

Introducing Clifford Geertz

In October 1988, just weeks before the Cold War swallowed itself in a tumble of falling masonry in Berlin, overloaded Trabants pouring past the raised barriers at Hungarian checkpoints, and a sea of vengeful fists and faces booing their hateful overlord off his balcony in Bucharest, a full-page advertisement in affirmative defence of being a Liberal appeared in the *New York Times*. It was paid for by an unorganised group of prominent academics and intellectuals who united briefly to rebut their President, the amiable, hotly ideological, charmingly anti-intellectual Ronald Reagan, who had turned 'liberal' into a term of open and contemptuous abuse.

It has pretty well stayed that way for the succeeding twenty-odd years. The signatories said:

Extremists of the right and of the left have long attacked liberalism as their greatest enemy. In our own time liberal democracies have been crushed by such extremists. Against any encouragement of this tendency in our own country ... we feel obliged to speak out.¹

Clifford Geertz was one of the signatories. He had never been a fellow-traveller of a *marxisant* persuasion, still less the kind of fundamental Federalist the US Government hired to do its dirtiest work in Indochina and in Chile. He was a quiet American, all right, but he spoke in the purest accents of the active, historical, self-critical and unmartyred liberalism which John Dewey took from John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hill Green, and turned into the plain prose of the best that Americans thought and said in the twentieth century.

In one of his finest essays, in which he sought to identify both the moral point and the common ground of all inquiry into the human sciences,² Geertz fell to puzzling out "some of the most thoroughly entrenched tropes of the liberal imagination". The latter phrase is of course the title of Lionel Trilling's famous collection of essays, and Geertz's essay was given as a lecture in Trilling's memory at Columbia. Those tropes included – in one of Geertz's characteristic, inclusive and disorienting lists – the integrity of other cultures, the sanctity of all human life (cruelty towards which is, for liberals, the one worst thing), the principle of equality as between men and women, supremely, but also as between classes, races,

¹ *New York Times*, 26 October 1988.

² 'Found in translation: on the social history of the moral imagination' in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, p43.

generations, and lastly the always mixed but largely brutal and desolate legacy of colonialism.

Typically, Geertz interpolates a parenthesis before his list, saying of the liberal imagination the making and remaking of which he takes as his subject and his life's work that it is "an imagination, I'd best confess, I more or less share", that "more or less" being the weightiest part of his confession, an aside which propels him to that edge of the stage from which the moral and intellectual commentator on human goings-on can best speak: near the exit but still an actor, perfectly audible but *sotto voce*; judging the action but not inflecting it; speaking always with as much intelligence, precision and beauty as he knows how.

Not that this minor lord-at-court is detached from the actions – or only as detached as he can manage and keep his balance. Indeed, Geertz is programmatically off-balance, always seeking out those moments where momentum veers, those moral truths about ourselves and others which, our having supposed them to be fairly dependable, suddenly elude us in ways typical of any imaginative construction capable, first, of gripping us, and then of changing, however slightly, the direction of our lives (*King Lear*, *Così fan tutte*, the end of Cold War, the natures of Islam, the making of a President).

So the lesson of the essay and of the life is this: that we apprehend other lives not by trying to get *behind* the elaborate behaviours and ideas with which they dramatise their being, but by seeing through (the pun holds up) the spectacles which constitute their meanings and their minds.

II

It is therefore wholly consistent with such a way of doing things that Geertz's enormous *oeuvre* should be dominated by the essay form. A few years ago he remarked that the world as it is – diffuse, changeable, particles hurtling upon and away from each other, 'globalised' only in the sense that its populations are forever on the move to somewhere else, refugees, immigrants, tourists, salesmen, mercenaries – is amenable only to 'mosaic or *pointilliste*' ways of seeing.

If the form is enforced by the facts, it is also the one in which Geertz has made himself most at home. He started out, as rookie anthropologists had to in those days, by taking towns (Modjokuto, eponym for Indonesia, and Sefrou, standing in for Morocco), whole fields of meaning (his doctoral thesis was called, in the plural and with no definite article, *Religions of Java*), modes of production (*Agricultural Involution*), social bonding (*Kinship in Bali*). But as he moved away from the heavy engineering and social structuration of the classics of old anthropology, he found the social world anchored to the earth by its history, for sure, but a history as compounded not so much by solid systems (class, nation, firm belief, fixed relations) as by time, chance, accident, patterned desperation, maybe quiet, often noisy.

He found this out in the best American way: by going to see what he could see, unarmed except with his own genius, good manners, gift of tongues, a deep egalitarianism, and a style of speech-in-writing which not only turned his prose into an exquisite instrument of pure science, but placed him in that great tradition of American thinkers – William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Dewey, Edmund Wilson, Yvor Winters – whose discursive writing is one of the glories of modern English prose. Now that Geertz's own discovery of the uncertainty principle for the human sciences is a truism of postmodernity, the force of Nietzsche's strictly personal admonition for the arts of thought is all the more piercing.

One thing is needful, to 'give style' to one's character – a great and rare art. It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!³

This kind of thing is no good to those busy module-managers trying to devise courses in social scientific methodology for doctoral students. It is however precisely Geertz's concern to refuse and, if possible, paralyse the assumptions which direct such courses. The ideology of methodology⁴ is always a function of the bureaucratic authority which orders and ratifies the qualifications. The closer these courses in method come to the making of policy (and as the lectures in this collection indicate, Geertz was well aware of the way his ideas might be bent, for good and ill, to policy purposes), the more their function is to suppress disagreement

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, W Kaufmann trans and ed, New York: Random House, 1974.

⁴ Geertz (as he told me more than once) admired Alasdair MacIntyre's 1979 essay 'Social science methodology as ideology', reprinted in *The MacIntyre Reader*, K Knight ed, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

and wave away conflict in order to ensure the complicity of the oppressed in the preferences of the management.

The inimitability of Geertz's style makes it intractable to discourses upon method. The style is the man, all right, and in being so distinctive cannot be turned into a technique. That same style in his hands is radically opposed to the currently prevalent view of human inquiry as the deployment of *skills* and the technology of subordination. The discipline of interpretation leads, when it is well pursued, to exact *expression*, and as an anti-positivist philosopher much admired by Geertz, R G Collingwood, wrote, "Expression is an activity of which there can be no technique".⁵

Art, supremely, is the exact expression of thought and feeling; technique is by definition instrumental, its aim reproducibility. One studies Geertz's thought (as Collingwood also puts it, of reading a great poet) in order

... not merely [to] understand the poet's expression of his, the poet's emotions, he is also expressing emotions of his own in the poet's words, which have thus become his own words. As Coleridge put it, we know a man for a poet by the fact that he makes us poets.⁶

That is what it is to find oneself under the influence of a great writer. In Geertz's hands, the essay has the imaginative force, compression, clear light, and sharp memorability of the short poem. The greatest short poems in the language, Yvor Winters observed, derive their force and complexity from the demands of the form and its accrued conventions as realised by the writer. They can allude to an action without having to recount a whole narrative. They permit, even encourage, aphorism and judicious generalisation. They demand the matching of due passion to relevant experience, of motive to emotion. Reason and rhetoric must be at poise (or the poem will collapse into rant). Necessarily the poem issues in moral judgement (which is not to say, in sentencing).

Clifford Geertz's essays do these things and pass these tests. That is what makes them works of art *and* human science in action, rather than applications of method. To read them is not to be drilled but to think, the thinking being informed by the best feelings of which one is

⁵ R G Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938, p111.

⁶ Collingwood (1938) p118.

capable in the carrying out of the task of interpretation to hand. Geertz is both friend and master; inasmuch as we, his readers, look for instruction, we are his students.

III

Most of the reviews and articles which follow appeared first in the *New York Review of Books*, and if what is plain upon the page is the directness, humour, luminosity and easy American conversability of the man, then it is worth adding that the pages of the *New York Review* have been notable for almost half a century as the continental, even international agora of just this manner of intellectual exchange. There is nothing to match it worldwide for its scrupulous, brave and even-tempered application not just of liberal but of inclusively humanist ideals and principles.

Even there, however, Geertz stands out for wisdom, for sure, and for a quite colossal breadth of reference – this was a man who spoke and read Arabic, two or three of the countless Indonesian dialects, German, French, Spanish, a phrase or two of Japanese, and his native tongue, a classic American prose straight in the line of Twain and Faulkner, Henry James and James Thurber, his favourite writers.

Given his gifts, the *New York Review* was the ideal place for him to speak, with modest authority, upon nearly 40 years' worth of the great world issues; from his first appearance reviewing, with muffled hilarity, his disciplinary ancestor, Malinowski, to his last, 'Among the Infidels', a few months before his unexpected death.

'Great world issues' however would never have been how he put it. Everywhere throughout his concise, conversational contributions, he refuses by way of trademark both Grand Theory and Issues in Big Capitals. Facing the facts of risk and the end of the world in his review of Richard Posner's and Jared Diamond's ill-assorted visions of doom, Geertz puts the delirious duo under warning with an epigraph from Cole Porter, and in his conclusion returns us to the necessity of monographic study; piecemeal solutions; face-to-face argufying; Fabianising (as they say in Britain) amelioration. They may not seem much; they're the best we can do.

A collection of Geertz's reviews, spanning as this one does just about forty years, is therefore far more than a piece of bookmaking. It configures the man and his self-making; it

dramatises his extended encounters with the world's intellectuals, with its tempestuous quarrels with itself, with the best, most intelligent and morally most defensible methods (to use the blessed word) one may devise for understanding it.

Printing the full range of reviews from the 1966 essay in *Encounter* included here to his last appearance in the *New York Review*, 'Among the Infidels', only a few months before his untimely death in the late summer of 2006, would take 150,000 words and go beyond the purposes of this collection. For my purpose here is to indicate, in this readable, accessible form, a representative selection from a momentous *oeuvre*, the work of a travelling American typical in his easy openness to the world in all its peculiarity and exceptional in the acuteness of his vision and the readiness and accuracy with which he knew what to think and how to connect perception to judgement.

Geertz exemplified a way of being-in-the-world inseparable from his own sense of the human comedy. In lower case and lowish tones of voice – as his friend and admirer, Robert Darnton complained in a memoir, "he talked too fast and mumbled into his beard"⁷ – he embodied in his writing and enacted in his thought a vision (dammit) of the modern comedy and its historical formation. In this he followed Kenneth Burke, one of his mentors from whom he borrowed (with embellishments from Wittgenstein) his signature concept, 'dramatism'. Burke distinguished between tragedy, understood as impelled by human evil and the supernatural malevolence of history, and comedy, effortfully contrived by human stupidity and corrigible error, perhaps to be put right by human self-knowledge.⁸ The comedies in question, as written by Geertz, are peopled by peoples, whether as individual thinkers; as nations trekking towards and away from progress; as churches and their congregations struggling for meaning and furious to strike down the meaningless; as empires, past or present, doing their best for misery or emancipation.

IV

I have grouped the reviews under three headings before adding what Kierkegaard once described as his "final concluding postscript". The first section, 'Sages and anthropologists'

⁷ Robert Darnton, 'On Clifford Geertz: field notes from the classroom', *New York Review of Books*, 11 January 2007.

⁸ Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p188, pp170-172.

takes in a queer enough *galère*; Geertz once remarked to me that "the *NYR* sends me books about the down-and-outs, the trouserless and the crazies", and it was so. I have, as an example of the latter, had to exclude Geertz's review of *Ishi's Brain*, the book about the last and most wretched Yahi Indian found mute and cowering in the Californian Sierra in 1911.

But this was exactly how Geertz reordered anthropology for the improvement of Western modernity. He showed the West Atlantic academic world more or less by himself (although Marshall Sahlins and Robert Bellah helped a lot) not only how to understand those millions living the other side of our imaginative territory but also how we and they might cross the frontiers and live, think and feel quite differently from the way we do here and now.

This is what he made anthropology do, taking the great opportunity thrown open by the Harvard Department of Human Relations in 1950 (still one of the most thrilling instances of a University's trying to make the world a better place), and carrying his subject to the neighbouring disciplines for their edification. This first section is constituted by his meditations on this mighty topic, the help and hindrance of the sages, the absorption of their lessons into the way we think now (the essay for *Encounter* on Levi-Strauss, at once lethal and handsome, having already appeared in *The Interpretation of Cultures*; when they met, Levi-Strauss said, wincing, that "it was a bit hard").

The second section is roundly entitled 'Islams', and in the new world crisis since September 11, 2001, the title needs no more justification. But in a dictum concluding the essay *Toutes Directions* included here (what he called his 'house-painting guide'), Geertz's admonition long before the World Trade Towers atrocity is that "the Islamic City ... is losing definition and gaining energy". The minatory moral of that is to locate the multiple sources of the church's energy and its manifold dramatisations – hence the two-part essay, its title taken, as you'd expect, from the *New Yorker*, 'Which way to Mecca?'

Part 3 is entitled 'Principalities and Powers' and takes in Geertz's conspectus reviews in which, majestically and modestly, he tackles the conditions of whole societies and their shifting places in the world, in two cases (in 1990 and 2005) the state of the whole world itself, followed by that half unsanctified by maleness. Naturally the emphasis falls largely on those two areas, one vastly populous, the other still vastly empty but filling up, which provided the dual subject-matter of his career: Indonesia and North Africa. But it was the

predominant emphasis of his method to teach his reader how to look through the lenses of one society at the peculiarities of another. Always refusing to accept Hegel's category of 'world-historical nations', his salutary lesson for his own society was to show it how to look at other principalities making modernity their own un-American way. For him, understanding was more a matter of bifocalism than comparativism *tout court*.

This collection is certainly intended to be illustrative – "Look, here's the range; this is what the work was like". It is also celebratory and valedictory. In Part 4, 'The Idea of Order' (Geertz was an admirer of Wallace Stevens's poetry), a group of five lectures may be chronologically read as his farewell to the world. The second is a successor fragment of autobiography and self-evaluation providing a footnote to *After the Fact* in 1995 and to the first chapter of *Available Light* in 2000. In each of these, Geertz at once lifts his eyes cautiously up to a universal human horizon, while standing as firmly as it allows on the ground beneath his feet.

The review of his career is also a long perspective thrown over American intellectual life and its soldiering in Cold War and postmodernity. The third is a paper so far given and published only at the Institute for Advanced Study and uncovering, in his characteristic way, the Near East in the Far. The fourth takes up some of the questions posed in his earlier three-part essay, 'The World in Pieces', and once more rehearses the necessity to refuse grand theoretical accounts of globalisation, still more the drum-beating anticipation of a clash of civilisations, and to take each oddity on its own terms, whether responded to by United States or United Nations.

The last is his unsettling lecture given for the journal *Dissent* in memorial of Irving Howe in which he dismantles some of the most reassuring political clichés of the day in order to suggest, without rancour, just how shaky are the narratives with which the powerful interpret the political world, meanwhile proposing others, preferable because local, because domestic, because less deadly.

For many years now Geertz has been talking politics as much as anthropology or history. Indeed, he invented out of the babel of the intellectual tongues of his time the outlines of

what R G Collingwood asked for of his fellow scholar-citizens, "a science of human affairs".⁹ Geertz fashioned such a thing from the medley of what he called the "blurred genres"¹⁰ of contemporary thought, to using and controlling which his first and last requirement was that they all refuse the unspeakable but alas widely spoken and lockjawed jargon of management and the policy sciences, and recover instead, in W H Auden's fine phrase, a "sane, affirmative speech".

It is timely to speculate, by way of conclusion, that the development of Geertz's genius, his 'style' in Nietzsche's strong sense, owed much to the wisdom and good fortune which placed him, from 1970 until 2006, in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. The extreme happiness of this, as he once noted himself, was that in those wonderful surroundings,

The niche-specialization that occurs with increasing rapidity in the great conglomerate universities is entirely missing, and nobody is ever really delegated to do anything. Economists have to deal with anthropologists, anthropologists with political scientists, political scientists with economists, and so on around the circle, and they all have to make sure the books balance, the appointments get made, and the Nosy Parkers from the government – NEH and all that – get kept properly at bay. It's the social science business we all have to know, not just our own special region of it, and there is surely no alienation from the means of production here.

This leads of course to an intensely personal sort of relationship between the proprietors as full human beings, there being no Deans, Department Heads, Standing Committees or whatever to hide behind, or for that matter to dump upon, and the line between home and office gets rather blurred. You hold policy meetings in hallways and streets, seminars in homes, discuss problems evenings, Sundays and whatever. And the result of *that* is you either get along as, to use the vernacular term, friends, not just, to use the professional one, colleagues, or the thing doesn't work.¹¹

The likeness, as he went on to say, of such arrangements is to a small business, never far away from danger or disaster, its partners united in anxiety and in hope, only doing a few things but obliged to do them extremely well, "for otherwise who needs it?" The result, he said, is "a sort of dialectic of temperaments rather than a division of labour", a powerful alloy of deep friendship between very unlike character – "the sort of thing that is reputed to have

⁹ R G Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939, p115.

¹⁰ In the essay of that name in his *Local Knowledge*, 1983, pp

¹¹ These remarks made at an informally welcoming party for the appointment of Joan Scott to the Institute in 1985.

existed in Greece but is rather hard to find in contemporary academia" – compounded of trust, regard, affection and a shared picture of the world.

These homely and amenable morals transpire spontaneously from the reviews and essays which follow. Geertz, himself cordial, generous, warmhearted to a fault, unmanageably funny, irascible when it counted, not a little frightening to us who listened and couldn't always follow, taught in his life, his prose, and in his thought the truism that the proper study of humankind is humanity, and that you can only do it properly by becoming as fully human as you have it in yourself to be.