

Bruce Jackson

"Plus un document qu'un documentaire": the voices of Terre Humaine.

(Published in French in *Terre Humaine: Cinquante ans d'une collection. Hommages*. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2005, 14-23)

The French do not have a word for it, nor do the English, the Russians or anyone else

I have difficulty explaining Terre Humaine to people who know nothing about it. I've found no single sentence or small group of sentences that explain it well. Rather, I find myself adducing examples: Agee's and Evans's *Louons maintenant les grands hommes*, Malaurie's *Les Derniers Rois de Thulé*, Lucas's *Suerte*, Segalen's *Les Immémoriaux*, Hélias's *Le Cheval d'orgueil*, Galeano's *Les Veines ouvertes de l'Amérique latine*, Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, Biocca's *Yanamo*....

So many voices; each of them different. So many cultures; each of them different. What order undergirds all that? What structure encompasses all that? It is far easier, I think, to tell someone what a mountain is, or an omelet, a university, an atom, a foot, a limousine.

The difficulty of explanation has nothing to do with the eighty and more works that comprise Terre Humaine itself, or with its guiding genius Jean Malaurie. The difficulty, I think, is grounded in a defect in our vocabulary, and the defect in our thinking that represents. Which is to say, it is grounded in the deficiency of imagination that makes Terre Humaine both significant and necessary.

Nearly all the works in Terre Humaine fall into a broad area of endeavor academics call "the social sciences." Knowing that is to know only slightly more than nothing. "Cette collection a construit, livre après livre, sans *a priori* théorique, un anthropologie à part entière, au regard global, où toute réflexion ne s'élabore que sur un expérience vécue." Malaurie wrote in 1995. "A l'écart d'idéologies aujourd'hui dépassées et des modes, Terre Humaine, oasis de liberté, est, dans un esprit de totale indépendance, un courant de renouveau de la recherche et de la pensée, dans la tradition si française de la littérature du réel."<sup>1</sup>

That term—"social science"—trivializes the individual works and the Terre Humaine community Malaurie describes. They are all too well written, too personal, too human for that. Adding the

---

<sup>1</sup>"Terre Humaine: 40 Ans." Unpaged, undated document describing each of the works in Terre Humaine, on Librairie Plon letterhead. My copy is signed by Malaurie and hand-dated 20.08.95.

most obvious modifier—“humanistic” to make it “humanistic social science”—helps not at all, because the expanded phrase begs other questions: What is social science *without* the modifier? People who call themselves social scientists aren’t studying the society of turtles or chickens. “Humanistic” is redundant, or should be.

What other modifiers might be used and how do those kinds of social science differ from this kind of social science? Would humans figure more or less in those other kinds of social science? Or might it mean social science somehow altered by the knowledge of or sensibility to the humanities? Well-written, say. Or sensitive to nuance of word and object? Perhaps—but what earthly use would there be to a science of human interaction that was insensitive to such things?

No: there is no way to fix the “social science” problem because the term itself is a bad compromise, an attempt to achieve an academic legitimacy that is, au fond, without meaning or substance. Calling something a “science” doesn’t make it one. And neither are the mere acts of counting and measuring and reporting on what was counted enough to make work science; the fact that things have been counted and measured only means that things have been counted and measured. Taking seriously only things that can be counted and measured means only that nothing will be learned about anything else.

There’s a name for activity that calls itself science but really is not, for work that uses the appurtenances of science to look like science, but is some other thing instead: *scientism*. This fallacy of nomenclature was described by the Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman:

Social science is an example of a science which is not a science; they don’t do [things] scientifically, they follow the forms—or you gather data, you do so-and-so and so forth but they don’t get any laws, they haven’t found out anything. They haven’t got anywhere yet—maybe someday they will, but it’s not very well developed.... We get experts on everything. They sound like they’re sort of scientific experts. They’re not scientific... There’s all kinds of myths and pseudoscience all over the place.... I have the advantage of having found out how hard it is to get to really know something, how careful you have to be about checking the experiment, how easy it is to make mistakes and fool yourself. I know what it means to know something, and therefore I see how they get their information and I can’t believe that they know it, they haven’t done the work necessary, haven’t done the checks necessary, haven’t done the care necessary. I have a great suspicion that they don’t know, that this stuff is [wrong] and they’re intimidating people. I think so. I don’t know the world very well but that’s what I think.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Richard P. Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, Cambridge, Perseus, 2000, p. 22-23.

Scientism would be of marginal interest were it not for the fact that it is bad coin that, in the academy, too often drives good coin out. Scientism is good at stating its goals and marking its conclusions. The problem, as Feynman suggests, is that those conclusions are self-contained; they finally take us only where they started.

### **Finding voice**

The writers of *Terre Humaine* do not arrive where they started, and neither do they write in the passive voice (“it was concluded that...” “It was seen that...” “The conclusion was reached...”) of the authentic science report or the scientific poseur. Their voice is active, the first person singular; their action is one of having experience and bearing witness to it with the central recording instrument being their own sensibility. If they had a common motto it might be the famous line of the American poet Walt Whitman in his “Leaves of Grass”: “I am the man. I suffer’d. I was there.”

Theirs is the job of expressing on a printed page what Agee calls the “immeasurable weight of actual existence.” The phrase occurs in a passage in *Louons maintenant les grands hommes* that is central to the work of every artist of the real:

In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact. As for me, I can tell you of him only what I saw, only so accurately as in my terms I know how: and this in turn has its chief stature not in any ability of mine but in the fact that I too exist, not as a work of fiction, but as a human being. Because of his immeasurable weight in actual existence, and because of mine, every word I tell of him has inevitably a kind of immediacy, a kind of meaning, not at all necessarily 'superior' to that of imagination, but of a kind so different that a work of the imagination (however intensely it may draw on 'life') can at best only faintly imitate the least of it.<sup>3</sup>

The writers of *Terre Humaine* step into other worlds and return to bear witness. They each document their passage in ways that become for us not simply a report of experience, but a significant experience in itself. Their work is, in a phrase Malaurie wrote to me in a letter, “plus un document qu'un documentaire.”

Something that records and describes but is a thing of value in its own right. “Plus un document qu'un documentaire” describes every work in *Terre Humaine*. It also describes work of three artists of the real whose work prefigures *Terre Humaine*, one of whom does not appear in the

---

<sup>3</sup>*Louons maintenant les grandes hommes*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, Paris, Plon, 2002, 30-31.

collection but very well could (George Catlin, who provided the first detailed ethnographic description of a complex Native American ritual)<sup>4</sup>, one of whom does appear in the collection and whose work was of critical importance in the collection's definition (James Agee), and one of whom not only appears in the collection but created and directs it to this day (Jean Malaurie).

Each of the three, I think, dealt in profoundly different but at some deep level similar ways with the greatest single problem in documentary and ethnographic work: simultaneously representing the Other and legitimizing the self doing the representation, thereby legitimizing the representation. For it is never sufficient to say "Here's what I saw." It is also necessary to provide or create or establish sufficient authority and authenticity so the rest of us can trust the report itself, to do it in such fashion that a reader might disagree with interpretations but nonetheless have sufficient information about what is being interpreted to have a right to disagree.

The physical scientist achieves that authority by a claim of careful record-keeping and an assertion of fully open process, and by the presumed potential replicability of the work. People like Catlin, Agee, Malaurie, and the companionship of Terre Humaine, achieve it by creating a voice and a persona that convince us that what is said and depicted is true. It is like solving for two unknowns with only one equation. In mathematics, that is impossible to do. In this kind of writing, it is essential.

Catlin was a painter, but he utilized every medium that was then available: letters, essays, paintings, traveling exhibits, lectures. He constantly arranged and rearranged, packaged and repackaged, wrote and rewrote. Agee wrote a book about sharecroppers in Alabama, but in order to do it he had to expose himself and his writerly craft as no one had before, and he had to work in mysterious, if not mystical, collaboration with Walker Evans, the most austere photographer of his generation. Malaurie utilized all those documentary and analytic skills—there are his geomorphological scientific works, his ethnographic works, his photographic works—and he did two further things: first, he refused to allow any of his major published works to remain static (they expand in every subsequent edition and translation), and second, he created a community

---

<sup>4</sup>The two most important prose works by George Catlin (1786-1862) are *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians...Written during Eight Years' Travel amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America, in 1832, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, and 39*, 2 vols. Published by the Author, London, 1841, and published in 16 more editions by 1913; and *O-Kee-Pa: A Religions Ceremony and other Customs of the Mandans*, London, Trübner & Co.:1867. The best collection in print of his paintings and drawings is the catalog for the Smithsonian's huge September 6, 2002-January 19, 2003 exhibit of his work, *George Catlin and his Indian Gallery*, Smithsonian American Art Museum and W.W. Norton, New York, 2002. The exhibit was curated and the catalog edited by George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman. The resentful, patronizing and politically correct introduction to the book by W. Richard West, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (himself a member of Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes), indicates that Catlin's long battle with the culture establishment continue to this day.

in which such discourse became a communal language—the continuously expanding community of Terre Humaine.

### **Jean Malaurie**

Perhaps the most important thing to know about Jean Malaurie is that he began as a physical scientist, a student of rocks and a maker of maps. He was a methodical physical scientist, someone who spent long hours making precise measurements and coming to reasoned demonstrable conclusions about the objects he studied. Richard Feynman would have approved of him. Malaurie is perfectly aware of the fallacy of scientism because he has done real science; and he is also perfectly away of the capacity of the first-person-singular to express living culture because that is what his own need forced him to learn. He came to writing and photography not by choice, but out of necessity. Just as an explorer needs a compass, Malaurie needed words and photographs to say what he realized he had to say only after he began to experience the human aspect of life in the Arctic.

Like Catlin in *Letters and Notes* and Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (and like the Inuit he knows so well) Malaurie incorporates and utilizes everything he can find: images new and old, things heard and overheard, things he saw and things he drew and photographed. His first book about the Arctic, *Les Derniers rois de Thulé* has gone through five editions, growing each time: 328 pages in 1955, 508 pages in 1965, 592 pages in 1976, 656 pages in 1979, and 854 pages in 1989 (the number of illustrations and maps increased accordingly), which is identified as the “édition définitif”—which I do not believe.

He doubly contextualized *Les Derniers rois de Thulé*, first with his two-volume report of his five decades of Arctic experience *Hummocks* (Paris, Plon, 1999), and then his magisterial history of Arctic exploration, *Ultima Thulé. De la découverte à l’invasion*, with 700 illustrations, 150 of them in color. But Malaurie had seen things that his words could not say, and in his 79<sup>th</sup> year he published his astonishing book of 300 color photographs, *L’Appel du Nord. Un ethnophotographie des Inuits du Groenland à la Sibérie, 1950-2000* (Paris, Editions de la Martinière, 2001). In addition to all that, there are 850 articles, expedition reports, films, CDs, DVDs....

Like Agee, Malaurie looked for and found a combination of languages to say what he saw. Like Catlin, he was incapable of doing what he had to do in one medium.

And he was incapable of doing it alone. Which is why he created Terre Humaine.

### **Terre Humaine**

Terre Humaine is like a genome project of human culture, in which each new articulation—whether a Greenland Inuit talking about dogs, a thief reflecting on the conditions of his career, or a psychiatrist trying to understand the world and voice of the clochard—clarifies and enriches the meaning of all the rest enriches and redefines the whole. It is, as Henri Mitterand wrote, “une œuvre de science et œuvre d’art, réunissant de nombrueses plumes, mais

modélée par un unique esprit. *La Terre Humaine* de Jean Malaurie.”<sup>5</sup>

It is grounded in Malaurie’s trust in the specific, the immediate, the personally-observed, the active. “Pour voir plus loin,” he wrote in *Bulletin No. 1 Terre Humaine* (May 1978), echoing Margaret de Navarre, “il sait qu’il faut regarder d’infiniment près.” But something happens when more and more of those close looks occur in concert: “Terre Humaine se veut carrefour où les sociétés, les auteurs les plus divers se retrouvent dans un alliance secrète pour une plus large compréhension du monde.” As he writes in his preface to *Le Livre Terre Humaine* “Sans à priori, pierre à pierre, Terre Humaine, peu à peu, a construit une anthropologie éclatée, dont les conclusions reposent sur une expérience vécue.”<sup>6</sup> (14) It is plural, not singular: “En vérité, Terre Humaine n’est pas un collection comme les autres : ce n’est pas une ‘série’ au sense anglo-saxon, mais une volonté collective, une pensée engagée et multiple. (23)

Often, when he published a book in translation or a second edition of a book in *Terre Humaine*, he added “Débats et Critique,” a postface, consisting of positive, negative and analytical comments. The book is published, but it is for him alive in context, and that context becomes attached to the book, like the barnacles on a whale.

Nothing is static; there are no rules beyond honoring and trusting the voice. Malaurie several times said in interviews in the 1970s and 1980s that *Terre Humaine* would never publish a novel. Yet one of the most important *Terre Humaine* publications in the past decade is Claude Lucas’s *Suerte*, identified on its title page as “roman.” But what a novel! The novel ends and Lucas append a brilliant essay, “De la fiction à l’autobiographie: Quelques réflexions,” in which he discusses his reasons for fictionalizing his own life, says what he thinks the contour of that life really was, and what he thinks about the prison world. “L’une des ambitions de *Terre Humaine*,” writes Malaurie in his postface to *Suerte*, “est de donner la parole à ceux qui ne peuvent pas la prendre, aux exclus de l’histoire” (470) The two voices of Claude Lucas in *Suerte* gave Malaurie the opportunity to abandon his own injunction against fiction—and he took it.

Malaurie has always been vigorously committed to maintaining the unique voices of *Terre Humaine*. I’ll offer two examples from personal experience. The first has to do with the translation of the book Diane Christian and I wrote about men waiting to be executed in Texas, *Le Quartier de la Mort*.

---

<sup>5</sup>Henri Mitterand, “Préface,” dans Pierre Aurégan, *Des récits et des hommes. Terre Humaine: un autre regard sur les sciences de l’homme*. Nathan, Paris, 2001, p. vii-xi. Quotation is p. vii.

<sup>6</sup>“Préface de Jean Malaure, “Une Littérature du réel,” 9-28, Paris, Plon, 1993

The page proofs of the translation arrived with a note from Malaurie saying everything was behind schedule, he hoped we could check and approve it quickly because they wanted to go to press very soon.

Diane, whose French is far better than mine, began proofreading it immediately. She became more and more agitated, more and more angry. “They’ve changed everything,” she said. “They’ve turned them into thugs.”

She was right: the translator had time and again inserted words like “cul,” “putain,” “merde,” and such where none existed in the original, and he had made the grammar of many of the speakers less precise. He had turned their speech into a television or literary caricature of what tough guys should speak like. Or, to be more generous, perhaps the murderers of the translator’s acquaintance spoke in such fashion and he thought murderers the world over did also. In any case and for whatever reason, he had altered the voices. Translation betrays enough without that added burden.

The condemned men whose words we included in the book had spoken to us in polite, ordinary English. Many were no doubt capable of speaking an American version of the street language the translator had bestowed upon them, but they had not spoken that way when we sat with them in their cells and the visiting room of the prison in Huntsville, Texas. Like anyone else, they were fully capable of adjusting their speech to fit the situation. We all speak differently to people at work, to friends, lovers, physicians, the very young, the very old. There is no deceit or hypocrisy in this. Everyone over the age of three or four is a master of that kind of linguistic code-shifting, is capable of selecting and using a vocabulary appropriate to the situation at hand. When those condemned men spoke to us for that book they were speaking to the outside world about the world they inhabited and about what it was like waiting to be put to death by the State of Texas. They knew exactly what language they were using and why. No one, Diane and I believed, had any right to betray that.

We wrote Malaurie, telling him all this.

A letter came with Malaurie’s typed signature but without Malaurie’s elegant style. The letter said we were victims of bourgeois sentimentality, that the translation caught the true spirit of the demotic, that it was far livelier than what we had in the original. It told us to relax, the people in Paris knew what they were doing.

Diane said, “Jean didn’t write that. Jean would never say anything like that. Someone at the publisher’s wrote it. I bet he’s away.”

We wrote a second letter, repeating what was in the first, criticizing what had been said to us in the reply. (This was before email. Even though we were sending our letters to Paris by Express Mail or FedEx, the process seemed to take forever.)

Malaurie wrote back. This time it was indeed his elegant voice on the page and his signature at the bottom of it. Diane had been right: he had been away on one of his expeditions. He’d sent the

translation to us just before he'd left and hadn't seen any of the correspondence since. He said he agreed completely, that in Terre Humaine voice must be honored.

He had the entire translation redone, getting it right. He delayed publication until we were able to read and approve the voices in the second translation.

(I know of another book in process now where Malaurie read the completed translation, decided it didn't capture the voice of the original, threw it out, and commissioned a new translation. The author is fuming about how long the publication of her book is taking; she should be sending notes of gratitude. I doubt those were the only two times that has happened.)

The second incident involves the recent third Terre Humaine edition of James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Louons maintenant les grands hommes*, a publication which, for many reasons, was of great importance to Malaurie.

The first two Terre Humaine editions placed Walker Evans's photographs in a signature in the middle of the book, as is ordinary practice in long books with only a few pages of photographs hors texte.

A few days before the book was set to go to press, Malaurie learned that in the original 1941 American edition the photographs had appeared before any text at all—even before the title and copyright pages. The very first page once the cover was opened was the photograph of the man in his necktie and ill-fitting jacket that had wrinkles that could come only from having lain long on a shelf or in a drawer. Malaurie also learned that the placement of the photographs was part of Agee's own design for the book's structure. It wasn't merely an eccentric placement of the signature by the American publisher in 1941, but rather a critical aspect of Agee's statement.

Malaurie immediately told Plon that the signature of photographs would have to be moved.

Plon told Malaurie that was impossible, everything was in place and set to go.

Malaurie said the photographs would have to be moved.

Plon said it was absurd to move the photographs and, more important, it would cost a great deal of money.

Malaurie said the photographs would have to be moved.

Plon said they would not be moved.

Malaurie said in that case he was canceling the publication. There would be no new edition of *Louons maintenant les grands hommes* in Terre Humaine.

I won't quote the emails I received from his assistant while all this was going on. They were like daily reports from the front lines: terse, tense, serious, witty.

For several days nobody said anything, then Plon blinked: the pictures would be moved. And, at whatever cost, they were, and the French edition appeared in exactly the form James Agee wanted his masterpiece to have.

### Voices

Terre Humaine: a community of voices, redefined by each new addition. “Les structures mêmes de la collection étaient-elles alors en place?” Malaurie asked rhetorically in an essay on Victor Segalan. “Non, à la vérité, l’esprit sous-jacent de l’œuvre collective ne s’est fait jour que lentement. Livre après livre. Avec toujours plus d’audace, ‘Terre Humaine’ fait parler ceux auxquels on ne donne jamais la parole, voulant abolir cette funeste lutte de classe entre ceux qui savent et ceux qui font.”<sup>7</sup>

What keeps Terre Humaine vital is Malaurie’s organic sense of the whole and his passion for the specific. He wrote in 1980:

Il est grand temps de nous pencher sur nous-mêmes avec lucidité; les mémoires des peuples sont beaucoup plus que des résurrections du passé, elles aident à faire affleurer le mouvement profond de cette primitivité que chacun porte en soi et que des siècles de strates culturelles n’ont pas toujours—Dieu merci—réussi à détruire. Il n’a jamais été plus urgent de retrouver cette relation socio-biologique, géopoétique, qui redonne à l’intuition première sa prépondérance sur un mode de pensée prétendument rationnel, alors qu’il est mutilé et castrateur.

Si la vérité totale peut être approchée, ce ne peut être que de l’intérieur, c’est le mouvement même d’un Segalen, d’un Roupnel, d’un Agee, qui échappera toujours à la démarche dialectique.

Louons maintenant les grands hommes.<sup>8</sup>

Terre Humaine is not about our common humanity, if there is any such thing above the biological level. It is rather about what makes us different and it honors that difference and particularity. The voices of Terre Humaine are not replicable the way a scientific laboratory experiment is replicable. Every visitor sees with different eyes, speaks with a different voice. For the scientists and for the pseudo-scientists, that is a problem, a defect, a limitation. For the rest of us, that is the glory and delight of it all. Science and art are both grounded in the particular,

---

<sup>7</sup>Jean Malaurie, “*Les Immémoriaux* et la collection ‘Terre humaine,’” 69-75 in *Victor Segalen: Voyageur et visionnaire*, Paris, BNF, 1999, p. 74

<sup>8</sup>*Bulletin 3 Terre Humaine*, Janvier 1980, p1

but the goal of science is to transcend the particular to reach the general, while the goal of the artist is to render the particular itself. “Pour voir plus loin, il sait qu’il faut regarder d’infiniment près.”

Throughout this essay I have come again and again to the singular voice. At the beginning I said there was no phrase for what the best researchers and writers and photographers are doing under the inadequate term “social science.” But of course we do have a name for that work and the concert of those voices: Terre Humaine.