The Literary turn in Contemporary Anthropology

A Review of James Clifford & George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. Price: $ 11,50 (paperback), $ 34,50 (cloth)

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After Kuhn's demystification of scientific textbooks (Kuhn 1970), one hesitates to enumerate recent "classics", representative "readers", or crucial journals in contemporary anthropology. The risk of intellectual-historical reification or self-serving historiography is simply too great, the more so since the recent past is still so very near. Besides, almost every living anthropologist is an interested party to his or her own favorite mouvement, scientific tradition, intellectual style, etc. including their attendant textbooks, readers, classics and journals. Hence the specific choices one makes are likely to reveal current preoccupations and personal prejudgements rather than judicious disciplinary judgements or sedimented historical evaluations. Still, in order to review *Writing Culture* with a certain intellectual historical depth and philosophical sophistication, I am going to have to make provisional choices and I shall.

I would argue that the recent history of Anglo-American cultural anthropology (and I shall limit myself to that tradition) is largely defined by at least three interrelated mouvements. There is firstly, critical anthropology. Its representative reader is Dell Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology* (1974); a recent classic is Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (1982); its most prom-

inent journals are *Critique of Anthropology* and *Dialectical Anthropology*. Secondly, there is feminist anthropology. A representative reader is Rayna Reiter's (now Rapp) *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (1975); a recent classic is Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981); an important journal is *Signs*. Lastly, there is symbolic anthropology. A representative reader is Jane L.Dolgin, David S.Kemnitzer & David M.Schneider's *Symbolic Anthropology* (1977); among its classics are Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) and, more recently, Clifford Geertz's *Negara: The Theater State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (1980). the apparently inevitable journal is now a fact: *Cultural Anthropology*.

James Clifford and George Marcus' *Writing Culture* (1986) is part and parcel of the last mouvement I mentioned: symbolic anthropology (with apologies to those whose favorite mouvements, readers, classics, and journals I left out). Not exactly a reader, the book does not attempt to cover symbolic anthropology as a whole. Its specific focus, rather, is ethnographic literacy, that is, the question of how another culture is (literally) written up. As a genre of symbolic anthropology, it may very well become a classic - though it would be premature to call it that just yet. Better to consider it, at least for now, as a specification, concretization, and delineation of that segment of the problem of meaning (a core concept in symbolic anthropology) that deals with textual and literary issues of ethnographic writing, production, construction, description, legitimacy, and authority (see Clifford 1983 for an initial formulation). Such issues are, of course, more than merely literary or textual and it is not surprising that the contributors to *Writing Culture* constantly, persistently, and perhaps inevitably meet up with proponents of the other two mouvements I mentioned: critical and feminist anthropologists. More about that meeting of the minds momentarily.

To set the intellectual-historical and philosophical scene, let me ask a deceptively obvious question:

Why the recent literary turn in contemporary cultural anthropology? Clifford's "Introduction" (pp.2 ff.) mentions several possible factors (e.g., the "crise de conscience" in critical anthropology, recent developments in the sociology and philosophy of science, structuralist theories of language, etc.) and related developments (e.g., historical ethnography, cultural poetics, cultural criticism, the semiotics of exotic worlds, etc.). Let me elaborate on just one or two.

The so-called semiotic revolution is in part responsible for a shift in our attention from a merely incidental concern with narrative structure, rhetorical devices, literary tropes, etc. to a decisively active interest in their constitutive effects on ethnographic description and analysis. Philosophically speaking, contemporary social scientists no longer seek a privileged or foundational discourse that is in principle adequate to describing and understanding a visible and knowable universe; rather, they experiment with multiple universes of discrete discourse that are in fact capable of expressing and illuminating those diverse possible worlds that can be meaningful to and for us. Language, in other words, has become problematic in the sense that it can no longer be considered as merely imitative or representative of reality, but must instead be considered as constitutive and expressive of that partial segment of the real that can be made intelligeable and meaningful to us within the cultural confines of a specific language game (see Bernstein 1983 for a comprehensive philosophical overview; Rorty 1980 for a "classic" formulation of a similarly motivated critique of representationalism).

This semiotic revolution (for want of a better term) has a number of implications - both concrete and abstract. Let me mention at least two abstract ones (in our actual discussion of *Writing Culture* we shall encounter them again more concretely): the epistemological consequences and the normative implications. Here, incidently, both feminist and critical anthropology play an important role - both as historical source of inspiration and as

potential source of critique of cultural anthropology's literary turn.

Briefly put, I think that the literary turn - at least from this point of view - consists of a crucial shift from an observational and empirical methodology to a communicative and dialogical epistemology (which may, of course, entail observational moments and empirical descriptions). Our conception of ethnological analysis and our activity as practicing ethnographers have changed accordingly: from a focus on the observing eye and the use of visual metaphors (as dominant in our culture as in our anthropology ((see Lakoff & Johnson 1980)) to a concern with the expressive voice and the constitution of intersubjective understanding.

Much more is involved in this crucial shift than meets the eye (literally and figuratively): questions of anthropological representation, praxis and production; of analytic and dialectical modes of understanding, experiencing and interpreting; of the relation between self, other and the nature of intersubjectivity; of science, power and cooptation; of speaking, listening and writing; of objectivity, relativism and ethnocentrism; of legitimacy, authority and truth; and - perhaps most problematic of all - of social critique and political praxis. All these issues are discussed in *Writing Culture*, though some more extensively than others and, as far as I am concerned, not all of them radically enough (in the epistemological *and* political sense of the term).

In order to exemplify how such philosophic issues effect the concrete workings of the anthropologist, let me take as my point of departure the question that Clifford raises regarding the descriptive authority and analytic legitimacy of anthropological texts (see Clifford 1983 or his two contributions to *Writing Culture*). The issue here is not simply one of how to interpret an ethnographic document (e.g., Karp & Maynard 1983) nor or how to assess the ethnological reliability of a given anthropologist's work (e.g., as in the recent Shabono

case (see Holmes 1983 and Pratt in *Writing Culture*) or the celebrated Freeman-Mead controversy (see Brady 1983). Though these are certainly important issues, more fundamental still is the perennial question that Stocking singles out as cultural anthropology's most enduring problem: "Whether anthropology offers forms of knowing that may be applied to all human subject matter even to the point of painful self-reflexivity or whether, in some profound sense historically delimited, it has simply been a way Europeans have invented of talking about their darker brethren"(and, I would add, "sisters") (Stocking 1982: p.419).

I obviously cannot attent to this issue here (I have tried to make a beginning elsewhere - see Scholte 1983), but I can at least indicate how Clifford addresses the problem. His approach is exemplary of the distinctive way in which the issue is treated by proponents of the literary approach - several contributors to *Writing Culture* deal with similar problems applied to different texts.

We need to reflect, according to Clifford, on the nature of cultural discourse, that is, on the style, rhetoric, logic, intellectualization, rationalization, etc. used by some people (mostly from the West) to describe, imagine, analyze, comprehend or coopt other people (often the Rest). The central problem, in other words, is very similar to Stocking's but more specifically literary: "Are (anthropological) discourses ultimately condemned to redundancy, the prisoners of their own authoritative images and linguistic protocols?" Or can we instead "(...) escape procedures of dichotomizing restructuring, and textualizing in the making of interpretative statements about foreign cultures and traditions?" (Clifford 1980: pp.209-210).

Clifford's question can be divided into two subsidiary ones. One is essentially literary: How are ethnographic authority and ethnological legitimacy constituted? The other is historical and, I would argue, in the last analysis political: why should anthropological viability have become so problematic recently? Why, in other words, should

this specific issue have become so urgent at this particular time? While the second question hovers over every page of *Writing Culture*, it is not really addressed thoroughly. Though people like Asad, Clifford, Rabinow, and Tyler offer suggestive insights, there are few if any sustained arguments. More about this in a moment. The first question is discussed at length by all the contributors to *Writing Culture* and before I give some illustrations, let me summarize what I consider to be the most significant conclusion reached by the discussants.

The most important insight reached, I think, is precisely the fact that ethnographic authority (existential credibility, empirical comprehensiveness, descriptive adequacy, etc.) and ethnological legitimacy (scientific insight, theoretical acumen, disciplinary value, etc.) are, in fact, *constituted*, that is, they are not merely descriptive (imitative) of reality or analytic (logical) manipulations of the real, but they are also and perhaps more fundamentally literary, poetic, inventive, imaginative, and constitutive *deeds* of a meta-anthropological (political, historical, aesthetic, etc.) kind (see White 1973 for a "classic" formulation in historiography and Hyman 1962 for a "neglected classic" in the social sciences). They are, in this sense, constitutive of that segment of the (ethnographic, ethnological, etc.) real that can be *made* meaningful, intelligeable, valuable, interesting, etc. for us.

Anthropological authority and legitimacy, being constituted in a *meta*-anthropological context, is relative in at least two senses of the term: constrained and multiple. The former raises the vexing issue of the socio-cultural and political constraints on anthropological texts; the latter issue (more fully discussed in *Writing Culture* than the first one) points to the experimental and creative nature of ethnographic production. Let's discuss them briefly, taking Clifford once again as our guide.

Clifford unequivocally states: "(...) no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee

the truth of (anthropological) images. They are constituted - the critique of colonial modes of representation has shown at least this much - in specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue" (Clifford 1983: p.119). And, he adds, "the process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to these forces ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority" (Clifford 1983: p.120).

Strategies of authority can take many forms, but they are essentially of two kinds: exclusive and diverse. If the former, they are said to be anchored in some specific core or privileged foundation. Clifford considers any such foundationalism or essentialism (my terms) as symptoms of "(...) the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience" (Clifford in *Writing Culture*, p.2). Ethnographic realism provides a concrete example. Strategies of authority can, however, also be diffuse, multiple, even experimental. That, in fact, is the position the contributors to *Writing Culture* advocate. They favor a "(...) mix of multiple realities written into ethnographic texts of dispersed authority" (Marcus & Cushman 1982: p.44). In its most dramatic form, ethnographic authority and poetic insight fuse (e.g., Prattis 1985). In an attempt to articulate the singularity and complexity of ethnographic experience, the anthropologist - like Wordworth - seeks to convey "unknown modes of being" in poetic form; a form deemed more fully appropriate to and commensurate with "(...) a post-hierarchical way of experiencing a multicultural world" (Rose 1983: p.354).

This brings us to a core theme of *Writing Culture* in particular and the literary turn in cultural anthropology in general: the post-modern (a much favored term by the advocates of this mouvement) transition from a single ideal of ethnographic authority to a multiplicity of descriptive experiments and interpretive paradigms. Foundational strategies derived from allegedly privileged

sources of ethnographic authority (hard-core facts, observational data, immaculate conceptions, analytic truths, etc.) need to be replaced by multiple strategies of dispersed authority (domains of facticity, negotiated realities, cognitive intentionality, dialectical understanding, etc.). Post-modernists consider this transition a crucial experiment in the human sciences (see Marcus & Fischer 1986). "Traditional" modernists are more likely to see it as an involutional relativism in which any semblance to scientific consistency, credibility, verifiability, and legitimacy are recklessly thrown overboard.

At this point the reader must wonder why I have spend such an inordinate amount of time on setting the intellectual-historical scene for what was meant to be a modest review of a specific collection of diverse essays on a common theme. I have three reasons for my unorthodoxy: one, and most importantly, cultural anthropology's literary turn reflects a significant change in Western thought as a whole and some of the salient features of that reorientation need to be made explicit. Though I have merely scratched the philosophic surface (a more detailed analysis is fortcoming), I think an important conclusion can nevertheless be drawn: Critical, reflexive, and innovative intellectual developments with substantial theoretical scope and concrete descriptive results are taking place in contemporary anthropology and the literary turn is one example of that fact, irrespective of one's sympathies with or apathy towards its distinctive aims and final products. Two, I can now distill the major points of the essays in *Writing Culture* quickly and economically while still refering them to the broader intellectual issues they address - sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly. Three and finally, I can also voice some of my own misgivings without thereby detracting from *Writing Culture*'s undeniable historical interest to our discipline or compromising my genuine respect for the detailed, imaginative, and suggestive analyses found in the Clifford & Marcus volume.

The precarious balance between literary analysis

and political critique that characterizes *Writing Culture* is announced right away by the editors' in their "Preface": "Several papers stressed, and the discussions repeatedly returned to, larger contexts of systematic power inequality, world-system constraints, and institutional formations that could only partly be accounted for by a focus on textual production" (pp.vii-viii). With the possible exception of Asad and Rabinow, however, few contributors address the question of "authoritative discourse" in other than structural terms, that is, as a problem of a text's internal composition. But any given discourse, including an anthropological text, is also subject to external relations of production, that is, constraints defined by people in a position to authorize the discourse on their own or someone else's behalf and/or expense (see Asad 1979; Keesing 1987; or Scholte 1986). Admittedly, Clifford makes an effort to address the issue in his "Introduction: Partial Truths" by pointing out that politics is one of the constraints operating on the process of ethnographic writing. He even adds the judicious reminder that the relation between anthropological knowledge and political power is never unilaterial or unequivocal, but "complex, often ambivalent, potentially counter-hegemonic" (p.9). Still, his primary focus is obviously literary representation ("the evocative, performative elements of ethnography" -p.12-) rather than material production (the bourgeois academic genesis of ethnographic texts, for instance). In fairness to Clifford, it should be said that he at least leaves the door open for such material analyses, i.e., for a *specification of discourses* (p.13) in which the question must be asked: "Who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With or to whom? Under what institutional and historical constraints?" (p.13).

In their "Preliminary Report" of the seminar from which *Writing Culture* resulted, Marcus & Clifford (1985: p.268) single out the absence of "papers written from a feminist standpoint" and the lack of "'Third World' or non-European perspectives". The latter omission is more dramatically evident than the former since several contributors to *Writing Culture* raise important anthropological

issues that are central to a feminist point of view as well. Mary Louise Pratt's "Field-Work in Common Places" is a good example. Her chief concern is the "(...) set of problematic links between ethnographic authority, personal experience, scientism, and originality of expression" (p.29). As her dramatic examples from the classic ethnographic literature make abundantly clear, the tension between personal narrative and impersonal description has always been an intricate part of the ethnographer's dilemma. Two recent examples (the Donner affair and Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa*) reaffirm the continued importance of the existential and descriptive problem. There is, of course, another precendent not mentioned by Pratt: the frenzied debates on navel-staring surrounding critical anthropology (see Scholte 1978). There, too, the question was and remains: Where do we draw the line between subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, between the idiosyncratic and the anthropological? That feminism must address this issue as well is clear. How, for example, would Pratt assess the *anthropological* importance of Cesara's strictly autobiographical *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist* (1982)?

Vincent Crapanzano's "Hermes'Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description" raises another question dear to proponents of the literary turn: how are ethnographic texts, fashioned, created, constructed, projected, etc.? And how are such provisional ethnographic "fictions" (not "falsehoods" as Geertz -1975: p.15- quickly added) authenticated and legitimated? Crapanzano does not really answer the latter question either (no one in *Writing Culture* really does), but he does offer a fascinating analysis of ethnographic descriptions by Gatlin, Goethe, and Geertz in order to show how each of them, in their own distinctive way, covers up a failed attempt to convince by an unconvincing appeal to meaning (pp.53ff.). What, according to Crapanzano, these authors should have done instead remains unclear, at least to me. His appeal to Hermes' dilemma is not really convincing: "When Hermes took the post of messenger to the gods, he promised Zeus not to lie. He did not promise to tell the whole

truth. Zeus understood. The ethnographer has not" (p.53). True, we may never know the whole truth and we may not have the literary means to tell all that we think we know of truth, but shouldn't we nevertheless keep trying?

Renato Rosaldo's "From the Door of His Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor" is an excellent example of what a detailed analysis of ethnographic rhetoric can contribute to our understanding of anthropological texts. Comparing Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* with Ladurie's *Montaillou*, Rosaldo shows how both authors effectively circumvent and mask the relation between power and knowledge. Ladurie seems oblivious to the fact that his archival material is the written product of inquisitors with vested interests in describing, judging, and accusing powerless heretics who could neither read nor write; Evans-Pritchard adopts a studied casualness as part and parcel of "(...) the rhetorical work of separating the context of colonial domination from the production of ethnographic knowledge" (p.97). In both authors, the "pastoral mode" (pp.96ff.) is invoked to both justify and betray "(...) the introductory efforts to suppress the interplay of power and knowledge" (p.97). It would be interesting, by the way, to have more detailed analyses of the use and abuse of this "pastoral mode" in cultural anthropology and folklore studies since it is probably one of the most prominent and appealing literary tropes implicit in our discipline (see Fabian 1983 or Clifford's essay in *Writing Culture*).

Anthropological writing as a literary genre is the explicit focus of James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Allegory". Echoing his colleague Haydn White's brilliant work on historical narratives (1973), Clifford calls ethnography "(...) a performance emplotted by powerful stories" (p.98). And, he adds, "(...) these stories simultaneously describe real cultural events and make additional, moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements" (p.98). In fact, the very act of ethnographic writing "(...) enacts a redemptive Western allegory" (p.98), e.g., Shostak's *Nisa* which Pratt

earlier characterized as an allegorical expression of the tension between the counter-culture of the sixties (the !Kung as victims of colonialism) and Harvard's infatuation with sociobiology during the eighties (the !Kung as primal beings outside history) (see pp.42ff.). Clifford also points out that ethnographic narratives are not just experimental and open-ended, though it is precisely these qualities that allow for a welcome multiplicity of voices and discordant allegorical registers. Still, history and convention impose coercive strictures on the ethnographic imagination and the meaning that can be generated is in that sense always restricted and contested. The very technology of writing is problematic too - "scriptocentrism" an anthropologist friend of mine calls it (see Lemaire 1984). I think Clifford could have gone further with the latter topic than he does, by the way. Aside from discussing Derrida's *Grammatologie*, he might have addressed the issues raised by Goody in his *Domestication of the Savage Mind* and especially Walter Ong's *Literacy and Orality* would have been germane. Ong's critique of visualism is entirely in keeping with Clifford's own emphasis on expression (As Ong -1982: p.72- says: "Sight isolates, sound incorporates") and Ong, like Clifford, warns us that no internal analysis of narrative structure is ever sufficient ("(...) no text can stand by itself independent of the extratextual world. Every text builds on pretext" -Ong 1982: p.162-). If we add up the various constraints on ethnographic writing mentioned, perhaps the ironic mode that Clifford finally advocates is indeed the only one left to choose: "If we are condemned to tell stories we cannot control, may we not, at least, tell stories we believe to be true?" (p.121).

Stephen Tyler's "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document" is theoretically one of the most stimulating essays in the Clifford & Marcus collection. It is also the volume's most difficult and inaccessible contribution. If I understand Tyler correctly, post-modern ethnography is essentially post-scientific, that is, evocative and normative rather than merely analytic and descriptive. It

is, in other words, poetic: "(...) a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of common-sense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect" (p.125). Discourse takes precedence to text; dialogue to monologue; cooperation and collaboration to the "ideology of the (solitary) transcendental observer" (p.126); emergence to registration; "perspectival relativity" (p.127) to "synoptic transcendence" (p.129). Tyler's critique of scientism is unequivocal: "The whole point of 'evoking' rather than 'representing' is that it frees ethnography from *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails 'objects', 'facts', 'descriptions', 'inductions', 'generalizations', 'verification', 'experiment', 'truth' and like concepts that have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies" (p.130). And he concludes: "Ethnographic discourse is not part of a project whose aim is the creation of universal knowledge. It disowns the Mephistophelian urge to power through knowledge, for that, too, is a consequence of representation" (p.131).

Though I sympathize with Tyler's point of view and share his critique of scientism (like his, in part based on Habermas' work - see Scholte 1978), I find an exclusive appeal to aesthetics and poetry politically inadequate. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that the "Mephistophelian urge to power" cannot also infect the poet. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that poetry by definition generates positive or desirable political consequences. The aesthetic turn made by Habermas' predecessors in the Frankfurter Schule (notably Adorno), for example, provides discouraging rather than supportive evidence. Aesthetic integration did not and could not generate a political dialogue with many voices; it was not and could not be a normative model for a non-repressive society (see Wellmer 1985: pp.48ff.). Only critical theory and political praxis can do that.

Talal Asad's "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology" is not theoretically as ambitious as Tyler's essay, but it has the advantage that it is not only more accessible but also brings an explicitly political dimension to bear on the problem of meaning or, in this specific case, the issue of translation. Echoing a theme that Asad has previously addressed (1979), the author points out that translation (a favorite theme in British anthropology since the fifties) is not merely a question of matching sentences, but of "*learning to live another form of life*" (p.149). And that, of course, in turn entails a political context. Specifically, in the case of translation, an "inequality in the power of languages"(p.160). In a critique reminiscent of Bourdieu's brilliant 'decomposition' of semiotic contemplation (1977) and as applicable to, say Clifford Geertz as Ernest Gellner (Asad's 'bête noire'), the author points out that this inequality of languages and the fact that the anthropologist often translates the discourse of a non-literate and non-academic population into the written and formal language of an academic elite encourages the tendency "(...) to read the *implicit* in alien cultures" (p.160). It thereby also tends to place the anthropologist in the pretentious position of the "outside expert" who is supposed to know what the other *really* feels or knows and to "reveal" that superior insight in a textual form often inaccessible to the person or persons spoken or written about. What Asad unfortunately does not explore are the alternatives the anthropologist has available in terms of concepts such as coevalness as developed by my colleague Fabian (1983). He restricts himself to calling for an explicit recognition of those political processes that effect "(...) the possibilities and the limits of effective translation" (p.164). That is an important step, but it doesn't really solve the problem.

George Marcus' "Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System" singles out a question that - as I have said - hovers over the pages of *Writing Culture*: how can symbolic anthropology be attentive and sensitive to *both*

ideational and symbolic supra-structures *and* socio-historical and politico-economic infra-structures? Marcus gives two examples of successful studies that manage to integrate the ideational (engendered) and material (encountered) worlds: the works of Raymond Williams and Paul Willis. Interestingly enough, they also exemplify the neo-Marxist tradition in recent social scientific scholarship - a fact that should have given Marcus greater food for deeper thought... According to Marcus, these studies are examples of "mixed-genre texts" (p. 188). They reflect "key rhetorical markers in modernist ethnography..: incompleteness and indeterminiteness" (p.192). Aside from the fact that I thought contemporary experimental ethnography was meant to be *post*-modern rather than modern, I did not find Marcus' essay very original or informative. He does little more than echo what Clifford, Tyler, and others have already said more than adequately elsewhere and his "explications des textes" of Williams and Willis can hardly substitute for the intellectual pleasure of reading the works themselves.

Michael Fischer's "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory" is more interesting, but the author again repeats much of what is already common knowledge, e.g., the recent fascination with hidden meanings, the importance of ethnographic listening, the attention to cultural criticism, or the experimentation with ethnographic writing. Fischer adds a few techniques of his own ("bifocality and reciprocity of perspectives, juxtapositioning of multiple realities, inter-textuality and inter-referentiality and comparison through families of resemblance" -p.230-), but they do not substantially add to the knowledge already gained from reading the contributions of Clifford, Tyler, and others in *Writing Culture*, *Cultural Anthropology* and elsewhere. Interesting is Fischer's subject-matter: the ethnic autobiographies of Armenian-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Afro-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Native Americans (p.201). Fischer thereby corroborates the ethnographic significance of "life-histories" (see also Crapanzano 1984), just as we now realize that the confessional mode has

its proper role to play in ethnological reflection (see Lévi-Strauss 1955 or 1963).

Paul Rabinow's "Presentations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology" is, like Stephen Tyler's article, theoretically very provocative. I found it more accessible than the latter's "Post-Modern Ethnography", but that may reflect on my own background in Continental philosophy and French structuralism rather than on Tyler's alleged inscrutability. However that may be, Rabinow takes Rorty's critique of epistemology as his point of departure and gives it an additional historical and sociological dimension through Hacking's specifications (1982) and Foucault's elaborations (1976). Truth (reasoned and correct judgement, criteria of inductive and deductive logic, etc.) is, according to Rabinow, "(...) dependent on a prior historical event - the emergence of a style of thinking about truth and falsity that established the conditions for entertaining a proposition as being capable of being taken as true or false in the first place" (p.237). Truth is, in that sense, context-bound rather than context-free. Rabinow's argument is, of course, a version of the relativist position in the so-called rationality debate (see Hollis & Lukes 1982, Scholte 1984 or Wilson 1971) and it is unclear to me why Foucault rather than, say, Winch (1958) is singled out, though I suspect that Rabinow's affinity with "Pop-Foucaultism" (Darnton 1986) may have had something to do with it. In any event, truth (including dialogue) "(...) is nothing more and nothing less than a historically locatable set of practices" (p.239). If so, "anarcho-rationalism" is the only viable position for the anthropologist (and philosopher) to take: "(...) tolerance for other people combined with the discipline of one's own standards of truth and reason" (p.238). Such a position, in turn, entails a re-evaluation of our epistemology and a re-assessment of our priorities: if epistemology is an historical and social event rather than an internal mirror reflecting an external reality, "we should be attentive to our historical practice of projecting our cultural practices onto the other(...)" (p.241). We should

be reflexive and critical, that is, "we need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been (...)" (p.241). Furthermore (and here Rabinow echoes a familiar theme), we "must pluralize and diversify our approaches (...)" (p.241).

Rabinow does not explicitly favor one approach to another nor does he formulate specific criteria for choosing between them, but he does suggest a possible reason for the literary turn's obsession with diverse narrative structures, multiple tropes, different rhetorics, heterogeneous allegories, etc. Perhaps the method in this madness is simply "(...) a tactic in the field of cultural politics to be understood primarily in sociological terms" (p.242)! That, of course, is a very dramatic and indeed embarrassing possibility (one to which Marcus returns in his "Afterword"); that the anthropologist's apparent concern with multiple ethnographic voices is actually, in the final analysis, a disguised concern with his or her own academic carreer! Bring on the ethnographic narratives; they assure the university jobs! The more "pistache" the merrier; "representations of others' representations" (p.250) require representatives to represent the world's "practitioners of textuality" (p.250). But spinning textual tapestries inspired by native designs does not, of course, guarantee a moral center. In fact, the latter threatens to disappear from anthropological praxis altogether. And there is the rub. Politics may become merely academic - literally so. Specifically, the politics of interpretation in the academy threatens to draw a "cordon sanitaire" (p.257) around the interpretation of politics in society. That, I would argue, is the greatest danger of symbolic anthropology and - by implication - its literary turn.

In his "Afterword", Marcus stresses the literary turn's interest in demystification and experimentation. Perhaps he is right, though I obviously do not think that the demystification goes far enough and I also wonder if the experimentation isn't getting too precious. I think Marcus is entirely correct in further suggesting that the

literary turn in contemporary anthropology may have something to do with professional credentials in both the field and in the academy. But then he should also have asked the next obvious question: could the literary turn itself be an ethnographic illustration of "bourgeois chique"? (see Webster 1982, 1983, & 1986). If so, wouldn't the "ironic mode" so popular among proponents of the literary turn be an appropriate vehicle for urgent self-reflection and judicious self-understanding? And wouldn't it be ironic, too, if we had to conclude that whereas cultural anthropology began as a literary genre among gentlemen-scholars in the South of England, its professional swan song is now being composed by gentlemen-scholars from the Southern United States?

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