *24 hours Non-Stop*, he states that he is unwilling to write another batch of travel notes about America, especially not travel notes that are ideologically dictated –

going like a typical Soviet newspaper report, “the sun has risen over Manhattan, but it’s not all sweet and sunny for common Americans.” Not that he would ever fall into this trap out of his own free will or carelessness, but *not* writing about America in this way and declaring so at the very opening of one’s book took more than a little nerve. On the other hand, there was a danger of falling into some alternative, rosy and romanticized, or cynical and pragmatic, set of clichés. In the fictional part of the narrative, the mock novel about a Typical American Adventure, one of the characters is the anti-author named Mimosov, who tries at every turn to reduce the hero’s American adventure to the level of pure consumerism, kitsch, materialism or triviality. In both of these undesirable cases, writing in an ideologically constrained way or unreflective stereotyped way, the author would be prevented from shaping and expressing his own attitude to the things and people he describes. Throughout the text, he strives to maintain the direct and sincere tone in his reflections. I might say he keeps the text an open window through which the author’s real, live, expressive face is seen, instead of letting it become a dead, static, concealing mask of some conventional attitude to America – whether condemning or admiring.

By contrast, in academic writing elimination of personal attitude is mandatory for the text to qualify as academic. No wonder for some researchers, especially beginning ones, it feels like putting on an expressionless mask. In “Three Narratives of Anthropological Engagement,” (in the journal *Anthropology Matters*, ninth issue, 2007), a doctoral student Melania Calestani complains of “a tension between what we feel and what we are supposed to write” (7). A sense of putting on a fake persona is expressed by another doctorant, Nico Tassi: “I could not avoid feeling, in my own attitude, a kind of unnatural theatricality in the use of words. We were all trying to play the game, a strange but necessary game where nobody can afford to say what she really believes, from the bottom of her heart. When I asked a male colleague, regarding his upgrading proposal, whether he had been able to frame into words his research interests and intuitions, he sardonically

replied: ‘Well no, I have been too busy trying to disguise what I *really* feel about it’” (4). I could say as much about the normative way of writing academic criticism in literary studies, though ironically it is the *literary* text that academic criticism regards as a mask the author puts on, concealing his or her real-life self. Tassi aptly calls this way of writing and talking “anaesthetized language” – and that is what leads much of academic writing to become boring, no matter how fascinating or compelling the topics it may be discussing. And in my opinion, making the topic of your interest boring to your readers is not only an aesthetic fault and a waste of the precious time of your life: it can be also classified as an offense against the ethics of writing, not giving your topic its due. Perhaps a still more serious ethical issue with anaesthetized language is the sense of betrayal of the real-life relationships developed by the researcher with his or her subjects, as Calestani describes in her account of her field research and writing-up process.

I would like to summarize now what makes Aksyonov’s text close to an anthropological study, as opposed to what makes it non-academic or literary. Being so close to travel notes approximates *Melancholy Baby* to ethnographic writing, which also grew out of travel writing and colonial officials’ reports – while colonial officials can also be defined in some sense as exiles from their native country. Aksyonov’s book, like an anthropological study, is a cross-cultural comparison, focusing on how the two cultures he examines, the Soviet and the American one, penetrate and influence each other, first of all in his own life and in the lives of his family and friends. Insofar as ethnographic study demands a relatively long-term involvement and participant observation, Aksyonov’s study satisfies these criteria as well – the first part of his book was written after several months of teaching in an American university, and the second part, over the first few years of his emigration. However, I would say that Aksyonov’s involvement with his material goes way beyond “participant observation” – he is writing about his own life, he is by no means

above or beyond the picture he creates, but rather an integral part of the picture – his text is extremely self-reflexive.

As for what distances Aksyonov's book from academic ethnography and makes it closer to literary writing – I wouldn't say it's mainly the formal properties of his text, like figurative language, or puns and other word-play – these are common enough in academic texts as well. Nor is his style very uncomplicated or primitive as compared to academic writing – there are a lot of complex ideas expressed in involved, complex sentences and intellectual vocabulary. To be sure, Aksyonov's writing is a lot more playful, informal and artistic than an average academic text. Also the writer chooses the most striking, memorable, distinctive images and characters – like a gypsy-looking woman professor of French, who first appears in *Typical American Adventure* in a mafia den, stirring a poisonous crystal into a glass of martini with her long magnificent finger. Yet somehow many of these characters turn out to be also representative, epitomizing social trends and human types. This is a distinctively literary strategy of creating characters.

But as the most substantial differences between *Melancholy Baby* and a normative academic text, I would emphasize *two* features: the linguistic diversity or heteroglossia of Aksyonov's text, which makes it closer to a novel after all, and the constant ordering and orientation of the material with respect to the author's life and attitudes, sympathies and antipathies, beliefs and passions. It is as if the writer's "I" is a firm resting point on which the described world hinges and around which it is organized – and this world is immensely wider than a single private life experience, it is a world *studied* and explored.

Aksyonov does not set out to describe life in the United States "objectively," for what it is – his discussion is naturally narrowed to a *Russian* perspective on the States, and focused in his own experience of this perspective, first of the fantasized image of the inaccessible America at home, then of how this image was confronted with reality, first on his guest-lecturer visit, and then in his emigration. Early in the first book, *24 Hours Non-*

Stop, he describes the mental process of actually seeing for the first time a city one used to dream about. “Imagination and reality. [this is the title of Chapter 2] [...] Are these two concepts in such an absolute opposition as they seem to be? On a journey, you are often faced with all kinds of minor, I would say mundane contradictions between imagination and reality. For instance, New York: you have read so much about the *streets* and *avenues* of Manhattan, seen so much photo, cinema- and tele-[he omits “representations”], that in your imagination this city is, you could say, already constructed; you have already plotted everything in your imagination, and you already know how these *streets* go, from where to where, but having finally arrived in the real New York you suddenly see that you were wrong, that the streets go not from here to there, but from there to here, and the whole Manhattan is warming its backbone in the sun not at the same angle as you used to imagine. Another example is Venice. You knew that it is beautiful, but in reality it turns out to be even more beautiful than in your imagination, in spite of the fact that its palaces are a little lower than you imagined. Thus on a journey you are faced with these small contradictions and happily demolish them, because in place of your former imagination there grows a new one, and eddying like tropical vegetation covers over your new reality. Does this mean that old imagination was worth nothing? Well, not at all. In the new forest you often stumble on patches of undergrowth from the old one, and either scramble through them, or throw yourself into them face down to catch your breath. Your journey becomes simultaneously a recollection.”

In this long quote you can see how literary language is used to convey a fairly abstract and complex – if you agree with me on that – psychological and epistemological insight. According to Aksyonov, there is no radical difference between knowing a city from representations and from first-hand experience, since the differences between the two are mostly “minor” and “mundane,” while the eyewitness experience is immediately transformed into another imaginary picture. Yet on the other hand, Aksyonov manages to

make an opposite, balancing statement: imaginary knowledge is a *desire* for actual, first hand knowledge, it is incomplete without actually seeing the cities – one is *happy* to demolish the inaccuracies of one’s imaginary picture of New York or Venice; fantasizing so much about these cities is in itself an evidence of desire to get there someday – a desire which for most of Aksyonov’s Soviet contemporaries was a totally unrealistic one. I would argue that this second, balancing proposition is conveyed almost exclusively by the artistic and emotional properties of the passage. The joy of the traveler is conveyed by the eagerly running-on rhythm of the sentences, the images of lush tropical forest, of Manhattan as a huge animal one is excited to sight warming its backbone in the sun, the traveler’s shortness of breath as he throws himself down on the thick bushes of comforting recollections. On the literal level, all this is summarized by the single emotional adverb – “happily.” All these elements, which could be dismissed as mere aesthetic and emotional add-ons, in fact make a crucial contribution to the *content*, at the level of ideas conveyed. Another prominent aspect of this fragment is its conversational, informal register – word omission, the direct down-to-earth colloquial “you” pointing at the reader, which *establishes* community of experience by *assuming* it, long sentences clinched with incomplete short ones in a lively rhythm – all these contribute to capturing the reader’s sympathetic attention, and would normally look out of place in an academic text.

But the good news about the academic writing, at least in qualitative research, is that it is becoming increasingly positioned as a genre among other genres of research output, and a researcher can choose the formal academic way of writing in a more conscious, self-aware move, rather than being passively boxed into it. In the last few months, during my work for the Israeli Center for Qualitative Research, I have become aware of other possible genres of research output. Dr. June Hare introduced me to ethnodrama and found poetry; I became acquainted with Dr. Ephrat Huss doing art-based research, where the visual is used as an alternative to the verbal medium; and Dr. Michal

Krumer-Nevo asked me to translate her article in social work written in a technique that she terms “writing that resists othering,” or that could be otherwise defined as a heteroglossic technique: some parts of the article were written in a regular academic language, while others were a conversational, down-to-earth account of interviews, and still others used the interviewees’ language on a par with the researcher’s.

The large question that arises when it comes to the choice of genre is, who do we want to be our audience? Do we want to address the academic circles, or a larger audience, or both? The answer we give in each particular case will determine *how* we write, and *how* will in the end determine *what* we say – since language is anything but a neutral and transparent medium.