

VERBAL AGGRESSION IN RUGBY RITUAL

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In examining the "adversarial condition of social life" which so fascinates him, Fernandez (1972:57; 41-43) has suggested that metaphor be understood as a strategy employed by actors to produce affective movement through the important domains of experience (i.e., quality space) of their culture. Metaphor may either persuade or evoke performance—its tenor may be adorned or disparaged—depending upon how aptly it is applied by the actor (1972:46). The power of metaphor invests the skillful actor with the ability to manipulate (and therefore control) various subjects and objects (Fernandez, 1974). Among the various "missions" attributed by Fernandez (1974:133) to metaphor, two over-arching functions are apparent: the imputation of identity to an inchoate subject and the definition of a sense of situation. This paper attempts to illustrate the utility of Fernandez's insights by examining certain rituals of midwestern American rugby players—notably the performance of bawdy songs—in terms of verbal aggression.¹

As the balance of this paper deals primarily with the folksong performance within which the salient metaphoric elements are showcased, several prefatory remarks are in order. Complementing Fernandez's formulations are parallel developments in folklore. Bauman (1974) has succinctly described the contextual theorists' shift from text-orientation to action-, event- and communication-orientation in terms of a cross-disciplinary integrative tradition focused on performance. These folklorists are especially interested in two aspects of the folklore event: pattern and emergent quality. "Emergence" permits the theorist to comprehend "the uniqueness of particular performances within the context of performance as a generalized system in a community" (Bauman, 1975:302). Bauman believes the emergent quality to reside in the interplay of communicative resources, individual competence and the goals of the participants in a given community's performance. The range of "emergent texts" (empirical performance) lies on a continuum between the ideal poles of completely fixed text and completely novel text (1975:302-303). The current tendency to view text, event and social structure as emergent is underscored by theorists who stress the

manipulative aspect of verbal art. Social structure can be transformed through performance; the performer controls his audience (and vice versa), and, through manipulation, places himself at the center of a social structure he creates. Performance becomes a strategy for enhancing the performer's social mobility and status (1975:304). Abrahams' rhetorical theory of folklore (1968) points out the importance of evaluating performance strategy. Expressive folklore is the "rhetoric" of a community insofar as it embodies techniques of control and persuasion—pleasure is provided, but persuasive intent is also executed. Performers not only instruct the young, but also seek to maintain their own positions of respect and authority (Abrahams, 1972:18-19; 28). In viewing verbal art as strategic social interaction, it is essential to concentrate as Bauman (1972:38) proposes (and as Radin 1927 and his disciples have stressed), on the social identities which are relevant to the performance of verbal art "within the context of particular situations and events."

The Rugby Complex—A Brief Description

Rugby is not merely a sport, but a social event of ceremonial and ritual import; it is an emically proclaimed lifestyle whose practitioners form a recognizable subculture (Sheard and Dunning, 1973:7). In a creative response to social stress, an intellectually elite community convenes to play, fraternize, indulge aesthetic impulse, criticize societal values and norms, propose alternative goals, achieve catharsis and reconcile itself with social reality. Comfortably ensconced in the social system (relative to such marginal dissenters as members of motorcycle gangs) which they symbolically assault, ruggers conduct their event in the idiom of or under the aegis of humor and bawdry; the clash of norms which animates wit (Freud, 1960)—and facilitates expression and discovery (Koestler, 1964:45)—amplifies and reinforces the ruggers' intent, while ensuring the viability of their dissent.

The rugby event in the Midwest consists of the match itself and a post-game party. The match is characterized by hard hitting aggressive play, and is hedged about with formality and protocol. Decorum is preserved on the field, with strict rules governing the players' actions. During the party, however, the conventions of social order are turned upside down. The sexual, verbal and drunken license of the party clashes stridently with the order of the game. The code of ethics in force during the game (clean, hard action) yields to the sadomasochistic content of the bawdy songs and licentious ritual of the party. Together, the match and party point out sources of social stress and permit the ruggers to obtain temporary release from the pressures of their everyday lives.

Elsewhere (Sherry, 1978) I have described the midwestern rugby event in terms of its liminal features. The institutionalization of liminality is apparent in the activity of the rugby club. The rugby club engenders normative com-

munitas—existential *communitas* is ordered into a "perduring social system" (Turner, 1969:132). The rugby event occurs in liminal space during liminal time; clubhouses and bars are the sites where the hiatus between workdays is celebrated. The liminal aspect of leisure (Turner, 1974b:69) is radicalized by the ruggers. As befits their liminal status, rugby clubs are frequently targets of criticism and disciplinary action (Turner, 1969:109) with respect to sponsoring agencies (usually university sports federations). Each club has a repertoire of songs and rituals which serves to enhance its liminal situation and forge the bonds of *communitas* between concelebrants.

In reconciling genre studies with performance-centered or contextual approaches to folklore, Abrahams stresses the need to view genres as "sets of performance pieces that performers employ to affect, to move, the audience. This affecting is brought about through the "sympathetic involvement of the members of the audience with the construction of the piece" (1969:107). While sympathetic involvement characterizes in-group performance, antagonistic involvement may characterize interaction between ruggers and the out-group audience of the social world, whether that audience is only implicitly present (as in the satiric songs) or actually present (as is the case when bumper stickers are displayed). Here Abrahams' view must be modified, and Turner's concept of "social drama" (1974:15-17) is useful in tempering this model.

The complex relationship between these simple forms is the contextual bond of audience and performer. The situation which precipitates this bonding has a distinctly liminal cast. The ruggers participate in a psychodrama of sorts, engaging in intensive, regulated yet emergent aggressive conflict, prior to withdrawing to a marginal space in resolute convocation—consonance replaces dissonance. A model of interpersonal relations is established through the rugby event. Abrahams (1972:29) has advocated viewing performance as

...arising out of some sensing by the group and the performer of a social misalignment that must be confronted and rectified... Each performance brings a misalignment or problem situation to attention, and calls for some kind of realignment. The question, then, is where performers stand in relation to the way things are or used to be—whether their ends would best be served by aligning themselves with the way the natural or social system functioned in the past or whether their place in that system would be improved by agreeing to the change called for.

Remembering that the ruggers criticize, lampoon, burlesque and invert a variety of social conventions, Abrahams' view of performance leads nicely to the envisioning of the rugby event as a social drama. The everyday social world is present implicitly and in spirit during the liminal period of the rugby event, as the object of much abusive rhetoric. In both arenas of the event (game and party), a social drama—the phased process of contestation be-

tween influential paradigm-bearers (Turner, 1974:15-17)—may be observed. At the match, clubs collide and at the party they mesh, but in each arena, the rugby ethos conflicts with the cultural conventions of mainstream America. The fourth phase of Turner's (1974:37-41) social drama is most interesting: breach, crisis and redressive action lead either to reintegration or irremediable schism. Being socially well-placed (a "winner"), the rugger is not desirous of producing social upheaval, but the gentleman-ruffian finds the conflict of paradigms occurring within himself. The regularity of these rituals of rebellion thus affords catharsis and periodic reconciliation for the social critic with something to lose. Prodigality and profligacy never attain the status of "root" paradigm (Turner, 1974:64).

At the rugby party,

Much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship and communion, in brief of *communitas*; on the other hand, much of what has been dispersed over many domains of culture and social structure is now bound or cathected in the complex semantic systems of pivotal, multivocal symbols and myths which achieve great conjunctive power... (Turner, 1974:259).

The liminal situation of the rugby event serves an important didactic end. Through the agency of bawdy song, the ruggers achieve a tremendous release "from conventional trammels and restrictions" (Legman, 1964a:423). The rugger is encouraged to distance his private self from both his social self and his everyday social context, and is given a chance to put things into perspective. He learns how to deal with, escape from, and otherwise alleviate the stress impinging upon him from his social world. The rugger emerges from the event as a new person, refreshed and ready to renew his workaday routine with added energy.

The Songs

As indicated earlier, the performance of bawdy songs helps sustain the atmosphere of liminality at the rugby event, and is instrumental in establishing the social organization peculiar to the liminal period. Backed by the "authority of quintessential tradition," instructors (experienced singers or "choirmasters") maintain their hierarchical superiority to neophytes (novice singers) while at the same time encouraging feelings of *communitas* (Turner, 1967:98-99). As a lead-in to a study of verbal aggression in verse, it is necessary to examine the symbology of the rugby songs.

Abrahams and Foss (1968:92) have noted that love and death are the predominant themes of Anglo-American folksong; these themes are transmogrified in the repertoire of the ruggers. The bawdy nature of the majority of the songs is reflected in a cursory cataloging of the joys of sex in all its hetero- and homosexual variety. References to concupiscence, fornication, nymphomania, sodomy, exhibitionism, voyeurism, masturbation,

obsession with orifices, comparative organ size and deformity, anal violation, gigoloism, bestiality, pederasty, cunnilingus, fellatio, hermaphroditism, narcissism, prostitution, fascination with animal sexuality, sexuality of the clergy, necrophilia, castration, impotence, adolescent and pre-pubescent sexuality, incest, lesbianism, rape (individual and gang), abortion, frigidity, transvestitism, infidelity, fascination with sexual apparatus (mechanical phalli, dildoes, douche bags, chastity belts, etc.) fetishism, and multiple orgasm abound in the songs. Similarly high rates of incidence are accorded such phenomena as venereal disease, vaginal discharge, menstruation, smegma, rancid seminal fluid, running scores, decomposition, scatology, flatulence and other ordurous manifestations. Violence and sadomasochism are important unifying themes in the songs. Before proceeding to the next level of analysis, it is essential to recall Turner's discussion of liminal symbolism. Death, decomposition, catabolism, menstruation and other physical processes with a negative tinge characterize those individuals who are no longer socially classified (1967:96). It is these symbols with which the ruggers play.

While sexual carousal is consistently glorified in song, other concerns of less biologically hedonistic orientation, and more directly social orientation, are presented as well. Marriage, military duty, conventional role relationships, the family, class, race, occupation, academe, politics, religion, technology and automation, and other cultural institutions and tenets of the American ethos are lampooned or satirized in the songs of the ruggers. All of these social sentiments are couched in terms of scatology, carousing, sex and violence of the types noted above. A metaphoric relationship obtains between the sex-violence symbols (the vehicle) and the social symbols (the tenor) of the rugby songs. This relationship is so intimate and so persistent or recurrent as to make this symbiotic complex verge on beoming a symbol itself, with either symbol evoking the other as a referent (consciously or unconsciously) whenever it may occur.

The rugby symbols are an interesting illustration of Turner's formulations on processual symbology. The orectic pole of each type of symbol is clear. Sex, violence and scatology require no explanation. Nor do the images of say, Rodriguez, the Engineer, the Hieland Tinker, the wife, the priest, the rabbi, the mother, the politician, or the proletariat. However, the ideological or normative pole of the rugby symbol is problematic in that societal values are burlesqued, satirized or ridiculed. Sexual puritanism and civil comportment are subverted in the songs. Class antagonism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, racism and regional prejudice, iconoclasm and anticlericalism, political satire, anti-intellectualism, alcoholism and infidelity, the inhumane primacy and moral impotence of Industrial or Technological Man, and numerous other anti-social sentiments are expressed at the ideological pole of the rugby symbols. Social criticism expressed during the liminal period of the rugby event through the symbols of the songs is not inconsistent with

Turner's functional assertion that the symbols serve the ends of the larger community. These symbols are the tools of liminal speculation, and the apparent clash between their poles is indicative of the fact that symbol embodies metaphor. Returning to the contention that the metaphoric relationship between the symbols of sex, sadomasochism and carousal and the symbols of social orientation approaches the state of a dense symbol itself, the liminars permit this monstrous complex to temper their perspectives of social reality. The liminal speculation of the ruggers may be characterized as an act of bisociation: a situation or idea is perceived in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference (Koestler, 1964:35). Bisociation is responsible for the creative act, and may result in humor, new intellectual synthesis or aesthetic experience. Each of these results may be realized at the rugby event. This brief exploration of symbolism may be concluded with an insight drawn from Fernandez (1974:132):

Expressive events not only create a liminal period for the readjustment of arousal, but also, by varying the normal association of things, enable learning to take place (Turner, 1967:Chapter 4). But the bizarre features of ritual are simply an elaboration of what is basic to metaphoric predication. The predication is a speculation upon the varying possible concomitance of subjects and objects. And in that speculation lies arousal value as well.

Verbal Aggression—Some Case Examples

One method employed to initiate singing at a party involves the issuance of a formulaic challenge by one club to another:

We call on _____ to sing us a song,
We call on _____ to sing us a song,
We call on _____ to sing us a song,
So sing, you bastards, sing!

(Or show us your ring, it's a terrible thing.)

This request begins with an imputation of illegitimacy and baseness (although the metaphor is tempered with humor) to the potential singers, who presumably accept the appellation by honoring the request for song. Failure to produce a song entitles the challengers to degrade their opponents further through a metaphoric examination of the collective rectum. The proctological humiliation is capped by a disparaging comment on rectal quality. That this "forfeit-challenge" is a scatological variant of an older, more explicitly homosexual taunt linking song with bawdy rituals—especially those of ordeal and initiation—among male clubmates is suggested by research undertaken by Legman (1975:115-117).

As is common among peoples who value oral poetry, an audience may reserve the right to verbally abuse and patronizingly correct a performer who has erred in his presentation (Finnegan, 1977:157-159; 232). Should a singer fail to produce a flawless verse, his cohorts generally rebuke him as follows:

Why was he born so beautiful?

Why was he born at all?

He's no fuckin' use to anyone.

He's no fuckin' use at all.

Him. Him. Fuck him.

He ought to be publically pissed on,

He ought to be publically shot,

And tossed in a public urinal

And left there to fester and rot!

Once roundly ridiculed, the singer is forced to gulp a glass of beer as quickly as he can. As a result of this error, the essential *raison d'être* of the rugger is called into question. The sentence awarded him by the jury of his peers is extreme, especially in that voyeuristic degradation is not the sole penalty imposed. That the severity of the ideal sanction is not commensurate with the infraction, and that the imposed penalty merely evacuates pleasure from a routinely enjoyable action both suggest that conventional legal canons are being parodied. On the symbolic level, the victim is humiliated, executed, allowed to decompose, and finally revitalized by *aqua vitae*, to begin afresh, with relationships properly reestablished. A rugger caught in an error may interject his own comment into line number five, superceding the audience response with a yell of:

Me! Me! Fuck me! PLEASE!

Such self-effacement, especially by acknowledged singers, appears to strengthen the bonds of communitas, if judiciously exercised (Turner, 1969:185). Communal self-effacement—for example, the singing of the refrain "we're all queers together"—serves similar ends.

An allusion-impacted analog of the Afro-American verbal duelling match known as "signifying" or "playing the dozens" (Dollard, 1939; Abrahams 1970, etc.) is discernible within the rugby complex. Although signifying as such does not occur among male ruggers (a practice similar to flyting occurs among some female clubs) a variant of the dozens genre is embedded in the structure of one of the songs. In "Rodriguez," the initial line of the standard refrain is a *blason populaire*, and runs:

Rodriguez the Mexican pervert.

Substitutions for this refrain center around the vilification of the kin group of the family of a generalized other:

Your mother swims out to meet troopships.

Your father does push-ups on anthills.

Your brother eats cream-filled doughnuts.

Your brother (or sister) eats bat shit off cave walls.

Your brother beats off in confessionals.

Your sister (or mother) she douches with Drano.

Your mother's rejected by troopships.

This generalized verbal assault extends (as the fifth refrain cited above

already indicates) into the realm of religion:

Your rabbi eats foreskin for breakfast.

This last remark compounds insult with blasphemy and pollution, the intimation (on the level of pun) being that pork has been consumed. The "you" against whom this vituperation is directed would appear to be the members of the rugby clubs themselves. The singer assaults the groups collectively. The ritual degradation of the liminars is communally sanctioned. Consequently, no retribution is exacted from the singer; rather, praise is often accorded the vituperative wit. Unlike the black street situation described by Abrahams (1970:40-49), words do not escalate into physical violence—the verbal playground does not become a verbal battleground. The players become a closer group through collective abasement.

Numerous songs provide the creative rugger with an opportunity to achieve an optimal position in the quality space of the group while at the same time both sublimating aggressive tendencies and paying his mates left-handed compliments. By tailoring traditional verses or creating new ones for the occasion, a performer is able to manipulate his audience to various ends. For example, by substituting the names of clubmates for generic titles in the song "In Mobile," anticlerical sentiment is transformed into a subtle ego-inflating, yet status deflating coup for the singer, vis-a-vis his mates:

Oh _____ is a bugger

And _____ is another,

And they bugger one another in Mobile.

Unmitigated praise of individuals is likewise permitted, as a verse of "Balls to Your Partner," suitably doctored, indicated:

Big _____ played a dirty trick,

We cannot let it pass,

He showed a girl his mighty prick

And shoved it up her ass.

Similarly, an entire club may be the object of adornment, if the verses of "Dinah" are altered:

Oh a rich girl likes the Wallabees,

And she likes Springboks,

But—Dinah likes the _____ boys best

Because they've got **BIG COCKS!**

(These last two words are invariably shouted in affirmation by the entire club.) A final example is useful in demonstrating the interplay of experienced and aspiring singers; predictably, threats to status are not entirely well received. Occasionally, the delicate balance between maintaining communitas and asserting status differential must be preserved. Such a process may ensue if a novice singer attempts to keep pace with an experienced singer. In the event of an implicit contest, a master may recognize the talent of a status subordinate while at the same time asserting his own influence in repartee (again, disparaging and adorning his mate in the same breath):

_____ he was there,

And he was mighty coarse,

We caught him in the stables

A' tossin' off a horse.

The recipient of such double edged largesse may then capitulate to the status superior, and may in turn single out another aspirant lower in the pecking order:

_____ he was there,

In a corner he sat,

Amusin' himself by abusin' himself

And catchin' it in his hat.

It is clear that song verses may be employed strategically by some ruggers.

A concluding example of verbal abuse may be drawn from the repertoire of female rugby players. The ritual rejection of female stereotypes is apparent in the practice of on-field chanting and allied ceremony popular with many women's clubs. The following bit of verse is characteristic of the pre-game exchange of insult practiced by some female clubs:

Peaches and cream,

Peaches and cream,

Those are the girls on the other team.

They're not rough,

They're not tough,

But boy can they crochet!

This mocking imputation of traditional femininity is often countered by the opposing team by chanted reference to their own copious consumption of marijuana, their narcotic-induced bloodshot eyes, and similar non-standard proclivities. T-shirt emblems also bear witness to this rejection of tradition: "Iron Ovaries" is a particularly popular logo, as is "Mother Rugger."

Conclusion

The ruggers in this study appear to effect "an exchange of hostilities disguised as an exchange of amenities" (Legman, 1975:24). The ruggers tacitly accept this disguise, permitting the experience of communitas to pervade their activity. This collective assault on social convention is embodied in the mechanics of bawdry through auto-aggression. ("They Bugger One Another Mobile" is an apt metaphor for this phenomenon.) In terms curiously reminiscent of one of the ruggers' favorite songs ("Rule Britannia"), Legman maintains that this particular form of bawdry is

...always and inevitably a sort of anal-sadistic *petard* or fire-cracker tied to the listener's tail, if...not positively hammered up his arse, and the fuse gleefully lit (1975:29).

Legman's remarks on performer-audience relations merge nicely with a discussion of manipulation via expressivity. In speaking of bawdy perfor-

mance, Legman (1975:43; 47) suggests that the listeners or audience are, as it were, dragged into their role with the unspoken bait not just of "catharsis," but of the belief that they will be given the magical strength by the taboo-outraging spectacle to turnabout tomorrow and in their turn, perform the opposite or "top-banana" role...

Finally, to complete his role...the listener or audience must *shrive* the teller, at the end of his telling, by means of the ritual climatic acceptance of laughter or applause...thus giving the teller the reassurance that his audience is still well-disposed toward him despite his muffled confession, and does not despise him.

Thus it can be seen that, in the ambience of *communitas* generated in the liminal rugby event, power, control, and intimacy are exercised on two distinct levels. First of all, a social structure is established wherein the experienced rugger (or choirmaster) manipulates the novice ruggers in a way that enhances his own superior status without upsetting the prevailing spirit of fraternity and egalitarianism. As a corollary to this assertion, a performer likewise manipulates his audience to his benefit. Secondly, the rugby club itself adjusts its relationship to social reality, providing its members with a forum for ritual or ceremonial criticism and burlesque, and promoting the belief that collective devotion to a common ethos provides participants a measure of worth and control in their personal lives. Spontaneity in the face of system, creative celebration in the face of retribution (social and mystical) are each championed on rugby weekends, imparting to participants a sense of power. These instances of manipulation of social relationships through efficacious expressivity illustrate the postulations of Fernandez, Bauman, Abrahams and Turner discussed earlier.

Ruggers, Legman (1974:45) might suggest, parade their anxieties before each other, showing their secret fears to their fellows, at once confessing and performing penance, and obtain release because the audience administers absolution in its failure to openly recognize the performer's peccadilloes. Rather (without elaborating on the psychodynamics of bawdry), I would suggest, fear and guilt are collectively shared, each rugger knowing the other's flaws through recognition and identification of same in himself. This complicitly need not be overtly proclaimed, although, through metaphor and allusion, the discreet conspiracy is acknowledged.

Turner has suggested that

Society (*societas*) seems to be a process rather than a thing—a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and *communitas*... Persons starved of one in their functional day-to-day activities seek it in ritual liminality. The structurally inferior aspire to structural superiority in ritual; the structurally superior aspire to symbolic *communitas* and undergo penance to achieve

it (1969:203).

It would seem that any viable, healthy, reflective and critical society must periodically encourage its members to achieve a type of aesthetic distance from its culture to ensure its continued vitality.

NOTES

¹The data gathered for this paper derive from practice sessions, games, parties, informal gatherings and interviews with the members of twenty-five-odd midwestern clubs and their coteries conducted over a year long period of field research begun in Autumn of 1976. A mixed strategy of participant observation and direct and indirect elicitation was employed throughout the study. The material discussed in this paper is the result of embedded collection; the gathering of data in a reasonably natural context proved quite feasible, due in part to the feelings of *communitas* shared by the participants. It should be emphasized that the rugby traditions presented here are those of midwestern America. While there is considerable overlapping of regional and national traditions, repertoires are frequently distinct and complementary, varying over time and space.

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