

Books

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THE HOW OF THE WORD

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Lead: LEAD: WORKS AND LIVES The Anthropologist as Author. By Clifford Geertz. 157 pp. California: Stanford University Press. \$19.95.

Text:

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Something momentous has happened in the field of rhetoric, and Clifford Geertz is partly to blame. The old rhetoric has become the new rhetoric and it is no longer "mere" rhetoric. The old rhetoric, style instead of substance, was first introduced to many of us by our mothers - it is not what you say, it is how you say it. That was "mere" rhetoric. The new rhetoric, Mr. Geertz's rhetoric, finds substance in style.

Who is Clifford Geertz? He is the rhetorician at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., where he has been resident since 1970. He is also America's most renowned cultural anthropologist, whose fame began during the 1960's when he was a leader of the "symbolic anthropology" movement at the University of Chicago.

Before symbolic anthropology came along, almost everyone innocently presumed that thoughts, words and reality were different things, and that thinking took place in the head. The then popular theory of mind (and pedagogy) said: you (should) think before you speak or write. Then in the 1960's a dizzying new theory, mind-in-texts, caught on. It said: how do I know what I think until I hear what I say or see what I write? The new rhetoric is a variation on the theme. It says: how do I know what I think until I hear how I say it? The "art of understanding," Mr. Geertz avers, is "inseparable" from the "art of presentation." One almost begins to suspect that he and the new rhetoricians all grew up in one of those cultures where it is believed that intelligence is located in the mouth, not in the brain.

In "Works and Lives" Mr. Geertz puts on display the new magisterial role of rhetoric. He analyzes the literary forms of several anthropological notables - Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Claude Levi-Strauss and others - writing stylishly in defense of style that "the way of saying" is "the what of

saying." He builds his case by example, disassembling the literary creations of anthropological authors, revealing the rhetorical props and devices used to construct their native realities. He rarely argues. He prefers to point.

There is, for example, the Oxford don Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, whose discursive style is used by Mr. Geertz to typify the implicit world view of the entire British school of anthropology: "first-strike assertiveness," presented with a "studied air of unstudiedness," a "passion for simple subject-predicate-object sentences" conveying the idea that "nothing, no matter how singular, resists reasoned description." If Mr. Geertz's doctrine - the inseparability of style and substance - is correct, the orderly and transparent prose of the British school should never be used to construct a skeptical account about an ambiguous world. Those who are artful, it would seem, are forbidden to write clearly about chaos.

In the person of Clifford Geertz the new rhetoric not only has its rhetorician, it also has its writer. He is universally acknowledged (and often misunderstood) for his distinctive style of oratory and written prose, which through literary artifice, elaborate clause-embeddings, meticulously wrought qualifications, high-culture allusions, dethroning witticisms and a peekaboo manner of verbal boxing - feint, jab, dodge, jab -deliberately calls attention to itself as sophisticated craft. Yet just as the new rhetoric is not mere rhetoric, "Works and Lives" is not merely a rhetorical finger exercise. It is a consequential and dead serious battle of wits and witticisms with some old, and rather formidable, intellectual foes - Plato, radical skepticism and literalism.

There is an ancient fault line that runs through the quadrangles of the University of Chicago. To this day Plato and his many friends - yes, Allan Bloom is one of them - occupy the intellectual territory on one side of the line. The Platonists seek a transcendent reality, beyond history and local culture, hoping to find in the eternal realm of ideas some shiny abstract conception of the ideal human being. No rock music.

For a decade, during the 1960's, Clifford Geertz in Chicago was a leader of the anti-Platonist battalions on the other side of the line. The doctrine of the new rhetoric, that there is no meaning to what you say (no semantic essence) independent of the special way you say it, is a variation of an anti-Platonist theme. Those are not shadowy traces of some abstract idea on the wall; they are carbon copies of your own inscriptions, written in your local dialect. So why not feel at home in the cave? Radical skepticism is the second opponent. Mr. Geertz has always had a fondness for jesters - mischievous skeptics clowning knowingly - yet these days, in some castles in the realm of cultural anthropology, the jester is trying to be the king, and is about to lose his head.

At meetings of the profession, "anything goes" ethnographers, lacking a sense of intellectual direction, place on display the Alice-in-Wonderland principle that "if you don't know where you're going almost any road will take you there"; while "nothing goes" ethnographers, doubtful that any knowledge is authoritative or privileged or even possible, have convinced themselves that anything they say or write is biased or tarnished -Western imperial ideology disguised as a search for

truth. The implication is that we are in need of a farm subsidy program for Western intellectuals: to avoid flooding the market with ideas, pay them not to think.

A crisis of faith exists. The scientifically inclined do not write ethnographies at all. The humanistically inclined do not write believable ones or they only write about themselves struggling to write about others. In anthropology as in politics, liberal tolerance begets nihilism, which provokes an authoritarian reaction from the palace guard: back to brute facts and the old scientific methodism. In "Works and Lives," Mr. Geertz, a liberal, diagnoses the corruptions in anthropology and attempts to disarm the reactionaries. This he does through his own assault, perhaps more of a shove, at the conservative doctrine of literalism, which equates "the fictional with the false" and which mistakenly opposes science to revelation. Ethnographic facts, he argues, are facts; they are not made up. Yet a great ethnography is not simply a compilation of facts; it is an imaginative way of seeing through experience. The facts are made out, not made up.

According to Mr. Geertz, ethnographic reality does not exist apart from our literary versions of it. He demonstrates his view by taking us on a series of luxurious rhetorical tours through the writing styles of anthropology's heroes and heroines. There is the "Parisian Mandarin" Claude Levi-Strauss, whose "Tristes Tropiques" is described as "a classic example of the book whose subject is in great part itself," "an invitation to dreams of adventure and escape, and even a dream itself."

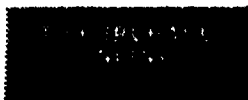
Then there is the "wandering Pole" Malinowski, wandering through 1914-18 in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands on "the paradigm journey to the paradigm elsewhere." And the "New York intellectual" Ruth Benedict, whose texts are described as "save-the-world anthropology," "onward and upward sermons," "the juxtaposition of the all-too-familiar with the wildly exotic in such a way that they change places," and whose "ironies are all sincere." Here is Mr. Geertz on Benedict's representation of the Japanese in "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword," written at the end of World War II: The "enemy who at the beginning of the book is the most alien we have ever fought is, by the end of it, the most reasonable we ever conquered."

The appreciation of Mr Geertz's brilliant writing is much like the appreciation of a brilliant metaphor. Both suffer from explication; something inevitably gets lost in translation. That is why Mr. Geertz points, instead of arguing. He prefers to be idiomatic, exemplifying his doctrines rather than spelling them out.

Yet his general reticence on the general principles of the new rhetoric creates difficulties for his interpreters. For if his doctrines can't be separated from his discourse, what will readers who don't think in Geertzian prose think they have heard, and what will he permit them to imply? That our author is not only entertaining, but also provocative, because of the number of embedded clauses in his text? That translation is impossible? That Hindu ideas about reality make sense and are true, but only when chanted, in Sanskrit?

Mark Twain said of Richard Wagner's music that it is better than it sounds. The effect of that remark is, of course, facetious, and it is facetious because music, poetry, metaphors and other forms of magic have this much in common: to disentangle substance from style destroys the object of enchantment.

Mr. Geertz, protagonist of the new rhetoric, thinks the same is, and ought to be, true of great ethnographic writings, as objects of enchantment. Like poetry, authoritative ethnographies are authoritative not because the ethnographer is a seer or a devotee of the methods of science, but because those texts bind us to a reality by presenting themselves as examples of the reality they describe. It's an enchanting idea, and, in this case, it may really be better than it sounds.



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