Storytelling Among the Anthropologists
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WHEN it comes to the classics of ethnography, books about the ideas and practices of exotic peoples — Margaret Mead on Samoa, Bronislaw Malinowski on the Trobriand Islands, Gregory Bateson on New Guinea — reading about it is usually better than being there. That's not because of the mosquitoes, the heat or the dysentery. Despite the discomforts and inconveniences, some anthropologists actually have more fun away from home. The reason that reading about it is better than being there is less obvious than it seems.

Anthropologists have many theories to explain why ethnographic books are better than ethnographic experiences. Paul Kay, of the University of California at Berkeley, has recently proposed, "semi-seriously," that "the exigencies of the publishing trade or literary genre have been imposed on the subject matter of cultural anthropology so as to make everyone feel that if I go out to study the 'whoevers,' I've got to come back and tell a consistent and entertaining story about what the 'whoevers' are like and everything they do had better fit this one story."

Another closely related theory is that anthropologists find objectivity and scientific methodology to be far more alien than the people they study. That's why the retelling is often better than the original experience. Unburdened of the small truths of positive science, the tale grows tall. The idea is that the best way to write a compelling ethnography is to lose your field notes. Sir Edmund Leach, the British anthropologist, did this. While in Southeast

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Seymour M. Hersh on Flight 007/3

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Asia during the Second World War, he lost his field data as a result of enemy action. Made free, quite by mishap, to speak on behalf of the facts, Sir Edmund went on to write a classic ethnography, "The Political Systems of Highland Burma."

I SUPPOSE it is no longer a clan secret that most anthropologists are innocent of methodology. Less publicized is the fact that those who are not innocent have not come up with a method, not even a technique, for producing a brilliant ethnographic book. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, in the postscript to his classic volume, "Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande," reminisces about his rigorous British anthropology training in methodology. As a young student in London about to set off for Central Africa he sought tips about ethnographic method from more experienced hands in the field. He went to his teacher, Charles Seligman, who told him to "take 10 grains of quinine every night and keep off women." He went to the famous Malinowski, who told him "not to be a bloody fool." Leading a minor movement against innocence in anthropology, a movement bound to fail, Oswald Werner of Northwestern University has recently nailed to the door of the academy a long list of "minimum standards" for ethnography. He thinks that most anthropological monographs are far too much like Cubist paintings: one cannot identify the people from the work of art.

Mr. Werner is not the only person to wonder whether you can trust what you read in ethnographies. Melford Spiro's recent critique of Malinowski, "Oedipus in the Trobriands," made many people nervous. After years of waving Malinowski in the face of the Freudians, anthropologists had to admit that even a Trobriand Islander might have an Oedipus complex. And, according to Mr. Spiro, Trobrianders are more than just a little hung up.

Many classic books in anthropology do not have all their facts straight, yet I doubt that error, distortion and falsehood explain the appeal of a good ethnography. The reason that ethnographic books are better than ethnographic experiences is, I believe, more philosophical, perhaps even Platonic. Plato, as every schoolchild knows, got us to distinguish between appearances (the shadow in the cave) and the really real (the eternal forms), which is an all too Platonic way of saying that our experiences are senseless until our minds step back from them and compare them with something else. Good ethnographers understand that message. Just as it takes a while to figure out what actually happened to you in the field, it takes a while to figure out which point of view will have the greatest impact on your audience. That may sound like casuistry, and it is, for it's casuists who write the best ethnographies.

Casuistry has fallen into disrepute in modern times, which may explain the contemporary crisis of faith in the writing of ethnographies. Casuistry may be defined as adroit rationalization, but what it suggests to most people is a degenerate ability, ordinarily attributed to lawyers, to justify anything or to defend any conceivable act or point of view. Lawyers are casuists, and they don't go to heaven.

Whether anthropologists go to heaven remains to be determined. Kurt Vonnegut, in his novel "Slaughterhouse Five," seems to have his doubts. He says: "I think of my education sometimes. I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the Department of Anthropology. They taught me that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting." What students read in those days, as they do now, was Ruth Benedict's classic ethnography "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword." In a radical shift of perspective, Benedict, who was a sophisticated casuist, presented us with Japanese conduct in World War II as seen from the Japanese point of view. What we might describe as "militaristic expansionism" was redescribed by the Japanese as an obvious remedy for international anarchy. No one knows for sure if Benedict the anthropologist, a woman of no simple morals, will go to heaven on Judgment Day, but if she doesn't I think we should, in defense of casuistry, reopen her case.

Pascal described casuistry as the sophistical evasion of the word of God, and ever since the Middle Ages casuistry has had a terrible press. The casuists of the Middle Ages, for the most part serious scholars at medieval universities, tried to come up with a rational justification for those difficult to understand, and seemingly arbitrary, ritual observances and ecclesiastical rules that others merely took on faith or authority. Eventually the casuists got so good at rationalization that they could justify almost anything, including opposition to authority and rules.

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Perhaps the most famous casuist of the Middle Ages was Peter Abélard, the 12th-century theologian and logician, whose passionate life has been immortalized in the love letters of Héloïse. Abélard not only talked Héloïse into the virtue of giving up her virginity, he also reasoned his way into several heresies and in effect nearly turned the church into a debating club. St. Bernard saw madness in Abélard's methods — a calculus for heresy. As the church viewed it, by the time Abélard finished reading a sacred text, the words of God had been erased through interpretation. His book on "Divine Unity and Trinity," packed with puzzles about the one and the many, was burned at an ecclesiastical council. The Pope condemned him, and shut him up by issuing an injunction against lecturing.

More recently, on the occasion of his 1983 Distinguished Lecture to the American Anthropological Association, Clifford Geertz reconsidered the problem of the one and the many and sought to inspire anthropologists to challenge the received and unquestioned assumptions of our contemporary empire. He walked off the stage unharmed, to applause. What used to be heresy is now good ethnography.

Of course, things are not that simple. Plato, in distinguishing appearance from reality, set off the longest unresolved quarrel in the history of never-ending intellectual disputes. Among the adversaries are the skeptics, who argue that we can never get beyond appearances, so reality can't be known at all. There are the phenomenologists, who argue that appearance is reality, so there is nothing else to know. There are the rationalists, and their soul mates the mystics, who argue that the really real can be known directly without having to be bothered by appearances or experiences at all. Reality can be known, they argue, with logic, through intuition, or by introspection on the mind of God within us.

Skeptics, phenomenologists, rationalists and mystics do not write classic ethnographies. When clever skeptics write ethnography they do it as parody or satire. This is sometimes called "deconstruction." The writings of Michel Foucault come to mind, and perhaps David Schneider's recent tour de force "A Critique of Kinship," in which he argues that "There is no such thing as kinship." Perhaps my essay is an example.

THE phenomenologists return from afar with the written equivalent of an unedited videotape, a vast chronicle of appearances recorded with the ethnographer as the camera. When no one wants to look at it, let alone read it, the phenomenologist moves into the archives and writes an encyclopedia instead of an ethnography. As for the rationalists and mystics, it is very difficult to deduce or meditate your way to knowledge of the variety of human practices. Thinking may be the best way to travel, but to write a classic ethnography someone has to leave the office, the armchair or the cave. An ethnography begins with an ethnographic experience: with your eyes open you have to go somewhere. Yet a culture is never reducible to what meets the eye, and you can't get to ethnographic reality by just looking. A culture is like a black hole, those compacted stars whose intense gravitational forces don't let their own light particles escape. You can never know it's there by simply squinting your eyes and staring very hard at it. If it is real at all, you can know it only by inference and conjecture.

The first thing that strikes an anthropologist in the field are details that seem alien. It is April 5, 6 A.M., 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and I'm in a remote region of India on a tennis court fashioned out of the earth of termite

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mounds. Music, cacophonous to a foreign ear, is blaring over a loudspeaker. In India the gods and ancestral spirits, who are not hard of hearing but are sometimes a long way off, not only like to eat food offerings, they also like to be entertained. To a foreigner for whom the gods don't exist, in the midst of a tennis match at six in the morning on a very hot day, the magnified blare is a nuisance. After two sets my Indian doubles partner finally takes off his heavy wool sweater.

A MILE away is the Hindu temple village where I do my research. During April I will witness untouchables proving their devotion to the village goddess by running across hot coals and swinging from poles with large fishhooks through their backs. I will watch the bidding at an auction, from midnight to dawn, for pots of water from a sacred well, water that is said to have the power, on that one night of the year, to make barren women fertile. Spirit possessions and exorcisms have become routine. I start muttering to myself: if everyone is the same, then why are we all so different? It almost feels reassuring when a Hindu friend tells me that God must have meant it this way, that's why He placed India and America on opposite sides of the globe.

Ethnography starts with the appearance of radical differences but it does not have to end there. Since there is always some point of view from which things seem alike, and some other point of view from which things seem different, the casuistry is in how the ethnographer chooses to portray the apparent differences between self and other. The choices are limited. Either the other is the same as us, and the differences are merely apparent, superficial or trivial, or the other is other than us, and the differences are real, deep and important. And if the other is other than us, then that otherness is either something we would like to have, so we choose to romanticize the other; or it is something we would like to leave behind, so we choose to derogate the other; or it is something we would like to keep available, so we choose to celebrate the other. When it comes to the best ethnographies of the 1970's and 80's — Robert Levy's "Tahitians," Gananath Obeyesekere's "Medusa's Hair," Sudhir Kakar's "Shamans, Mystics and Doctors," Gilbert Herdt's "Guardians of the Flute," the entire corpus of Clifford Geertz's writings — in each case there is a deliberate challenge to our sense of self, as the difference between self and other is either celebrated, elevated or denied.

> *"Good ethnography is an intellectual exorcism in which we are wrenched out of our self."*

What makes those ethnographies good is not what they do with the difference between self and other. It does not matter whether they tell us that we're all really the same deep down, or that the other is a repressed version of ourself, or that there is an alien living within us. What makes them good ethnographies is that we recognize their casuistry, the play on likeness and difference, the tantalizing shift in point of view, even as they shake our confidence about who we are. By the time we finish reading a good ethnography, adroit rationalization has made familiar what at first seemed strange, the other, and has estranged us from what we thought we knew, ourselves.

Nothing has done more harm for the writing of ethnographies than those all-too-familiar dualistic analogies made famous by René Descartes and his followers: the scientific is to the humanistic as is the hard to the soft, the objective to the subjective, the outer to the inner, the observable to the unobservable, the methodical to the intuitive, the perceived to the imagined. Years ago, while I was in graduate school at Harvard University, two professors on the admissions committee could never agree on which students to admit to the Ph.D. program in anthropology. The first professor wanted students with a high mathematical I.Q. and a strong background in methodology. The second professor wanted students with a high verbal I.Q. and a strong background in literature and history. The first professor thought that one day there would be a manual or rule book for doing ethnography. I think he believed that anthropology was close to developing mechanical knowledge production procedures and that, armed with an artificial intelligence, anyone, and I mean anyone, should be able to write a perspective-free, literal description of another culture, the way the other "really is." He never did write an ethnographic book.

The second professor preferred insight over technique, intuition over method and imagination over procedure. Some of his students did write ethnographic books, even well-written and inspired books, but not great ethnographies. The books were too reminiscent of a vision quest. With an educated contempt for methodical inquiry, off to the forest went the ill-prepared yet sensitive Ph.D. candidate in search of divine communication, invariably to return with a revelation about a faraway place. Thinking back, I wish the committee had been less concerned with whether it is scientists or humanists who make the best ethnographers.

THOSE supposed contrasts between the hard and the soft, and all the rest, are probably misconceived anyway. When I talk to social scientists they tell me that what they do is soft science and that the real hard scientists are the physical scientists. When I talk to physical scientists who are meteorologists or geologists they tell me that what they do is soft science and that the real hard scientists are the physicists. And so it goes. The experimental physicists, feeling a bit soft, point me to the real hard scientists, the theoretical physicists. The theoretical physicists point me to the mathematicians, where the linear algebraists, feeling a bit soft, point me to the hard cutting edge, the typologists, who tell me it's all very mystical and intuitive.

Faced with two unacceptable alternatives, our only alternative is to reject them both. Casuists write the best ethnographies, but not because they are intuitive or methodical, hard or soft. Casuists are both scientific and humanistic; they collapse the dichotomies, addressing the facts with great respect while never letting them speak for themselves. Casuists write the best ethnographies because good ethnography is an intellectual exorcism in which, forced to take the perspective of the other, we are wrenched out of our self. We transcend ourselves, and for a brief moment we wonder who we are, whether we are animals, barbarians or angels, whether all things are really the same under the sun, whether it would be better if the other were us, or better if we were the other. When Margaret Mead wrote "Coming of Age in Samoa," a whole generation now in their 70's and 80's felt liberated by the mere possibility of such a place; and such places do exist, whether or not Samoa is one of them.

Of course there are some people who want to spoil the fun, arguing that to transcend ourselves is to be nowhere in particular, and that one of the problems with transcending the self is that you can't bring your "self" along to appreciate or monitor the change. But don't despair. There is always another perspective on things. For the best way to really get inside oneself is to go outside oneself; and, as any good casuist, or ethnographer, knows, if you can't find yourself through the other, you're not going to find yourself anywhere at all. □

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