

The prose and the passion

*Anthropology, literature
and the writing of E. M. Forster*

Nigel Rapport

Manchester University Press
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[A]re there not more figures than the round one which are also beautiful? I hold a snake-like line to be the most serviceable for a book and I already wrote along these lines before I learned that Hogarth had written something about it, or that *Tristram Shandy* made known the manner *en ziczac* or *ziczac à double ziczac*.

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Aphorismen*

Acknowledgements: the intent of the book

Let me begin by writing between the lines.

This is a book of heroes and villains: of poets versus deconstructionists, edifiers versus systematisers, empathisers versus determinists. The 'heroic' I ascribe to Humanism: to a humanistic Anthropology and a humanistic Literature; to John Stuart Mill and Georg Simmel, to Edmund Leach and Clifford Geertz, above all to E. M. Forster, for the way all write (and would right) social reality.

I might set out with e. e. cummings (cited in Brady 1991:22):

S[cience] is fundamentally a depersonalising leveller . . . whereas I stand for individuality and personal uniqueness as against sameness or standardisation. . . . [S]o far as I am concerned, mystery is the root and blossom of eternal verities . . . while, from a scientific standpoint – mystery is something to be abolished at any cost. . . . [F]or me nothing impersonal or measurable matters . . . but for science measurability and impersonality are everything.

But then since Humanism and the Individualism and the Liberalism which it embraces are nowadays widely dismissed as Romantic notions (at best cursorily dealt with as notions of narrow cultural and historical specificity), and since a book of social science cannot so easily debar the notion of the scientific from the lists, let me say, too, that this work sets out to demonstrate the close connections between a heroic Humanism and the actual of the present-day.

To set out again then (in more disciplinary prose), this book represents an attempt to demonstrate a correspondence between Anthropology and Literature, between the writing, the individual authoring, of anthropological texts (monographs, papers, treatises) and literary ones (novels, short stories, essays). And the logic of this correspondence is that reading the work of E. M. Forster causes me to come to a certain understanding of my anthropological experiences in the rural English village of Wanet, while reading through my work on Wanet

leads me to a certain appreciation of Forster. Hence, here is an exercise in making sense of, 'reading', anthropological fieldwork through the writings of an English novelist, and 'reading' an English novelist through the writing-up of anthropological research. Reading Forster, as an anthropologist writing up his field experiences, helps me see what exactly such writing entails and how it works. 'Anthropology': 'Literature': 'Wanet': 'E. M. Forster', so the argument runs.

This is no essentialist enterprise, nevertheless. This is not *the* Forster and this is not *the* Wanet, and this is not *the* relationship between them. This is rather my reading of certain symbolic forms and my sense-making of them: my experiencing of 'Wanet' and 'Forster' as vehicles for the construction of a personal meaning. This is not to claim that Forster and Wanet are meaningless, or that I can take them to mean anything I choose. It is merely that what they mean is never unmediated; what they mean is always a matter of interpretation. Thus, while Forster intended to say very particular things, to convey precise meanings by his novels, short stories and essays, and while Wanet is made very particular sense of by Doris, Molly, Sid, Harry, Barbara and others I find living in the village who speak of it as home, in each case the sense I make of their sayings, and the likelihood of its correctness, is ultimately a case of understandings personal to me. The point, then, is not that there is something inherently special to Wanet or special to Forster or special to the relationship between them, but rather that in my attempts at reading and writing social interaction I find them so.

The how, why and wherefore of my finding them so is the content of this book. What follows are two introductory chapters which set the scene for a variety of postulated linkages between the disciplines of Anthropology and Literature, and between a personal experiencing of Wanet and of Forster. These introductions are then followed by five substantive essays each of which relates a reading of a particular Forster text or texts to a particular reading of individual lives in Wanet. And following these is a concluding chapter which argues that a correspondence between Anthropology and Literature should be seen to derive from the way that their individual authors' creativity and imagination is employed in an individual rewriting of social reality.

Thus, the book intends a riposte to a current social-scientific drive towards an author-less discursivity, and points to a different future:

[T]here has been an enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life in recent years, and it is, such blurring of kinds, continuing apace. . . . The

recourse to the humanities for explanatory analogies in the social sciences is at once evidence of the destabilisation of genres and of the rise of 'the interpretive turn' (Geertz 1983:19,23).

If British anthropology continues to locate itself within the social sciences as they were established at the turn of the present century, it will fail to make a successful transition to the next (Hart 1990:10).

Here is a humanistic essay in a post-modernistic frame.

* * *

I imagine that this book will not be to everyone's taste; some will find it positively indigestible. But then I do not court congruity – correspondence perhaps, but not unisonance. The book is a personal statement, in turn critical, fanciful, prescriptive, apologetic, metaphoric, and (certainly for me) therapeutic.

I imagine too that the book will not meet the criticisms of those who have been kind enough to read from its drafts and comment: Marilyn Strathern; Alan Campbell, Paul Baxter, Allison James, Suzanne Heald, Andrew Dawson, Jonathan Webber, Richard Werbner, Pnina Werbner, Katalin Kovacs, Ulrike Meinhof; members of seminar audiences in Belfast, Budapest, Edinburgh, Hull, Manchester and Prague; and Anita Roy, Richard Purslow, and the anonymous readers for Manchester University Press. But I should like to thank them sincerely all the same. Also to say that the work would not appear as it does if Tony Cohen had not given me a copy of Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives* as he did.

Quotations from E. M. Forster's *Howards End* and *Two Cheers for Democracy* are reprinted by permission of The Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge, and The Society of Authors. Quotation from W. H. Auden and C. Isherwood's *Journey to a War* is reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd, and Random House Inc.

Author's note

Forster is represented as a 'heroic' figure in this work but I would not idealise or mythologise him, any more than I would my informants in Wanet. I moderate the seeming gender bias (and other chauvinism) in his expression, therefore, and the often graphic innuendo in theirs, but not so far as to anachronise or sentimentalise them.

Nigel Rapport
St. Andrews 1993

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Section one

Temperamentally, I am an individualist. Professionally I am a writer, and my books emphasise the importance of personal relationships and the private life, for I believe in them.

E. M. Forster, *The Challenge of our Time*

Prefatory statements

The discursive context of the book

What is, now that the proconsuls are gone and sociometrics implausible, the next necessary thing?

Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives*

It is not inappropriate to begin this book with reference to an essay of Clifford Geertz's (and to have a number of *Reflections and refractions* forming a subtext).

*Works and Lives. The
Anthropologist as Author*

Reflections and refractions

explores the question of how a writerly identity, an authorial signature, has been constructed in their texts by some of anthropology's past grand masters, and how such a signature is to be conceived of and allowed for in the future.

Let me précis parts of Geertz's text (1988:1-9, 130-148), for it sets the scene and outlines the methodological premisses from which this work sets out.

There is a nervousness in the state of current anthropology, a lack of persuasiveness in its traditional claim to explain others by going 'there' and sorting strange facts into familiar categories for perusal 'here'. The gap between

Strathern: anthropology finds itself in a new aesthetic. The fieldworker who translates particular socio-cultural observations no longer convinces: the single author is no longer an image of authenticity, the one culture or society no longer valid as an object of study (1991:8-11).

engaging others in the field and then representing them in the academy has recently become far more visible, incongruous and uncomfortable. The nature of this gap is both moral and epistemological. The moral gap concerns logistics of 'going there' which were laid largely in the culturo-historical context of colonialism, but whose power-asymmetries can be seen to be replicated today; still we act as unrequested, lifelong spokespersons-cum-experts for groups of people with fewer Western 'resources', whom we briefly meet in some 'peripheral' environment. And yet, such colonialist trappings are a far remove from the reorganisation of ethnic political relations in which many anthropologists would nowadays hope to see themselves involved. The epistemological gap, meanwhile, concerns a questioning of what description of 'there' means. Words, it is now held, are inadequate to experience, leading off not into a world of actuality but only into other words: here is no transparent medium of representation.

In short, where once the discipline of anthropology shared complex institutional connections with Western colonial expansion on the one hand, and a salvational belief

Marcus and Fischer: how is an emergent, post-modern world to be represented as an object for social thought in its various contemporary (disciplinary) manifestations? Traditional anthropology, certainly, as an exercise of power over passive subjects, is no longer acceptable in a world where liberal humanism has convincingly posited notions of general humanity, where Marxism has demonstrated the infrastructure of economic conflict common to all societies, where migration and communication have overcome any former spatial and temporal cultural separatism, where global languages have penetrated local knowledges, and where world systems increasingly homogenise and polarise world populations. Now, anthropology must become sensitive to its political, historical and philosophical conditions: here is 'an experimental moment', pregnant with possibilities (1986:vii).

Ricoeur: the referents of a text are other texts and not any circumstantial reality (1981:149).

Rorty: sentences connect with other sentences 'rather than with the world' (1980:372).

in the power of science on the other, now these energies have dissipated, and anthropologists find they can no longer act convincingly either as transcontinental mediators or as transcultural theoreticians. Is anthropological representation of the other decent? And is it even possible?

This nervousness has led to a felt ambivalence, at least by some anthropologists, towards their discipline and a distancing from its traditional canons. Hence, in the publications of recent years, there has been a stream of deconstructive attacks on canonical anthropological works, and on notions of canons *per se*. There has been ideological critique intent upon unmasking much anthropological writing as the continuation of imperialism by other means. And there have been calls for new ways of writing: reflexivity; rhetorical self-consciousness; first-person narratives; dialogue; linguistic play; heteroglossia; verbatim recording; performative translation.

The real problem, however, according to Geertz, is not the moral-cum-epistemological gap *per se*, for that will never go away; it is intrinsic to the discipline. The real problem is coming to terms with the gap, openly discussing it, learning

Stoddart: only by not being there at all could anthropologists achieve their intended display of the domain of investigation as it exists independent of their presence; only by being locals themselves could they know how its features exist for other locals; and only by using no techniques at all could they be sure that the data they collect exist independently of their techniques of investigation: (1975:4-6).

Pratt: tropes need not be seen as somehow natural or native to a discipline: anthropologists should use and invent new ones (1986:50)

Kristeva: to redress inequality, repression and social injustice, is not to attempt an 'objective' appreciation of 'coherent cultural institutions and systems'. For this is simply to extend an authoritarian gaze (1988:230-1).

Tyler: ethnography should become a mutual, dialogic, collaborative production, a negotiated, cooperatively evolved text, consisting of fragments of discourse. This should replace a monologic rape by an observer's transcendent ideology (with its synthesising gaze, strong argument and final word). And this should evoke in readers the therapeutic possibility of a new commonsensical reality, before returning them to their old one transformed, renewed and sacralised (1986).

Eagleton: to claim the finality of an unbreachable, determining code is, as Wittgenstein foresaw, a metaphysical illusion: there is no way to eradicate the indeterminacy whereby behind one kind of ordering there is always another (1982:68).

to live with it; accepting, in short, that anthropology will henceforth involve (as it always has), 'half-convinced writers trying to half-convince readers of their (the writers') half-convictions' (1988:139). That is, the way out of these moral asymmetries and discursive complexities is simply to admit that anthropology entails representing one sort of life in the categories of another (those of the writer), and to accept that anthropological texts are to be looked *at* and not just *through*. And then the aforementioned mooted cures – ethnographic ventriloquism, text positivism, dispersed authorship, confessionalism, and the removal of bias by self-inspection – can also be eschewed as the pretensions they are.

Of course, this makes authorship more burdensome, its practice no longer being shrouded in professional mystique. But for the anthropologist, from such a burden there is no escape and no relief. For anthropological texts can but remain author-centred; closer, in Foucault's distinction, to the author-saturated constructions of literature than the author-evacuated ones of science. It is art which is primarily involved in bringing anthropological texts to life and keeping them

Marcus: the problem is how to accommodate reflexivity and yet retain the traditional authority of the ethnographic text (1980:508).

Leach: the major problem for anthropology is one of translation: of finding categories in the ethnographers' ways of thought to fit their complex of observations and then of finding the language to translate this insight for readers who did not share the original experience (1982:53).

White: any conventional written reportage will have recourse to poetic, rhetorical, tropological strategies whereby facts are fashioned into a structured, explanatory totality; nonetheless, without the aid of this generically fictional and ideological matrix, 'facts' would not find voice at all (1976:22–30).

Loriggio: ethnocentrism is an impediment which anthropologists must beware, and yet a necessity too: the source of their basic perspectives (1988:319).

Leach: what anthropologists observe in the field is something unique to them: harmonic projections of their own personalities; what anthropologists write about others are refractions of their own selves. This makes anthropological texts interesting in themselves, and not because they tell us something about an external reality (1984:22; 1989:137–8).

Dumont: the work of an anthropologist represents not an objective viewpoint but a multiplicity of local ones, all of which have passed through the warping prism of his or her consciousness (1978:13).

Geertz: 'What sort of scientists are they whose main technique is sociability and whose main instrument is themselves? What can we expect from them but

active, and such artistry cannot be displaced onto 'method' or 'language' or 'the people themselves'. Anthropological writings are works of the imagination, whose responsibility and credit must be tied to the romancer who dreamed them; for here is writing which entails telling stories, making pictures, concocting symbolisms and deploying tropes. Only by admitting this can claims that the enterprise is iniquitous or impossible be countered.

And yet there is still great resistance to seeing anthropology as a kind of imaginative writing. It is regarded as improper for anthropologists to reflect upon such literary questions instead of surveying the external world: an unhealthy self-absorption; time-wasting and hypochondriacal. It is felt that anthropologists produce 'plain texts' which do not warrant literary inspection: they are not aiming for distinct styles; they are not mixed up in the 'sharp practice' of rhetoric. Moreover, it is feared that disinterring how knowledge claims are advanced is to reduce their plausibility as serious knowledge.

To this, Geertz responds that reality privileges no particular idiom in which it demands to be described – literally,

charged prose and pretty theories?' (1985:624); 'all ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest confession' (1967:25).

Tyler: scientific rhetoric about 'induction', 'reification', 'generalisation', 'truth', 'objects', 'facts', is inappropriate to anthropology (1986:130).

Leach: 'Anthropologists who imagine that by the exercise of reason, they can reduce the observations of the ethnographers to a nomothetic science are wasting their time' (1982:51–2).

Sangren: the post-modern obsession with writing amounts to 'self-congratulatory, narcissistic decadence' (1988:423).

Barnard: the 'self' analysis of much current anthropological writing is 'soppy drivel' (1988:174).

Gellner: the present post-modern mood is of 'indulgent hermeneutic-subjectivist excess' (1992:7).

Spencer: 'Some anthropologists, especially in Britain, may be ready to dismiss Geertz's discussion of anthropology as representation, feeling it to be no more than the personal preoccupation of one of the discipline's foremost literary dandies'. And it is true, the gains from a 'wholehearted subjection' to 'recipes and formulas from the light industry that is American literary criticism', 'look meagre indeed' (1990:145, 149, 162).

Rorty: the search for objective knowledge – discovering facts by knowing essences – is but one amongst a repertoire of ways of representing ourselves to ourselves, which

positivistically, or without fuss. Moreover, while traditionally there has been the pretence in anthropology that the writer's vision is god-like, direct, all-encompassing and unimplicated, and his or her narratory voice omniscient, this has been a rhetorical strategy in itself; in actuality, the classic anthropological texts have all been stylistic *tours de force*.

What is now called for is for anthropology to admit that its continuing genealogy is literary not scientific. The realm of anthropology is '“faction”: imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times' (1988:141); where the 'imaginative' and the 'imagined' need not be confused with the 'imaginary', the 'fictional' with the 'false', or the 'made-out' with the 'made-up'.

Having said that, Geertz admits that seeing anthropology as in important respects a literary vocation does have its dangers. For then the enterprise may be seen as the seduction to intellectual positions through rhetorical artifice, and as turning primarily on the meaning of words, with its central quarrels construed as conceptual ones, and its central value as aestheticism and the pleasures of a good read. Nevertheless, these risks are worth running

provides no more privileged a description than others (of novelists, sculptors, psychologists, mystics); privileging pertains to hierarchies of use rather than transparency to the real (1980:360-8).

Peckham: the connection between explanation and what is explained – the types of explanation and the levels of explanatory regress – is not necessary, immanent, logical, natural; it is conventional, and a matter of cultural taste (1976:63).

Leach: 'Ethnographers as authors are not primarily concerned with factual truth; they convince by the way they write' (1989:138).

Geertz: anthropological writings are fictions – fashioned and made – but not unfactual, or 'as if'. They are imaginative descriptions of people who are represented as actually having existed and of events as actually having happened (1973:15-16).

Spencer: anthropology is far more than just interpreting and writing; for there is counting, weighing, and surveying, not to mention reading (1990:147).