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Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology [and Comments and Reply]

Author(s): Marilyn Strathern, M. R. Crick, Richard Fardon, Elvin Hatch, I. C. Jarvie, Rix Pinxten, Paul Rabinow, Elizabeth Tonkin, Stephen A. Tyler and George E. Marcus

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# Out of Context

## The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

by Marilyn Strathern

The history of British social anthropology indicates a dramatic gulf between Frazer and Malinowski. The way in which that gulf is constructed is illuminated by analysis of a subsequent gulf between so-called modernist and postmodern epochs in anthropological writing. Each generation creates its own sense of history, and thus its disjunctions: modernists regard Frazer as failing to deal with the technical problem of elucidating alien concepts by putting them into their social context; postmoderns recover from the past diverse ironies in the writings of anthropologists, including Frazer, stimulated by their own play with contexts. I argue that Frazer is out of context in both cases, on the technical-literary grounds of the kinds of books he wrote. He did not organise his texts in a modernist way, but neither did his pastiche develop out of those contextualising exercises of Malinowskian anthropology which postmoderns attempt to overcome. Present-day concern with fiction in anthropology addresses new problems in the writer/reader/subject relationship which highlight issues to do with communication. Postmoderns have to live the paradox of self-representation. An attempt is made to separate out the intentions of pastiche and juxtaposition from the images of jumble and confusion, asking what social world is fantasised by those images and whether we really would wish to return to Frazer.

MARILYN STRATHERN is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester (Manchester M13 9PL, England). Born in 1941, she was educated at Cambridge University (B.A., 1963; Ph.D., 1968). She has been assistant curator in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge (1966–68), and has been a fellow of Girton College (1976–83) and Trinity College (1984–85) of that university. She has also been a research fellow in the New Guinea Research Unit, Australian National University (1970–72, 1974–75), a senior research fellow at Australian National University, and a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests are the ethnography of Melanesia, legal anthropology, the anthropology of Britain, and, crosscutting these, gender relations and feminist theory. Her publications include *Women in Between* (London: Academic Press, 1972); *Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon, Essex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); with A. Strathern, *Self-Decoration in Mt. Hagen* (London: Duckworth, 1971); and the edited volumes *Dealing with Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in press) and, with C. MacCormack, *Nature, Culture, and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). The present paper was submitted in final form 16 x 86.

1. This is a version of the Frazer Lecture for 1986, given at the University of Liverpool. The annual lecture, an honour accorded Sir James George Frazer in his lifetime, circulates among four universities: Liverpool, Glasgow, Cambridge, and Oxford. The first given in Liverpool was by Bronislaw Malinowski, the most recent before the present by Marshall Sahlins. I am very grateful to John Peel and to Liverpool University for their invitation, which persuaded me to read Frazer again; this paper is for E. E.

This is the confession of someone brought up to view Sir James Frazer in a particular way who has discovered that the context for that view has shifted. I wish to convey some sense of that shift.

To talk about a scholar is also to talk about his or her ideas. But there is a puzzle in the history of ideas. Ideas seem to have the capacity to appear at all sorts of times and places, to such a degree that we can consider them as being before their time or out of date. One of the things I learned about Frazer was that his ideas were old-fashioned before he wrote them down. But at the same time there were some decidedly modern ideas in fashion. In fact, the experience of turning back to Frazer and his late 19th-century contemporaries is to realise how modern they also seem. Yet I am disconcerted by the fact that I simultaneously know that post-Frazerian anthropology is utterly unlike what went before it. There was a quite decisive shift in the subject some 60–70 years ago whose result, among others, was a generation of social anthropologists like myself brought up to regard Frazer as unreadable.<sup>2</sup>

The presence or absence of particular ideas does not seem enough to account for such movement. They collapse a sense of history into a sense of *déjà vu*. This is particularly disconcerting for the anthropologist also brought up to imagine that cultural notions “fit together” and that what people think is a “reflection” of their times. Consider, for instance, two examples of ideas about ethnocentrism. Both address the conundrum how to describe the apparently absurd customs of other peoples in such a way as to make them plausible to the reader. One refers to the ancient Israelites, the other to modern savages, topics which Frazer was to bring together in his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (1918).

The first is a work published in 1681 by the Abbé Fleury, *The Manners of the Israelites*. An expanded 1805 version was produced by a Manchester cleric, Clarke, in response to public demand following earlier editions. The opening justification of the book is of interest. It is because the customs of God’s chosen people are so different from ours that they offend us and that the Old Testament has been neglected; “upon comparing the manners of the Israelites with those of the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, and other people of the former ages . . . these prejudices soon vanish. . . the Israelites had everything that was valuable in the customs of their contemporaries, without many of the defects” (Clarke 1805:15). Clarke’s intention is to make the Bible readable, to rid the Old Testament of its strangeness, so that his readers can conceive of God’s being among the Israelites. He desires (p. 16)

the reader to divest himself of all prejudice, that he may judge of these customs by good sense and right

2. It will be clear that I write from the perspective of British social anthropology, and not from another perspective which would seek to explain this species of anthropology to others. That American as well as British writers become significant in the later discussion of contemporary issues reflects other shifts that have occurred in this perspective.

reason alone; to discard the ideas that are peculiar to his own age and country, and consider the Israelites in the circumstances of time and place wherein they lived; to compare them with their nearest neighbours, and by that means to enter into their spirit and maxims.

These ideas have an uncannily contemporary ring—even to the point of the writer's saying that he aspires not to a panegyric but to "a very plain account" of the people he is describing. But then so, in some respects, do the words of Sir John Lubbock spoken at Hulme Town Hall, Manchester, in 1874. Like Clarke's rendering of Fleury, they are addressed to a large popular audience: a lecture on modern savages in a series, *Science Lectures for the People*, whose opening address had attracted 3,700 people. (The subsequent attendance is recorded at an average of 675). Lubbock (1875b:238) starts with the fact of difference:

The whole mental condition of the savage is, indeed, so dissimilar from ours that it is often very difficult for us to follow what is passing in his mind. . . . Many things appear natural, and almost self-evident to him, which produce a very different effect on us. . . . Thus, though savages always have a reason, such as it is, for what they do and what they think, these reasons often seem to us irrelevant or absurd.

But by comparing diverse accounts of peoples from all over the world, it is possible to show how widely distributed are those ideas and customs which "seem to us at first inexplicable and fantastic" (p. 239). What we—and he means himself and his audience—take as "natural and obvious" will turn out not to be so. Lubbock's special case is a desire to give "a correct idea of man as he existed in ancient times, and of the stages through which our civilisation has been evolved" (p. 237).

Like Fleury/Clarke, he argues that to understand people very different from ourselves it is necessary to be aware of their particular premises and values. Lubbock makes his point by substantiating that difference, introducing his witnesses to a disparate range of reasons and customs, examples they would be unlikely to have come across if he had not regaled them with the evidence. The evidence includes such items as belief in the reality of dreams, fondness for ornaments, and marriage ceremonies such as those which reduce women to slaves valued for their services. He sees in this last circumstance an explanation for marriage by capture—still, he says, in some regions a rude reality while elsewhere the mimicry of force alone remains (1875b:242).<sup>3</sup>

Yet there was also a vast difference between these writers. The Manchester cleric who promoted Fleury in the 1800s held a cyclical model of the world, in which nations rose and fell as they passed through stages of

prosperity and decline. Fleury and Clarke bewailed the corruption of their contemporaries which prevented them from appreciating the ancient virtues of the Israelites. It is not to be supposed, they argued, that the further one looks into antiquity, the "more stupid and ignorant" mankind will appear (1805:18). On the contrary, "Nations have their periods of duration, like men." Consequently we must learn to distinguish "what we do not like, upon account of the distance of times and places, though it be in itself indifferent, from that which, being good in itself, displeases us for no other reason, than because we are corrupt in our manners" (1805:15). This could not be further from Lubbock and his 1870s implementation of the idea that modern savages were to be understood because they gave an insight into former times: their wretched state measured the distance that civilisation had come. He lived not in a cyclical world but in an evolving one. His efforts were directed to substituting one linear view of mankind's progression for another, doing battle with those who saw modern savages as the degenerate descendants of civilised peoples; to see them as examples of a stage since superseded gave hope of progress.

As soon as one set of ideas is put into the context of others, they no longer seem similar at all. In fact, these particular examples could be assigned to radically different paradigms (Stocking 1984).<sup>4</sup>

One could go on. When more than 40 years after Lubbock's lecture Frazer came to describe the manners of the ancient Israelites, it was his wide-ranging researches into "the early history of man" which rendered them thoroughly plausible. His aim was to show that the Israelites were no exception to the general law, that their civilisation like others had passed through a stage of barbarism and savagery (1918, vol. 1:Preface). If this was a view similar to Lubbock's, however, it provided a very different context from the ideas about ethnocentrism which Malinowski published 4 years later. In his famous opening to the work which introduced the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia, Malinowski (1922:25) argues that in "each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses," and that without an understanding of the subjective desires by which people realise their aims, the study of institutions, codes, and customs would be empty.<sup>5</sup> The same aim, to understand other people's values, is differently conceived; for Malinowski the goal is "to grasp the native's point of view." The Trobrianders have become "savage" in a playful sense. Or one

3. And proceeds to discover "similar customs" and "traces" of them in both classical and modern Europe, remarking on how "persistent are all customs and ceremonies connected with marriage" (1875b:242).

4. Stocking (1984:136) refers to the early history of anthropology as alternating between two dominant paradigms, both diachronic. Lubbock's writing evinces the progressive-development paradigm and Fleury/Clarke a diffusionary paradigm deriving from biblical assumptions about the genealogy of nations. I invoke this dichotomy not to parody the many styles and strands of thought that contributed to the premises on which Lubbock (and later Frazer) proceeded or to pretend to a history but merely as a sign that there was a history.

5. A point upon which Marett had also published in his unfortunately chosen terminology of "psychology" (e.g., Marett 1920).

could jump to Geertz's ideas expressed in the 1980s. His assertion that anthropology is the first to insist "that the world does not divide into the pious and superstitious" seems a familiar stand. Yet when he adds that "we see the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding and . . . they look back on ours through ones of their own" (1984:275), this version of a two-way regard in turn makes his meanings a significant departure from Malinowski's.

For a non-historian, the disconcerting point is this: If one looks hard enough one can find ideas anticipated long before their time, or one can trace their similarity through time. Yet, when one looks again, and considers other ideas, the sense of similarity vanishes. A model of an evolving world cannot possibly produce the "same" ideas as one in which nations pass through life-cycles. In the same way, Geertz's two-way regard cannot possibly lead to the same kinds of understandings as Malinowski's confidence about grasping the Trobriander's version of the world. In conveying the concept of ethnocentrism, none of these writers appears to intend quite the same thing. This makes it impossible to explain the prevalence of certain ideas simply with reference to other ideas. On what basis is one to foreground some, relegate others to background context? Do we write a history of the idea of ethnocentrism, or a history of its different premises? Or are we not dealing with the "same" idea at all?

These are puzzles intrinsic to cross-cultural comparison. They are familiar anthropological conundrums. The question is, then, what an anthropologist's resolution might look like. The problem is simply that I know that these sets of ideas are different, that the gulf separating Geertz and Malinowski, say, is as wide as the gulf separating Malinowski from Frazer or Frazer and Lubbock from Clarke and Fleury. But how am I to *persuade* myself that I know? If the sequence of ideas is always so ambiguous, from where does our dramatic sense of shifts and gulfs come? It must come from the place those ideas have in our practices. Thus we should look not at whether this or that person could conceive of other cultures in this or that way—whether the idea of ethnocentrism existed or not—but at the effectiveness of the vision, the manner in which an idea was implemented. That is why I mentioned Fleury's popularity and the huge audience for Lubbock's lectures. The point leads into the astonishing phenomenon of Frazer's celebrity.

The phrase is Leach's (1966). Attributing much to the showmanship of Frazer's wife, 20 years ago Leach despatched the idea that this celebrity corresponded to any secure academic reputation, in Frazer's own time, among anthropologists at least. If I return to the same question now, it is because of what has happened to social anthropology in the years since Leach presented his views. I suspend judgement and proceed as if what really is at issue is the grip Frazer had on people's imaginations. This will turn out to be germane to the recent history of anthropological practice, for any survey of the practices of anthropology has to acknowledge the force of Geertz's observation (quoted by Boon 1982:9): "What

does the ethnographer do?—he writes." If we look to practice, we could do worse than look to anthropological writing. I spend some time on the writings of Frazer himself, for the gulf between him and the anthropology which came after tells us much about how we come to imagine that there are gulfs at all, and thus about how we persuade ourselves that there has been a history.

## Sir James Frazer

Frazer is widely held to have had a profound effect on the minds of his contemporaries. Downie (1970:64) repeats Jane Harrison's famous story of a policeman who said to her, "I used to believe everything they told me, but, thank God, I read *The Golden Bough*, and I've been a freethinker ever since." From its first appearance in 1890, remarks Downie, the endeavour was treated generally with respect, and he quotes Malinowski's observation that *The Golden Bough* was "a work known to every cultured man, a work which has exercised paramount influence over several branches of learning" (p. 57).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Frazer's *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, published in 1918, met with ready acclaim in theological as well as literary journals. His work not only appears to have spoken for his times but has exercised a lasting power. Above all, he promoted anthropology. For many non-anthropologists, no one, not even Malinowski, has quite displaced him. Yet what is astonishing about the effect of his writing is astonishing to anthropologists, or rather is astonishing about them, for Frazer has not for many years—some would say never—held a respectable place in the history of the discipline. On the contrary, modern British anthropology knows itself as not just non-Frazerian but quite positively anti-Frazerian. Social anthropologists habitually scoff at Frazer, hold him up to ridicule, and regard his folklore as long superseded.<sup>7</sup>

What, then, was the grip Frazer had on many people's imaginations? And just what was created in turn by those who founded modern anthropology? I use the word "modern" advisedly, in a context in which we are informed from all sides that we live in a postmodern age. As will become apparent, this latter-day representation

6. Malinowski (1962) effusively praises the book as "in many respects the greatest achievement of anthropology." But of course it is by juxtaposition that he also places himself in relation to Frazer—welcoming the abridged edition of *The Golden Bough* as convenient to take into the field! Anthropologists in general had their reservations. Marett's review of the third edition (reprinted in Marett 1920) strongly objects to Frazer's parallelisms; survivals should be treated not as fossils but in a psychological (i.e., sociocultural) context. Some literary reviews of the time were also cool (Leach 1966).

7. Leach presents a matter-of-fact exposition for a non-anthropological audience: "Frazer's present renown is largely undeserved. Most of what he himself contributed to the study of anthropology and comparative religion has proved worthless" (1983:13). I should make it clear that I do not intend a revision of Leach's views in particular (I read Leach 1966 after the bulk of this paper was written).

allows a contemporary place for Frazer that was barely conceivable 20 years ago. This most recent shift suggests that anthropologists might after all find parts of Frazer more readable than they thought.

The interesting question is how modern anthropologists came to construct Frazer as demonstrably *not* of their time, and how indeed the writing which for so many others was eminently readable for them was rendered quite unreadable.<sup>8</sup> My account will inevitably place too much weight for a historian's liking on the significance of this figure, as though he really were central to the shift which took place in the subject. It ignores others, both those who also became unreadable and those to whom anthropologists return from time to time as precursors. It is rare to return to Frazer in this way: this most literary of figures became of all of them the most completely unreadable. Frazer was made visible as a victim of the shift.

In a bitter attack, recently renewed, on modern social anthropology, Jarvie (1964, 1984) deliberately promotes Frazer as victim.<sup>9</sup> He borrows the metaphor of the priest's overthrow: "the first battle-cry of the revolution was 'kill the chief-priest.'" Rather more prosaic, however, is his complaint that "endless doses of the facts of fieldwork are so boring" (1984:15). Certainly from a postwar perspective, the new anthropology as it developed in the 1920s and 1930s appeared in direct competition with Frazer's, and on the very issue of fieldwork. Looking back, Evans-Pritchard commented on how literary sources had had perforce to stand in for "direct observation" (1951:10).<sup>10</sup> It was above all through the fieldwork possibilities of direct observation that literary sources could be supplanted and that Malinowski (along with Radcliffe-Brown) assassinated Frazer (the image is Jarvie's [1964:1]).

Jarvie also promotes Malinowski as the instigator of the revolution, dated to about 1920. In his allegory, "Malinowski plotted and directed the revolution in social anthropology—aiming to overthrow the establishment of Frazer and Tylor and their ideas; but mainly it was against Frazer" (1964:173). As he sees it, the revolution had three aims: (1) to replace armchair anthropology

with field experience; (2) in the domain of religion and magic, to replace Frazer's attention to beliefs with the study of social action (the rite); and (3) to replace false evolutionary sequences with an understanding of contemporary society. Jarvie is far from alone in this view. The received wisdom is that fieldwork observation meant that people's practices could be recorded in their immediate social context. This shifted the kinds of explanations for which anthropologists sought. Malinowski (like Radcliffe-Brown) insisted that practices were to be related to other practices—that exchanges of food and valuables at marriage ceremonies, for instance, were intelligible in the light of local rules of inheritance or land tenure. To account for such ceremonies in the Trobriands, Malinowski turned not to practices found in other cultures but to other aspects of this one culture. The rest is well known—that this led to a view of individual societies as entities to be interpreted in their own terms, so that both practices and beliefs were to be analysed as intrinsic to a specific social context; that societies so identified were seen as organic wholes, later as systems and structures; and that the comparative enterprise which modern anthropologists set themselves thus became the comparison of distinct systems.

Indeed, this view of cross-cultural comparison has become so ingrained within the discipline that it is quite odd to read Frazer's own claim that his was "the comparative method" (1918, vol. 1:viii). Frazer meant not the comparison of social systems but the collecting together of diverse customs in order to throw light on one particular set. Light can be shone from any direction—beliefs and practices from anywhere in the world will illuminate those under study, showing possible antecedents or a tendency for people everywhere to think in the same way. Frazer's comparative procedures included both the proposition that in any piece of behaviour one will find traces of prior habits which help explain current forms and the proposition that practices are to be understood as reflections of beliefs. Thus it was possible to explain widespread practices by widespread beliefs. The revolution was successful to the point that Frazer's comparative method came to seem not simply erroneous but absurd. The new task was the comparison of societies as such. And it required the painstaking attention to those details which make particular societies distinctive and which Jarvie finds so tedious. Yet Frazer was nothing if not attentive to details. As we shall see, it was about their arrangement that Jarvie must have been protesting.

Although there is still some debate over Frazer's own arguments, as frequently as not they are condemned by his style. Rather than addressing the issue of historical residues or the comparability of beliefs, the modern anthropologist tends to object to Frazer's narrative structure. His work is criticised for being *too literary*. It is also criticised for treating events, behaviour, dogma, rites *out of context*. "Frazerian anthropology" is a synonym for undisciplined raids on ethnographic data without respect for their internal integrity, for the way they fit together as parts of a system or have meaning for the

8. Swept along with Frazer were also his contemporary critics such as Marett; a swath of anthropological writing was rendered unreadable. Frazer's work itself came to appear quite dull, not the "glorious and thrilling reading" that Jarvie (1964:33) finds it.

9. Jarvie means this literally. Those who do not credit Frazer with much stature take it metaphorically—the real victims are to be found elsewhere. Malinowski's own targets included, for instance, the survey anthropology of Rivers and Seligman (Langham 1981) and the diffusionism of Elliot Smith (Leach 1966). As a comment on the creation of victims, see Urry's (1983) review of Langham's account. Langham is principally concerned not with Frazer and Malinowski but with Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown. Urry points out that Langham accuses Radcliffe-Brown "of practically everything short of murder" in eclipsing Rivers's contribution to British anthropology (p. 401).

10. Obscured in the dichotomy between direct observation and literary sources is the fact that Frazer's literary sources were to a large extent reports on observations from ethnologists whom he encouraged to correspond with him. The dichotomy thus obscures the literary status of reportage itself.

actors. In fact, it is very appropriate that it should be his style that upsets the modern anthropologist, for what is above all at issue is the kind of book he wrote.

I take as my example Frazer's *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, which brought together a classical text and a tradition of biblical historical exegesis with the accumulated results of his comparative method, a vast collection of customs which threw light on ancient Hebrew life.<sup>11</sup> The diversity of his examples is staggering.<sup>12</sup> First, he goes through various episodes of Old Testament history: the creation of man, the fall of man, the mark of Cain, the great flood, the tower of Babel, the covenant of Abraham, the heirship of Jacob or ultimogeniture, Jacob and the kidskins, etc. Second, these are the occasion for disquisitions on origin myths, treatment of homicides, myths about the flood, varieties of sacrifice, inheritance rules, polygamy, etc., each topic treated like a narrative episode. Third, these episodes are made even more episodic by the accompanying discussions. Jacob's marriage is the occasion for a treatise (the term is Marett's) 18 sections and nearly 300 pages long: Jacob and his two wives; the marriage of cousins; the marriage of cousins in India, in America, in Africa, in the Indian archipelago, in New Guinea and the Torres Straits islands, in Melanesia; why marriage of cross-cousins is favoured, marriage of ortho-cousins forbidden, including a detailed argument on various theories about cross-cousin marriage; and so on. Finally, the sections are themselves composite: that on marriage in Africa includes references to Herero, Bantu, Nyanja, Awamba, Wagogo, Wahehe, Baganda, Banyoro, Basoga, and others.

Every instance is placed. Frazer faithfully ascribes particular customs to particular people. There is respect for these specific origins, as there would be in establishing the different authorship of classical or biblical manuscripts. But the effect of piling example upon example achieves the opposite. One has long since lost any sense of specificity about the Israelites, let alone distinctiveness about the Torres Straits or Melanesia. In fact, there is a counter-specificity in his demonstration of similarity. Frazer says himself (1918, vol. 2:97), "The story of Jacob's marriage, whether strictly historical or not, reflects the customs which have been observed at marriage by many more or less primitive peoples in many parts of the world; and accordingly we may fairly

suppose that at an early stage of their history similar customs were practised by the Israelites." The demonstration of similarity establishes the authenticity of those biblical records as plausible descriptions of real behaviour. One can see the power of this against a background of scholarly work concerned with how true a record it might be. Using (say) Melanesian practices to make Israelite ones seem less strange means, of course, that there can be no sustained internal contrast *between* Israelite and Melanesian practices. But the strategy is deliberate. Frazer isolates three elements in Jacob's circumstances: cousin marriage, marriage of a man with two sisters in their lifetime, and bride service:

All three customs I propose to illustrate by examples and afterwards to enquire into their origin and meaning. Although in doing so we shall wander far from our immediate subject, which is the folk-lore of ancient Israel, the excursion may be pardoned if it sheds sober light on the exquisite pictures of the patriarchal age in Genesis, and thereby helps to reveal the depth and solidity of the human background against which the figures of the patriarchs are painted.

His 280 pages of examples "suffice to prove that marriages like that of Jacob have been and still are practised in many different parts of the world. . . . [T]he patriarch conformed to customs which are fully recognised and strictly observed by many races" (1918, vol. 2:371). The biblical account is no "mere fancy picture" but depicts social arrangements "drawn from life."

Yet were the customs ever regarded as mere fancy? He is ambiguous about exactly how his account contributes to debates over the historicity of the Old Testament. Frazer's strategy would make sense in an atmosphere of disbelief about Israelite manners or simply an attitude that regarded many minor features and incidents as narrative embellishments, there for no other reason. His "comparative sociology" would show that within the context of world cultures, the Israelite experience is not so strange. Yet was this really how people of his time regarded the Old Testament? Surely for some of the minds he influenced the Old Testament would have seemed very familiar, its many events an intrinsic part of a story often told. In fact, there is almost a Sunday School ring to the episodes he lists. We cannot really credit Frazer with Fleury's problem of overcoming people's antipathy to the ancient Israelites as an example of a less polite society than their own. It was much more likely that it would be the ethnographic examples which strained credulity.

In setting the Israelites side by side with African or Melanesian cultures, however, Frazer is not just making the Israelites credible. He states that one can assume that the ancient Hebrews, like anyone else, had passed through "a stage of barbarism and even of savagery; and this probability, based on the analogy of other races, is confirmed by an examination of their literature, which contains many references to beliefs and practices that can hardly be explained except on the supposition that they are rudimentary survivals from a far lower level of

11. This work, written on the eve of the Malinowskian revolution, is in direct continuation with the position that Frazer had reached by the third edition of *The Golden Bough*: that he wished a context in which to set forth the information he had been amassing on primitive thought and culture. Indeed, the former may be read as a disquisition on religion, power, and politics (cf. Feeley-Harnik 1985), the latter on kinship, marriage, and—with its passages on inheritance and property relations—economics.

12. Whereas his predecessor in the field, Robertson Smith, in *The Religion of the Semites* (1956 [1894]), had confined his study to a group of kindred nations (broadly categorised as they were to include Arabs, Hebrews, and Phoenicians, Aramaeans, Babylonians, and Assyrians), Frazer allows himself to roam all over the world. For a comparison between this work and *The Golden Bough*, see Jones (1984). Smith was specifically interested in a contrast *between* Semitic and Aryan religion and thus could not simply assimilate the beliefs and practices of the one to those of the other.



culture" (1918, vol. 1:vii). He continues: "The instrument for the detection of savagery under civilisation is the comparative method, which, applied to the human mind, enables us to trace man's intellectual and moral evolution" (p. viii). Was it this labelling of contemporary practices as survivals which constituted much of the fascination which Frazer had in his time? Would his readers have applied "the detection of savagery under civilisation" to themselves?

And if Malinowski really did overthrow this priest, was it because he overthrew this central doctrine? Malinowski and his colleagues put forward the same proposition but in reverse: the detection of civilisation under savagery. Perhaps the visibility of Malinowski in modern anthropology partly lies here, for he provided a particularly persuasive context for this proposition by the way he wrote. I follow Boon's observation: Frazerian anthropology was superseded above all by a new kind of book; Malinowski made Frazer's style obsolete (Boon 1982:13, 18).

It has become very stylish to scrutinise anthropological narratives for their effects, especially in the case of Malinowski, a self-conscious writer with a philosophical background which informed his approach to the art of representation and the concept of a text (e.g., Thornton 1985). I do not touch on the now extensive critical literature. Rather, I take up a narrow question, of the writer's impact on the imagination from the perspective of the kind of relationship that is set up between writer and reader and between writer and subject matter. These are mediated through relationships internal to the text, in the way the writer arranges his ideas. In Malinowski's works appear new juxtapositions, new disjunctions of a kind which enabled the comparative method to proceed in a quite different way. Indeed, to set the scene for a comparison between Frazer's strategies (as evinced especially in *Folk-lore*) and those of modern anthropology, I require a neutral ground, which is why I emphasise their works as literary products. In laying this ground, I shall also attend to the first of the two criticisms frequently thrown at Frazer's writing, that it is *too literary*.

## Persuasive Fictions

Marking out a piece of writing as "literary" is like marking out a person as having "personality." Obviously, insofar as any piece of writing aims for a certain effect, it must be a literary production.

Difficulties arise when the apparent facts of a case are altered or distorted for the sake of a particular effect. Frazer is certainly guilty of this charge; he did not strive for a "plain account." Thus he has been accused not simply of creating an atmosphere of romantic savagery but of tampering with his source material to do so (Leach 1966:564). However, anthropologists have a particular problem of literary production on their hands, and it is this problem which makes Frazer as much an anthropologist as Malinowski.

The problem is a technical one: how to create an

awareness of different social worlds when all at one's disposal are terms which belong to one's own.<sup>13</sup> I mean more than simply getting over the flavour of a particular atmosphere—Frazer and Malinowski both created evocative descriptions, coloured by a sense of locality.<sup>14</sup> I also mean more than the facility to translate from one world view to another. When faced with ideas and concepts from a culture conceived as other, the anthropologist is faced with the task of rendering them within a conceptual universe that has space for them, and thus of creating that universe. If I observe of bridewealth exchanges which accompany a Melanesian marriage that the bride's parents are being paid for their feelings towards her, I am juxtaposing ideas which in the language I am using are normally antithetical. Emotion is not a commodity. Although I might try to wriggle out of the word "paid," it remains clear that I am describing as a transaction what is also an expression of relatedness—one we would normally interpret as a flow of emotions between persons, not something to be transferred to a third party. Space must be cleared before I can convey the unity of an action which an English-language description renders as a composite of disjunct elements.

This is part of a general problem of communication, to "bridge the divide between the reader's experiences and the experiences of the people whom the researcher wishes to describe to him" (Runciman 1983:249). The effect of a good description is to enlarge the reader's experience. But those very experiences of the reader are themselves a problem—what guarantee is there that the description will not feed prejudice, will not, far from enlarging, merely augment a narrow perspective?<sup>15</sup> We typically think of anthropologists as creating devices by which to understand what other people think or believe. Simultaneously, of course, they are engaged in constructing devices by which to affect what their audience thinks and believes. Preparing a description requires

13. In part, as I show later, this is a modernist construction (the holistic idea of a culture to which everything belongs). I am grateful to David Lowenthal (personal communication) for the point that the preservation of language allows the otherness of terms (foreign, anachronistic) some life of their own. But in part there is another issue, one which provides the framework for Boon's account: the fact that there is no place outside a culture "except in other cultures or in their fragments and potentialities" (1982:ix). One could regard this as a technical "problem" whose theoretical framework was provided by the perception of a social fact: the presence of social others in the world. It led to the kinds of esoteric puzzle-solving techniques that Langham (1981:19) insists indicate the presence of a mature science.

14. The writer uses the impressions which the place made on him or her to relay information about that place to the reader. What it is like for a European to live in a tent on the Trobriand Islands thus conveys a picture of a kind about the Trobriands. Thornton (1985:9) puts this striving for the concrete image in the context of Malinowski's theories of the role of imagination, "founded on a positivistic conception of the real psychological existence of images . . . in the mind that permitted the apprehension of reality to take place."

15. Goodenough (1970:105) writes that the problem of ethnography is how to produce a description that satisfactorily represents "what one needs to know to play the game acceptably by the standards of those who already know how to play it." This implies an enormous willingness on the part of the reader to compare standards.

specific literary strategies, the construction of a persuasive fiction: a monograph must be laid out in such a way that it can convey novel compositions of ideas.<sup>16</sup> This becomes a question of its own internal composition, of the organisation of analysis, the sequence in which the reader is introduced to concepts, the way categories are juxtaposed or dualisms reversed. To confront the problem is to confront the arrangement of text. So whether a writer chooses (say) a "scientific" style or a "literary" one signals the kind of fiction it is; there cannot be a choice to eschew fiction altogether.

I use the term "fiction" to echo Beer's (1983:3) observation that theory is at its most fictive when it is first advanced. She is referring to Charles Darwin's narrative: "The awkwardness of fit between the natural world as it is currently perceived and as it is hypothetically imagined holds the theory itself for a time within a provisional scope akin to that of fiction." The issue is the new organisation of knowledge. Darwin, she suggests, "was telling a new story, against the grain of the language available to tell it in" (p. 5). How does one "imagine" a natural world not only in a vocabulary but in a syntax created by a social world? Its success is measured in the extent to which the new narrative becomes determining. The question is not simply how to bring certain scenes to life but how to bring life to ideas.

Some tropic release is afforded through imagery. Darwin drew on the metaphor of kinship, among others (see Beer 1986), on the idea of the web of interrelations between kin, to give concrete form to the concept of evolutionary affinity. An image of proximity was extended to the entire living world with specific intent—not just that all the world's creatures could be imagined as under the tutelage of a single law (or deity) but that there were demonstrable degrees of affinity between them. Beer suggests that this demonstration was achieved through more than the promotion of apt images. The idea of an organic whole with diverse parts was conveyed through the organisation of the text itself (Beer 1983:97):<sup>17</sup>

For his theory to work, Darwin needs the sense of free play. . . . In his epistemology argument must emerge out of a plethora of instances because, of its nature, his text must at all costs avoid aligning itself with the procedures of artificial selection. . . . It is essential for Darwin's theory that the multitudinous-

ness and variety of the natural world should flood through his language. His theory deconstructs any formulation which interprets the natural world as commensurate with man's understanding of it. It outgoes his powers of observation and is not co-extensive with his reasoning. Yet in the use of metaphor and analogy he found a means of restoring equivalence without false delimitation.

If Frazer also wrote determining fiction, what has to be explained in his case is its astonishingly ready acceptance at large. One reason, I suspect, is that the context for his writing was amply provided by the assumptions of the audience he addressed. Against a background of classical and Hebrew scholarships, whose presence if not the details his readers would have taken for granted, he simply introduced them to a third range of material, the primitive world from which he drew his comparisons. Here was the organising force of his accounts. The effectiveness of this juxtaposition lay in the comparable minutiae of the case he presented. He did not have to create the context in which his ideas could take shape and thus promote as an organising device an image (such as Darwin's metaphor of kinship among living things) drawn from some other domain. Indeed, by the 1900s, many of Frazer's ideas were unremarkable. Finding vestiges of the past in the present, treating the Old Testament as an archive, establishing contemporary parallels to former practices did not of themselves require new conceptualisation.

Frazer dealt with plurality and diversity (as Beer argues was central to Darwin's conception of the profusion of the natural world), but he did not represent this profusion in terms of a novel set of interrelationships. Ideas about the evolution of human thought from savagery to civilisation had been thoroughly aired. Moreover, far from going against the grain of his language, he gloried in the language to hand—the prefaces to both *The Golden Bough* (1900 [1890]) and *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* express his literary kinship with the ancients. The airy music he heard in spirit at Nemi was at one with his ear for the psalmists, prophets, and historians of the Old Testament who lit up the darker side of the ancient story, literary glories "that will live to delight and inspire mankind" (1918, vol 1:xi). Perhaps, as with the non-existent bells at Nemi, he could take the liberties he did because his language was so secure. One source of Frazer's impact on his general readers, then, must have been the familiarity, not the novelty, of his language and themes. And the *sense* of novelty with which we must also credit him came, as we shall see, from this very closeness to his readers, from what he shared with them, and not, as was to be the case with the anthropology which followed, a deliberate distancing from them.<sup>18</sup>

18. Frazer and his predecessors had a clear idea where they stood as moderns in an age which regarded itself as modern. But one does rather get the impression that the savages they present in their pages would, if they could, agree with this arrangement of the world. A different kind of self-consciousness was to follow, which did not even hint at such an agreement. This created a new distance between the ethnographer and his/her readers.

16. We may look back on Frazer's arguments about magic and ritual and about the origins of totemism as clearing a conceptual space (in a field otherwise dominated by a dichotomy between religion and science) for, among others, Spencer and Gillen's account of Australian increase ceremonies. Thornton (1985:10) speaks of Frazer's (and Mach's) influence on Malinowski as creating "a new discursive space for ethnographic argument." On ethnographic space in general, see Marcus and Cushman (1982:42).

17. Darwin was not just using "well-understood realities" with which the ill-understood ones "could be brought into the circle of the known" (Geertz 1983:22). He was altering the sense of well-understood realities themselves. Thus Beer suggests that he played havoc with contemporary class assumptions embedded in the aristocratic connotations of genealogical trees; the history of man became a difficult and extensive family network, always aware of its lowly origins (1983:63).



I want to suggest that self-consciousness about creating a distance between writer and reader, and thus about creating a context for ideas that are themselves novel, re-emerged in anthropology as a "modernist" phenomenon. It required that the writer stand in a specific relation to his or her writing. By implication, the observer must stand in a particular relation to the observed, framing off the intellectual exercise as an endeavour of a particular kind.

The books that have become orthodox over the last 60 years are modernist in this sense. Recently, of course, there has been much questioning of the authorial status of the anthropologist. If we are to follow Ardener (1985), this questioning heralds the end of modernism, for it makes explicit the implicit reflexivity of the entire anthropological exercise of that 60 years, the relationship between the anthropologist and the other construed as an object of study (e.g., Crick 1982:15). The division between observer and observed was always a self-conscious one. What typified the modernism of anthropology was the adoption of this division as a theoretical exercise through the phenomenon of fieldwork. The anthropologist who "entered" another culture carried that self-consciousness of the other with him or her. This was what was invented by the fieldworkers of Malinowski's day. Whatever the nature of their field experiences, it was visibly reinvented in the way monographs came to be organised.

## Putting Things in Context

Modernism can mean as much or as little as one wishes. I do not intend a definition of the idea but would simply point to its current appropriation in the definition of a specific anthropological epoch.<sup>19</sup> Ardener is careful to delineate a particular character for modernism in anthropology which is not always in time with modernist forms in other fields. He does, however, associate Malinowski with its creation. Malinowski "completely rearranged social anthropology" (p. 50), giving it a manifesto which above all rested on a perceived change of technique. Fieldwork was the new strategy by which the anthropologist could intervene, as Ardener puts it, at certain points in time and space "in which he or she behaved like an ideal metering device" (p. 57). Historicism was rejected in favour of the discovery of holism and synchrony. The new anthropology rendered previous ways of dealing with cultural diversity quite obsolete, and knew itself as so doing.<sup>20</sup>

Such a genesis for modernism accords with the notion

that Malinowski instigated the revolution which overthrew Frazer. At the same time, it is thoroughly tongue-in-cheek to talk of a Malinowskian revolution at all, as though it were an event and as though Malinowski (whatever he claimed himself) single-handedly masterminded it. What we have to explain is how this figure came to *stand for* the idea that there had been a revolution, a shift, in the discipline.

It is important to spell this out, because it is easy to show that what was true of Frazer was also true of Malinowski: his ideas were not particularly novel. Thus, he promoted functionalism, but if functionalist arguments can be traced to Frazer's own work (cf. Lienhardt 1966, Boon 1982) there are more continuities here than the idea of a revolution will allow. It is possible to recall Marett, who in 1912 was pressing for a functionalist interpretation of "the social life as a whole" (Langham 1981:xix-xx; Kuper 1973:31),<sup>21</sup> or to note that "Jarvie makes it sound as though Malinowski, with no help from anyone else, was reacting directly against the work of Frazer. In fact, Rivers and his colleagues, A. C. Haddon and C. G. Seligman, were decisive in bringing about the change-over from nineteenth-century-style social evolutionism to twentieth-century-style structural-functionalism" (Langham 1981:59). Or one might prefer to centralise Radcliffe-Brown as the principal instigator of the breakthrough in the oscillation of previous diachronic paradigms (Stocking 1984) or to point out the exaggeration in subsequent estimations of Frazer's interest in beliefs rather than rites (Boon 1982:11). Most ironic of all have been the exaggerated claims made for Malinowski's promotion of fieldwork and the detraction that he did not really invent fieldwork after all.

Firth (1985) points to a tradition of fieldwork well under way before Malinowski's apotheosis of it. He suggests that Malinowski's novelty lay rather in his elevating the method to a theory (cf. Leach 1957:120). Stocking (1983:93) has dug up Rivers's prescriptions for fieldwork, which, in 1913, spelled out the programme Malinowski enacted: The worker should live for a year or more in the field, in a community where he comes to know everyone, and, not content with generalised information, study every feature of life in concrete detail. "Long before Malinowski's influence was felt, Rivers was hailed as the apostle of the new approach to fieldwork" (Langham 1981:50). Was the difference then that Malinowski did it, his fieldwork style a matter of "placing oneself in a situation where one might have a certain type of experience" (Stocking 1983:112)? Surveying the several anthropologists who left English universities for the field at about that time and noting the intensive nature of their studies, Stocking is forced to argue: "Something more than delayed or institutionally marginal careers would seem to be involved . . . in the lapsed remem-

19. Hence my references to modernism (and postmodernism) are mediated through the writings of a small handful of anthropologists and are weighted towards the commentators on rather than the exponents of the genres.

20. This knowing is important. Hence Ardener's claim that the 19th century was truly "modern," the 20th modern only as genre and thus appropriately "modernist." Within anthropology, the modernist phase embodied a displacement of historicism with a deliberate stress on the contemporary.

21. From the 1912 edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. Marett recommends an exhaustive and intensive investigation of social organisation, not only statically (cf. structure) but dynamically (cf. process). Moreover, he argues that the only scheme which has scientific value must be framed by the observer himself to suit the social conditions of the specific tribe being studied.

branch of these other academic ethnographers of Malinowski's generation . . . [to wit] their early monographs did not present them as self-conscious ethnographic innovators" (p. 84).<sup>22</sup> If Malinowski did not really invent holism, synchrony, intensive fieldwork, and the rest, then was there no invention at all? I have prefigured my answer, that it lay in how he wrote, and specifically in the organisation of text. This implemented the kinds of relationships between writer, reader, and subject matter that were to dominate anthropology, British and beyond, for the next 60 years.

By contrast, his descriptive style as such is retrospective. Indeed, it is for this aspect of his style that Malinowski is often held most closely to imitate Frazer. Leach (1957:119) refers to his "Frazerian style of fine writing," Firth to Malinowski's romantic mode as opposed to the classical mode of Radcliffe-Brown, and Kaberry (1957:87) argues that it was the acceptance not of Malinowski's but of Radcliffe-Brown's conceptual distinctions which led to a widespread style of ethnographic writing emphasising definitional precision and plain language. What must be laid at Malinowski's door, rather, is the proclamation of the kinds of spaces that had to be made to convey the "new" analytical ideas. It was because this contextualisation was novel that the ideas themselves came to appear novel and that other scholars who might have been regarded as former exponents of them were rendered invisible. Its power for anthropologists lay in the parallel between the framework of the monograph and the framework of the field experience.

Fieldwork made a new kind of persuasive fiction possible. But I would follow Clifford (1986) in suggesting that this should be considered the other way around: the fieldwork experience *was reconstructed in the monographs* in such a way as to become an organising device for the monograph as such.<sup>23</sup> Malinowski was able to create a context for "new" ideas (such as the perception of society as a functioning whole) by making much of the social and cultural context in which indigenous ideas were found. This indeed was the subject of his Frazer lecture on myth (Malinowski 1932 [1925]), a disquisition on the importance of seeing myths in their life-context, that is, the society and culture which the ethnographer describes. Trobriand ideas had functions which could not be grasped otherwise. He acknowledges his debt to Frazer's own insistence on the connection between belief and rite and between tradition, magic, and social power. Yet the importance of setting things in their social context came to be universally underlined in

anthropology at large by the disparagement of Frazer's disregard for context, for the new ideas in question had acquired a double identity: the organising analytical ideas of the anthropologists were themselves contextualised by putting into *their* social context the indigenous ideas through which people organised their experiences. Contexts could be compared. This instigated a persuasive literary device in the arrangement of the texts through which societies and cultures were to be described.

It was all very well for Malinowski to expound that Trobriand myths were part and parcel of people's pragmatic experience. How was the distinctive nature of that experience conveyed to a non-Trobriand audience? A juxtaposition was engineered through describing the experience of the central figure of the fieldworker entering a culture (cf. Clifford 1986:162–63).<sup>24</sup> Trobriand ideas thereby juxtaposed were contrasted with those of the culture from which the fieldworker came. Thus the Other (Fabian 1983:xi; Marcus and Cushman 1982:49) was constructed. And however the divide between self and other was constructed in the colonial encounter, in the prejudices of the fieldworker, in the assumptions of his or her audience, it structured the resultant monographs to great creative effect.<sup>25</sup>

The new kind of book which Malinowski wrote was not just the holistic monograph centered on a particular people or the elucidation of the distinctiveness of unique societies that was to be the foundation of subsequent comparative sociology. Leach (1957:120) points to the significant theoretical assumption that the total field of data under observation must "fit together" and "make sense": "No data outside the immediate subjective-objective present need to be considered." The new kind of book, then, was also premised on a disjunction between observer (subject) and observed (object), a disjunction that made the observer aware of technique and led subsequently to the conceptualisation of anthropological practice as model building. Analytical frameworks became countenanced as deliberate artifice. The contrast between this modernism and Frazer's historicism was embodied in a new version of primitiveness<sup>26</sup>—a version that incorporated a new relationship. The difference between "us" and "them" was conceived not as a different stage in evolutionary progression but as a dif-

24. Clifford suggests that the insights of fieldwork were constructed less in the field (where Malinowski, in his own words, lacked a real character) than in the process of writing *Argonauts*, where he established himself as fieldworker-anthropologist.

25. It was not just the myth of Malinowski as fieldworker which defined modern anthropology—the fieldworker was a symbolic vehicle for a new kind of literary production. Therefore no amount of demythologising will affect the fact that whatever fieldwork went on before, and however patchy it really was afterwards, the symbol of the fieldworker had a new power in post-Malinowskian writing. This and a number of other points I emphasise are anticipated by Boon (e.g., "The author as fieldworker was always implicitly present; the author as author was always implicitly absent" [1983:138]). See Beer (1986:226–27) on Charles Darwin's presentation as the fieldworker.

26. Captured in Ardener's quip that Malinowski created modern primitivism for modern people (1985:59).

22. See also Leach (1957:120); interestingly, Stocking (1983:79) claims a precursor in Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, "recognisably 'modern' in its ethnographic style. . . . given focus by a totalizing cultural performance." Its subsequent status was compromised, Stocking suggests, by Spencer's failure to leave significant academic progeny.

23. Clifford (1986:162): "ethnographic comprehension [a coherent position of sympathy and hermeneutic engagement] is better seen as a creation of ethnographic *writing* than as a consistent quality of ethnographic *experience*."

ference of perspective. "They" did not use the same frames as "we" do through which to visualise the world. Simply as ethnocentrism that was no discovery at all. Rather, ethnocentrism was invented both as a theoretical principle and as an organising framework for writing. And it was displayed in the arrangement and relationship of ideas internal to the monograph. A radical way of presenting the anthropological subject was opened up; its two elements were both creative for the discipline.

The first was the literary implementation of ethnocentrism which has characterised the modernist period throughout: the realisation that frames are only frames, that concepts are culture-bound, that analytical terms are themselves buried in premises and assumptions. From the start the modern ethnographers sought to dislodge the taken-for-granted status of Western concepts—the development of a technical terminology proceeded hand in hand with self-scrutiny. There was always much more to the definitions of terms such as law or family than cultural relativism.

The second was the discovery of the ordinary in the bizarre, civilisation under savagery. The ruling mode of ethnographic presentation became exactly what Jarvie parodies (1984:15, my emphasis):

What the fieldwork involves is going to an exotic society and succeeding in *making good sense* to the outsider of its customs and institutions. So each monograph in effect says, "Look here! Pretty bizarre, eh. Just what you expected of benighted, irrational, anarchic primitives. But now look closer. What do you see? They live an ordered, reasonable, perhaps even admirable social life."

"Making sense" was, at least initially, a question of making "commonsense" (Leach 1982:28–29). Extravagant as he was in his atmospheric writing, Malinowski also insisted on the need to cover seriously and soberly all aspects of tribal culture. What for him was an injunction not to pick out the sensational and singular, to make no difference between the commonplace and the out-of-the-way (1922:11), became subsequently a maxim about ordinariness itself. Thus Jarvie dwells on Evans-Pritchard's remark that post-Frazerian anthropology was not searching after strange or colourful appeals to romantic interests but endorsed matter-of-fact enquiries about social institutions (1964:4, 13, 214). Leach has recently restated the point: "It is always highly desirable that the fieldworker should rid himself of the notion that there is something altogether extraordinary about the situation he is observing" (1982:29). And how many anthropological courses begin with the adage that the anthropologist's job is to make sense of what is first presented as strange, to render beliefs and acts in terms of their taken-for-granted status in the context of people's lives. Jarvie's complaint is that after the first or second exposure to this revelation, the repetition becomes boring.

For the discipline, both moves were highly productive. They led to the development of various frames by which

other societies and cultures could be analysed, and they put the anthropologist in the position of elucidating the bizarre, thus revealing the logic and order in other people's lives. Malinowski himself is sometimes credited with imposing rationality on his subjects. His sense of the ordinariness of Trobriand culture certainly opened up the conceptual space for future investigations into primitive logic and reasoning.<sup>27</sup> At the same time his holism created the context for enquiries into systems, though he did not take this far himself.

In the end it was inevitable that anthropologists should be criticised for treating the people they study as "objects" (cf. Fabian 1983). But that objectification was a product of a positioning of the anthropologist's own ideas (the analytical frames) against those attributed to his other subjects. This remained a structuring framework for the writing of monographs long after Malinowski's functionalism was considered of theoretical interest—the holism that first compelled the subjective-objective relation was no longer required for the endless investigation of that crucial relationship itself. The effect of the observer/observed dichotomy had been to create a sense of alienness or otherness, introducing the reader to the bizarre and simultaneously overcoming it by locating what "we" see as bizarre within a context where for "them" it is familiar and ordinary. The ordinariness was in this sense a technical ordinariness, that is, a product of accounting for ideas or behaviour in terms of the context to which they properly belonged. Foregrounded in the new anthropology (cf. Clifford 1986), "society" or "culture" domestically enclosed such ideas. Strangeness had to lie outside this boundary and was identifiable only in context-crossing.<sup>28</sup> The supreme context-crossing was between observer and observed. Thus was created the central problem of modernist anthropology in whose terms I couched my original question: how to manipulate familiar ideas and concepts to convey alien ones.

The concentration of the new ethnographies on single cultures opened up the possibility of exploiting the dualism of the relation between observer and observed, using one's own language in reversing or turning upside down one's own categories (e.g., we regard payment as antithetical to kin relations, they regard kin relations as based on transactions). Concepts paired in the observer's culture could be split apart (e.g., we have a commodity

27. Stocking (1984:178) cites with amusement Gregory Bateson's despair at being unable to find a single instance of the word "logic" in the whole of *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*. But functionalism assumed that the anthropologist "could find reason even where it had never in fact presented itself to the individual savage consciousness" (p. 183).

28. One might recall functionalist examinations of witchcraft and sorcery beliefs here: what was classified as strange or exotic had to be seen to cross some social boundary or other. I would argue that the anthropology of classification and boundaries so prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s spoke to an implicit epistemology which domesticated behaviour (it all "made sense") as the attribute of a particular culture or society and therefore led to a special problem in accounting for people's own concepts of the bizarre and exotic from within those cultures or societies.

economy, they have a gift economy). Because the other was framed off, it became possible to use terms within the frame for meanings different from those they held outside it (kinship to them is not what we mean by the term). And so on.<sup>29</sup> In these ways, manipulating one's own concepts to conceptualise ones constructed as alien established distances between writer, reader, and the subject of study.<sup>30</sup>

Jarvie berates modern(ist) anthropologists for striving to show that there is nothing exceptional about the lives they describe. The analytical technique, deriving from postulates about the integrity of society and culture, is embedded in literary technique. The imaginative leap becomes *between what "we" find ordinary and what "they" find ordinary*. Hence the significance of Malinowski's perpetual insistence that "they" were more than projections of Western theories. The burden of his Frazer lecture was that Trobrianders did not treat their myths as armchair theorists speculated they would. Their ideas had to be appreciated in their own terms, not least for the reason that myths could not be treated as some "primitive intellectual armchair occupation" (1932 [1925]:82). There were no armchair theorists on the Trobriands! Thus it was necessary to jar his readers/hearers into accepting the distinctiveness of Trobriand passions before expounding on their fitting place within the pragmatics of local life. The audience had to accept the naturalness of Trobriand ideas in their context—once that context had been created in the separation of

the culture of those to whom he was speaking from the culture of those about whom he was speaking. The audience was required to connive in its distance from the anthropologist's subject matter. Meanwhile the anthropologist moved between the two. His proximity to the culture he was studying became his distance from the one he was addressing, and vice versa. This, *tout court*, is how the modern(ist) fieldworker has imagined him- or herself ever since.<sup>31</sup>

## Out of Context

We are now in a better position to appreciate the persuasion of Frazer's fictions—and his reputation among modernist anthropologists who found them not at all persuasive.

Once the new frameworks for comparison were created—the distinctiveness of different kinds of societies provided a basis for what became in essence a comparison of contexts—Frazer's comparative sociology looked ludicrous. Hence the most common charge against him, that he tore things out of their context.<sup>32</sup> His episodic treatment of the Old Testament and the similarities he shows between Hebrew customs and those from Melanesia, Africa, or wherever seem to entail the worst kind of indiscriminate borrowings, with no regard for historical or social circumstances. Frazer was not manipulating the internal discriminations between writer and subject matter, between observer and observed, that typified the modernists. On the contrary, he depended on a kinship between his own revelations and contemporary interest in the classics, here the Old Testament, and in the early history of man. Far from distancing himself from his audience, he appeared to share much with them.

Certainly he evinced neither of the strategies that were to become so significant. First, he was not interested in the status of his frames, in perpetually specifying his own ethnocentrism. Hence the ease with which he could comprehend what it was like to be in Nemi or what the ancient Hebrews might be expected to do (e.g., 1918, vol. 3:80). There was no problem about interpreting people's emotions or motivations. In the course of his disquisition on marriage, Frazer is meticulous in locating the particular sources from which he gleans his innumerable pieces of information. Where possible he quotes such reasons as people are reported giving, but he has no hesitation in supplying them himself. This is a

29. Other disjunctions typical of this mode include (1) dividing data into domains, such as kinship or economy, which are then collapsed or seen as versions of one another; (2) defining concepts by negation—the X have (say) no concept of "culture"—in order to introduce discontinuities into what are habitual dichotomies in Western thought (e.g., the contrast between culture and nature); (3) cross-cultural comparison which rests on an elucidation of similarities and differences but always implies the distinctiveness of units so compared; and (4) internal comparison within the analysis between us and them, now and then (the other being presented as a version of oneself or in antithesis to the familiar self).

30. I hope I have made it clear the extent to which I would defend the Malinowskian disjunctions: artificiality (between "us" and "them") is contained within the construction of a literary product concerned with a question that is far from artificial, making conceptual space for social others. Let me draw on an instance with which I am concerned: the terms "gift" and "commodity" for contrasts between Melanesian and Western exchange systems. The two terms only make sense from the point of view of a commodity economy. At the same time, one can use them to talk about two radically different ways of organising the world. This lays one open to empiricist suggestion that gift was never observed in a pristine state. But objections of this kind leave one serious problem: *how* otherwise is a writer on Melanesia to present to a largely Western audience the distinctiveness of Melanesian social organisation, of ideas about personhood, of all the subtle and complex, as well as fundamental and crude, ways in which Melanesian concepts do or do not have analogies in the Western world? As a practical literary necessity, how is one to proceed? De Heusch, for instance, shrinks the idea of gift to an economic transaction and puts in its stead the idea of ritual cuisine as "the expression of the social order" (1985:17). Anthropologists do this all the time; but it makes comparison hard because one needs to know the literary locus of such constructs in the writer's account: what they stand for—not just how they are defined but what part they play in the construction of analysis.

31. The triad writer/subject/audience was constantly played as a dyad (observer/observed, anthropologist-reporter/reader) (cf. Webster 1982).

32. Gellner (1985b:645) uses this phrase of the reaction of Malinowski's functionalism to Frazerian speculation. Frazer assembles a vast array of fragmentary data out of context, whereas Malinowski's fieldwork method, he observes, was an exhaustive exploration of social contexts. Lienhardt (1966:27) succinctly presents the modernist orthodoxy: Frazer "thought he could understand very foreign beliefs quite out of their real contexts simply by an effort of introspection."

comment on the direct exchange of women in Melanesia (vol. 2:216):

No doubt the practice of exchanging women in marriage may be observed from a variety of motives, one of which in certain cases may well be the desire to keep up a sept at full strength by only parting with women on condition of receiving an equal number of women in exchange. But such a motive of public policy seems less simple and primitive than the purely economic motive which I take to be at the base of the custom; for while the economic motive appeals directly to every man in his individual capacity, the public motive appeals to men in their collective capacity as members of a community, and therefore is likely to affect only that enlightened minority who are capable of subordinating their private interest to the public good.

The selection of reasons is governed by what he imputes as likely examples of simple and primitive behaviour. Few modern monographs do not also impute thoughts and feelings to the people being described; the difference is the validating presence of the fieldworker, who uses the self as a metering device (cf. Clifford 1983). In talking of the economic motives of marriage, Frazer had to be guided by the ethnographers who reported to him. Thus, he says carefully that "the natives of the northern coast of Dutch New Guinea are said to regard their marriageable daughters as wares which they can sell without consulting the wishes of the girls themselves" (1918, vol. 2:217). Yet this leads not to a scrutiny of what the said natives might mean but to a general extrapolation (p. 220):

[I]t seems probable that the practice of exchanging daughters or sisters in marriage was everywhere at first a simple case of barter, and that it originated in a low state of savagery where women had a high economic value as labourers, but where private property was as yet at so rudimentary a stage that a man had practically no equivalent to give for a wife but another woman. The same economic motive might lead the offspring of such unions, who would be cross cousins, to marry each other. . . .

For a modernist reader, it is not just the economics but the kinship structures which require elucidation. The relationship between these would give an internal authority to the account. Frazer establishes his authority, however, with reference to an extraneous frame, the sense of history which he shares with his readers (p. 220):

If the history of the custom could be followed in the many different parts of the world where it has prevailed, it might be possible everywhere to trace it back to this simple origin; for under the surface alike of savagery and of civilisation the economic forces are as constant and uniform in their operation as the forces of nature, of which indeed, they are merely a peculiarly complex manifestation.

Frazer was not particularly interested, then, in framing off his ideas from either those of his audience or those he was describing, and the second point is that consequently he did *not* have to make good sense of the bizarre. True, he sought to show how customs since abandoned and disclaimed as barbaric were not to be dismissed from the Old Testament as fantasy but bore close resemblance to the practice of many cultures. But this is not the same as making sense of them. Rather, it confirms their status as indices of savagery: Frazer's savage was the antique man whose practices of simple and primitive times were still preserved. He established the plausibility of the numerous customs he reported by showing how they occurred again and again, and he supplied motives and reasons from his general understanding of primitive society. But there was no need to justify them in terms of a logical system or tease out their connections with other ideas. His narrative showed example after example of what happened—it could not create an internal context for turning the merely conceivable into a distinctive cultural logic. The customs made sense in only a very limited way. Above all, he had no theoretical motive for rendering the exotic ordinary. On the contrary, the effect of his literary composition was to show, at every point, *the ordinary to be cognate with the extraordinary*.<sup>33</sup>

This perhaps is the power of all those examples out of context. Apropos the Old Testament, Frazer was taking a story which would have been very familiar to his readers. Whatever was thought about particular incidents, within the framework of the biblical story they had a long-established place.<sup>34</sup> He exposes the story episode by episode, showing the affinities of Hebrew customs to those drawn from savage or patriarchal peoples from all over the world. Incidents which might have been accepted as simply part of the narrative are shown to be remarkable by comparison with exotic customs. Thus the disjunction upon which Frazer plays is between his reader's prior perceptions of biblical customs as ordinary

33. Boon (1982:11) claims that Frazer's prose describes unbelievable rites believably. At the same time, while Malinowski inscribed practices not as exotic specimens but as straightforward human experience, Frazer "represented the culmination of traditional compilations of 'fardles of fashions' and cabinets of curiosities" (1982:17). Frazer made such curiosities plausible but not logical. Cf. Stocking (1984:183): "the armchair anthropologist—archetypically, Frazer—could give [irrational beliefs and customs] rational meaning through the in-built rationalistic utilitarianism of the doctrine of survival: what made no rational sense in the present was perfectly understandable as the sheer persistence of the imperfectly rational pursuit of utility in an earlier stage."

34. Malinowski's own review (reprinted 1962) of the abridged edition of *Folk-lore* comments that Frazer reshapes familiar facts and situations (the "story has been lived through by every one of us") but that though familiar they were always disturbing and incomprehensible, bound up with dreams and fantasies instilled in childhood. Feeley-Harnik (1985) develops the suggestion that *The Golden Bough*, as a treatise on the savage thoughts that compel people to kill in order to prosper, deploys the sacrifice of the priest/king as a metaphor to understand the irrationality and violence underlying, as she puts it, the smooth surface of Christian ideals of progress in Victorian and Edwardian England.

and their far from ordinary cognates. This allows a further disjunction, between the customs the reader takes for granted in his or her own culture and the origins of these same customs under very different, savage, regimes. In short, Frazer has taken his text apart. What coheres, as the biblical tales unfold, is shown to be a palimpsest of reports about events which no longer belong intrinsically to one another but instead have a family resemblance to doings all over the world. They are to be appreciated in the light of social and practical reasons that appear in many times and places: a global culture indeed, differentiated only through the stages of savagery and civilisation.<sup>35</sup>

Frazer's prefatory remarks, dated May 1918, conclude with the observation that "the revelation of the baser elements which underlay the civilization of ancient Israel, as they underlie the civilization of modern Europe, serves rather as a foil to enhance by contrast the glory of a people which, from such dark depths of ignorance and cruelty, could rise to such bright heights" (1918, vol. 1:x). It is not just the multitude of times and places that makes an effect, but that for his parallels Frazer drew on cultures that would already be classified in the general reader's mind as exotic. The revelation was that civilisation so-called should consist of so much former savagery. Was it this juxtaposition of civilisation and savagery that gripped his contemporaries' minds? In the relationship Frazer enjoyed with his general readers and (through what he read) with those about whom he wrote he presumed a continuity. It was a continuity that embraced the rational and irrational alike, that could be shared on the grounds of *either* savagery *or* civilisation, neither distinguished in any absolute sense as the attribute of this or that whole society. The "enlightened minority" among his Melanesians foreshadowed a civilised attention to the public good, like the literary light that shone forth from the Hebrew writers. This theme of illumination runs through his narrative in consistent parallel to the unearthing of the "baser elements": "The annals of savagery and superstition unhappily compose a large part of human literature; but in what other volume [than the Old Testament] shall we find, *side by side* with that melancholy record, psalmists who poured forth their sweet and solemn strains, etc." (1918, vol. 1:xi, my emphasis). Reader and writer share a text: what the writer forces his readers to realise is the unevenness of the text itself, its multivocality, its side-by-side conjunction of savagery and civilisation.

When, 50 years before, Lubbock had lectured at the Royal Institution on "The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man," he had confessed a block to his desire to describe the "social and mental condition of savages" (1875a): he would have to refer to ideas and acts which might be abhorrent to his listeners. Frazer, in command of an astonishing array of materials, much of

it collected in the intervening years, gives a vivid discourse on the social and mental condition of savages through the mediating texts of works thoroughly familiar and respectable. The result, I have suggested, is the exoticisation of those familiar and respectable ideas. The world is seen to be plural, composite, full of diverse manners, of echoes from the past. The present, the ordinary, holds all the colourful possibilities of folklore, quite as much as civilisation is revealed as barely concealing a medley of practices which belong to darker, older days.

In fact, one could almost call Frazer an "aesthete with the ability to select references," for whom "the act of invention consists in rereading the past and recombining a selection of its elements" (*The Listener*, March 20, 1986, p. 32), or say that his style "evokes, hints, reminds," in a world of infinite referrals where signs "are not arbitrary because meanings are sedimented in them: signs have 'been around'; they bear the traces of past semantic manoeuvres"; consequently, "instead of analytical steps there is a suggestive use of images, quizzical manoeuvres and numerous asides," so that writing comes to seem a promiscuous dissemination or explosion (Crick 1985:72–73 and citing Tyler 1984:329). These remarks are not, of course, made of Frazer but represent two attempts to evoke a postmodern mood. This brings me to my final comments on the nature of Frazer's creativity.

## Playing with Context

Whether we are or are not entering a postmodern phase in social anthropology, enough people seem to be speaking as though we were for the idea to be of interest. Crick sees it as among those diverse trends which include reflexive anthropology, critical anthropology, semantic anthropology, semiotic anthropology, and post-structuralism (1985:71). This, he says (quoting Hastrup 1978), is not a unitary position, but in the aftermath of modernism we are not to be surprised that there appears to be no particular future<sup>36</sup> or that history may be put into reverse. Crick describes as suitably ironic the recent retrieval of Leenhardt, Lévi-Strauss's predecessor in Paris, whose work is ripe for discovery in a post-structuralist era (Clifford 1982:2; cf. Young 1983:169). At the same time Ardener (1985) is arguing that although other disciplines may think of structuralism as postmodern, its place in anthropology is as a thoroughly modernist phenomenon. Thus he traces the span of modernism in anthropology from Malinowski (in 1920) to the beginning

36. If the modern is a kind of appropriated future, its collapse must be perceived as the collapse of the future (Ardener 1985:57). However, in the very way current experiments in ethnographic writing bring modernism to consciousness, they may also be seen as part of modernism itself (e.g., Marcus 1986); cf. Foster (1985 [1983]:ix): "if the modern project is to be saved at all, it must be exceeded." It will be apparent that I use the contrast between modernism and post-modernism to indicate a shift within anthropological writing—one might or might not wish to subsume it all under the term "modern."

35. He appears to use this classification from time to time, but it does not organise his arrangement of examples. Nor does he seek historic parallels to his biblical characters. Thus he adduces Papua New Guinea parallels in his discussion of the Patriarchal Age and the Times of Judges and Kings alike.



of the decline of structuralist influence in the mid-'70s. The demise of structuralism/modernism is underlined by the resurrection of Leenhardt, a figure who preceded the chief exponent of structuralism as far as much anthropology is concerned (Crick 1985:72).

Crick here draws attention to Clifford's biography of Leenhardt. Leenhardt is presented as someone whose work "addresses itself to the present concern with more 'open' cultural theories—modes of understanding capable of accounting for innovative process and historical discontinuity . . . and for reciprocity in ethnographical interpretation" (Clifford 1982:2). Leenhardt's access to "the native's point of view" was not just through fieldwork empathy but involved a collective work of mutual translation, one that could not be easily dominated by a privileged interpretation (Clifford 1980:526). The context for Clifford's interest is similar reciprocities identifiable in the writing of a new generation of ethnographers concerned with the representation of dialogue—how the fieldwork encounter is itself handled, and thus how ethnography is written.

The historian's championing of Leenhardt also involves something of an assault on Malinowski (Clifford 1983).<sup>37</sup> The time seems ripe to expose the figure of the fieldworker who was the register of the otherness of cultures. Clifford tackles the authority which anthropologists claimed this gave their writings: the fieldworker who came back from another society spoke for it in a determining way which now appears repugnant. Whether or not anthropologists ever did claim such authority is beside the point. It is the kind of book they wrote which is exposed: the monograph presented simply as though it were about a particular people, the author absent because the fieldworker is the authority for the text (and see Marcus and Cushman 1982:31–32). But "the silence of the ethnographic workshop has been broken—by insistent, heteroglot voices, by the scratching of other pens" (Clifford 1983:121). For some while now it has become widely accepted that the fieldworker must be written back into the text as also its author and reproduce the conditions of his or her encounter with the other. Reflexive anthropology sees the resultant production as a dialogue between anthropologist and informant so-called: the observer/observed relationship can no longer be assimilated to that between subject and ob-

ject.<sup>38</sup> The object(ive) is a joint production. Many voices, multiple texts, plural authorship (e.g., Rabinow 1983; Clifford 1980, 1982) suggest a new genre. "Ethnography must hang on in good faith to the myriad contingencies and opaque personalities of reality, and deny itself the illusion of a transparent description" (Webster 1982:111). Writing has become a question of authorship, even to the point of a new denial of it, insofar as the "negotiated reality" of the text is the social or experiential reality of neither party (Crapanzano 1980).

Over the last decade or two, there has been increasing awareness that the dichotomies which characterised modernism in anthropology will not do, the easiest target being synchrony, the timelessness of descriptions framed not by history but by the distinction between "us" and "them." In fact, there has always been criticism of the ahistoricity of anthropology, in the misleading charge that anthropologists create an idealised break between the pristine society "before contact" and the "social change" since (misleading because, to borrow from Ardener, it reads the dichotomies as a matter of life rather than genre). This has joined with mounting criticism about the audacity of the anthropologist to speak for the other, to treat other persons as objects, not allowing the authors of accounts their own voice, and so on.<sup>39</sup> In short, that powerful modernist frame, the distinction between us and them which created the context for positioning the writer in relation to those he/she was describing, has become thoroughly discredited. The other as literary object, being taken by critics as situating human subjects as objects, can no longer survive as the explicit organising frame of texts. No one set of voices should be denied or privileged—the author must objectify his own position in the ethnography quite as much as he or she strives to render the subjectivity of others.

There is an inherent ambivalence ("ludic" is Crick's word) in certain current exponents of postmodernism. They are deservedly after the event—for their strength lies in exposing the artificial edifice of structuralism, ethnographic authority, or whatever.<sup>40</sup> Structuralist and

38. Webster (1982:96) criticises the tradition in anthropology in which the understanding subject and the object understood are grasped as primordial realities. Thinking one can substitute subject for object will not do: we have to know that it is in the course of dialogue that both subjectification and objectification are necessarily created.

39. Marcus and Cushman (1982:25–26) argue that recent self-reflectiveness in ethnographic writing aims to demystify the process of fieldwork, and thus to confront the objectification of the resultant texts. Geertz (1985) refers to postmodern self-doubt as anxiety about the representation of the other in ethnographic discourse. However, it is interesting to note a parallel between Webster's (1982:97) criticism of Geertz and Rabinow's criticism of Clifford: both Geertz and Clifford are attuned to multiple texts but proceed to absent themselves from the narrative—i.e., fail to objectify their own participation.

40. A point also made outside anthropological interest in postmodernism; hence Jameson's comment to the effect that there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were established forms of high modernism (1985:111). If as in anthropology "modernism" is now uncovered in retrospect, there will be considerable ambiguity about what is modernist and what is postmodernist (see n. 36). A simple binarism will not do: insofar as postmod-

37. "Assault" is too strong a word in the light of his overall appraisal of Malinowski. On subsequently comparing Malinowski as the diarist and as the author of *Argonauts*, Clifford (1986) resurrects him as an original heteroglot, someone capable of trying out different voices, different personae; and he sympathetically describes the "ample, multiperspectival, meandering structure of *Argonauts*" (1986:156) where modernists have simply seen arguments without structure. The fact that a convincing totalisation always escaped his work, Clifford suggests, aligns Malinowski with latter-day cosmopolitanism. In his earlier article, *Argonauts* had been the archetype for a generation of ethnographies that "successfully established participant-observation's scientific validity" (Clifford 1983:123–24). Clifford's thesis is that what was created in the writing of ethnography was the experience of the fieldworker as a unifying source of authority, dissonant with the fieldwork experience itself. What thus requires assault is the authority embedded in the literary symbol of Malinowski as fieldworker.

ethnographer alike were playing games too, the difference being that they did not know it. It is that realisation which is crucially postmodern. The appropriate genre is not representation but the "representation of representations" (Rabinow 1986:250).<sup>41</sup> In the subsequent reappropriation of anthropological history, Leenhardt is particularly interesting as a pre-Malinowskian fieldworker.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps he is attractive because the religious embodiment of his ideas (Clifford 1982:3) evinces that move away from the separation of the sociological and phenomenological towards signs embedded in human use and intentionality to which Tyler refers (1984:328). The missionary observer is a good exemplar, since his understandings are purposed. But British anthropology has a prominent figure of its own, so to speak, in Malinowski's supposed predecessor, Frazer. Indeed, in some respects, Frazer's bookish plenitude is highly evocative.

I am not suggesting that Frazer is a postmodern. He could not be, since the mood takes its creativity from modernism (Ardener 1985:60). But perhaps he is a person whom postmodernism allows us to countenance. It is salutary to think of Frazer because it is salutary to think about what the modernists found so distasteful in him—taking things out of context. The postmodern mood is to make deliberate play with context. It is said to blur boundaries, destroy the dichotomising frame, juxtapose voices, so that the multiple product, the monograph jointly authored, becomes conceivable. It remains up to the reader to pick his or her way through the differing positions and contexts of the speakers. Mere points of view (cf. Hill 1986), these contexts have ceased in themselves to provide the organising frameworks for the ethnographic narrative. A new relationship between writer, reader, and subject matter is contemplated. Decoding the exotic ("making sense") will no longer do; postmodernism requires the reader to interact with exotica in itself.

However, I want to introduce a note of discord: to raise Frazer both with respect and as a spectre. The discord is between what contemporary anthropologists are doing in toying with labels such as postmodernism and what they continue to do in their writings. Indeed, as happened in the early programmes for feminist writing, there is more talk about what postmodernism might be than examples of it. I suggest that there is a significant difference between blurring contexts and playing with them, between free play and play, between a composite identity and reciprocity; and that the evocation of post-

modernism draws on images not always very appropriate for the anthropology which goes under its name. Such identifiably postmodern anthropologists<sup>43</sup> as there are play with contexts, knowingly; they do not simply scramble them. Crick says (1985:85) that there is no such thing as free play, that a paradox is impossible without a notion of rules. The problem is that the *representation* of activity as postmodern blurs *that* distinction—dwelling instead on the tropic release afforded by context jumping.<sup>44</sup> This is where the spectre enters. If we really want to scramble contexts, then we have a historical guide in Frazer himself.

At this point, I must make my own account explicit. There is a tension between two styles/frames, neither of which quite encompasses the other. The first might mock itself as following contemporary fashion in stressing the literary rather than the scientific or argumentative aspects of Frazer's work. The very use of the word "fiction" conveys a self-conscious playfulness. This reflects uncertainty on my part as to what the idea of postmodernism is all about. Of course, the answer is that the idea is not "about" (anything other than itself)—it is enacted, performed. The second is a modernist one. I have sought for a certain perspective on Frazer by putting some of his writing into context, and thus have produced a kind of history. Though considering Frazer and Malinowski by reference to their persuasive fictions, I have presented them as though they shared the modernist problem, how to convey alien ideas across cultures.<sup>45</sup> Arguing that Malinowski did this differently from Frazer projects the problem backwards in the very form Malinowski and his colleagues created. Nevertheless, in setting these approaches side by side, let me suggest both how it is possible to appreciate Frazer in a new light and why we should be cautious about doing so.

#### A POSTMODERN FASHION?

If there is one word which summarises the anthropological recognition of a postmodern mood, it is *irony*.<sup>46</sup> And

43. Or anthropologists who are interested in the questions raised by taking a deliberate postmodern stance but would not necessarily use the label of themselves. This position is exactly analogous to that of anthropologists interested in feminist issues who do not necessarily call themselves feminist anthropologists.

44. What we might call the misrepresentation of postmodernism comes from the very efforts to represent it. Again, outside anthropology, Foster (1985:xi) takes pains to distinguish postmodernism, a specific conflict of old and new modes, from relativism and pluralism, "the quixotic notion that all positions in culture and politics are now open and equal."

45. Marcus and Cushman (1982:46): "Not only must the ethnographer's conceptual and descriptive language make (common) sense to his reader within their own cultural framework, but it must communicate meanings to these same readers which they are persuaded would make (again, common) sense to the ethnographer's subjects."

46. I am grateful to Richard Fardon and James Boon for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and for pointing out that irony can take many forms. One could construct a virtual typology of ironies. However, it should be clear that I do not intend to discriminate thus between the kinds of distancing mechanism and false recognitions that we may discern in the writings of past an-

ernism recovers the past, it seeks to recover modernism as well and is thus itself a modernist project.

41. I profited from reading Rabinow's paper in draft form, as I did from Marcus's in the same volume (*Writing Culture*). This and Marcus and Fischer's work on anthropology as cultural critique were published after the lecture was prepared; I do not consider them here, though both are clearly germane to my themes. I am grateful to Paul Rabinow for his comments on the lecture.

42. Young (1983:169): "As an ethnographer Leenhardt amply fulfilled the conditions for intensive fieldwork a dozen years before Malinowski, seeking mastery of a native tongue as the key to his research."

the current rediscovery of irony indicates all the difference between the "free play" which some descriptions of postmodernism hint at and postmodernist "play," if it exists, in anthropological writing. Irony involves not a scrambling but a deliberate juxtaposition of contexts, pastiche perhaps but not jumble.

Those aware of irony find irony in others. I am tempted to suggest that some of Beer's reading of Darwin makes such play. She comments on how rich in contradictory elements Darwin's prose is, how multivalent and full of hermeneutic potential with its "power to yield a great number of significant and various meanings" (1983:10). He accepts the variability of words, "their tendency to dilate and contract across related senses, to oscillate between significations" (1983:38). Darwin's profuse metaphors renounce a Cartesian clarity or univocality, she suggests, an echo of the contrast Boon uses in discovering that Frazer's vision as well as his prose may have been touched with irony; Frazer displaced one-dimensional reportage with multidimensional representation (1982:11).<sup>47</sup> He emphasised the rich array of primitive rite, confronting the paradox (Boon says) that modern anthropologists were to avoid: "how cultures, perfectly commonsensical from within, nevertheless flirt with their own 'alternities,' gain critical self-distance, formulate complex (rather than simply reactionary) perspectives on others" (1982:19). By contrast, Boon argues, functionalism after Malinowski became an anthropology without irony.<sup>48</sup>

Beer's concern is with Darwin's problems in precipitating his theory as language (1983:5). She deals with *The Origin of Species* as an extraordinary example of a

thropologists; rather, my interest is in the fact that "irony" has become a contemporary buzz-word for distance and recognition on the part of contemporary commentators. It is how often the term is now used in contemplation of the writers of the past that intrigues me. Necessarily, therefore, it is the commentators who adopt an ironic stance—in its extreme form likened by Jameson to pastiche: "Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour: pastiche is to parody what that curious thing, *the modern practice of a kind of blank irony*, is to . . . the stable and comic ironies of, say, the 18th century" (1985:114, my emphasis).

47. Compare Downie's remark (1970:21) that *The Golden Bough* had no single purpose.

48. Yet there seems to be no end to the contemporary discovery of irony in others. Thus Thornton (1985:14), himself juxtaposing contexts (Malinowski and Conrad as writers), presents a portrait of Malinowski as set down in the "self-imposed agony of loneliness at the very juncture of contradiction" (a contradiction between the interaction of imagination and description, civilised and primitive thought, endorsement and doubt). The vision of the ethnographic monograph, of incomparables compared, occasioned a "profound sense of irony": no event was what it seemed to the native by virtue of the universal categories of Western social science. He suggests that by the end of the 19th century, ethnographic writing had come to "reflect an ironic vision of people who had to be explained, both to themselves and to the rest of the world" (1983:516). (Thornton includes Frazer here.) Stocking takes for granted the "gentle irony" of Malinowski's attitude towards his Melanesian subjects as characteristic of much modern ethnography (1983:108). The ethnographer both shares their vision and knows things about them that they do not (cf. Webster 1982:93). Clifford (1986:145) talks of the "ironic stance of participant observation" presupposed in modern anthropology. All I am suggesting is that the discovery of this interplay as ironic seems to characterise 1980s reflection on these topics.

work which included more than the maker of it at the time knew, despite all that he knew (p. 4). We are not required to consider his use of language wholly planned—we are talking about the way a work is registered in the minds of its readers, and thus about its power to persuade. Stocking (1983:105) writes of Malinowski that while he was aware of ethnography as literary artifice, nevertheless we are left to our own literary critical devices to explicate the method of his artifice. To this one must add: it is we then who are interested in the literary devices of others, and in the persuasiveness of their fictions, because in what is also a post-paradigm era, we cannot take their frames as natural boundaries (Marcus 1986).<sup>49</sup> When Beer suggests that Darwin's language fitted his theory, perhaps she means that she must make this true of herself. The same probably applies to any suggestion that Frazer was grappling with the modernist strategies I have imputed to him. Thus the "problem" of conveying alien ideas (ascribed to Frazer) is written (by me) back into his works from my perspective on them. Whether or not this was something he consciously set out to tackle, it appears as an effect of his writing. Yet this appearance in turn must come from the contemporary preoccupation with the representation of representations.

As far as irony is concerned, I wonder about Frazer. I am not sure that his ironic intentions were the same as those of latter-day ironists and that we can recover him as anticipating our post-functionalist selves. His diversity led to plenitude.<sup>50</sup> He made equivocal contrasts (the two versions of the creation story in Genesis recreate the debate between Darwin and his detractors over evolution and creationism). He decentered his texts (biblical and classical); he restored vestiges of the past; he crammed his books with multiple voices, in a manner of speaking—but only in a manner of speaking. Those numerous juxtapositions, Melanesians and Africans jostling side by side, evincing this or that belief, were not there as "Melanesians" and "Africans." Probably he did think that the way any people thought illuminated other people's beliefs, but since he drew this evidence out of context, *it was not the contexts* (i.e., being Melanesian or African) *which were juxtaposed*. Can this, then, be what post-functionalists understand as irony? Do we not require that contexts be recognised? That irony lie in deliberate play? Beliefs and customs would be juxtaposed not to reveal similarity but to raise questions about it. By contrast with the modernist who "explains" and brings to the surface the grounds for similarity or difference, the postmodernist (I have noted) leaves that work to the reader.<sup>51</sup> He/she is interested in provocation

49. Clifford (1986:14) talks of the post-cultural, i.e., a syncretic situation not amenable to unidimensional paradigms. The privilege given to natural cultures has dissolved in the contemporary appearance of culture as a fiction.

50. "Rich, mixed feeding," said Marett (1920:173). In contrast, Darwin's sense of profusion, of a multivalent world, was controlled by his theory of interrelationships.

51. Marett again (quoted by Kardiner and Preble 1961:106): "by the magic of [Dr. Frazer's] pen he has made the myriad facts live, so that they tell their own tale, and we are left free to read their meaning as our several tastes and temperaments dictate."

for its own sake. But the legacy of the last 60 years is that the provocation will lie precisely in the juxtaposition of social or cultural contexts. With what meaning, then, do we attribute “ironic comparativism” to Frazer (Thorn-ton 1985:14)? Is it that we are in the mood to see all comparison as ironic and that without an explicit modernist frame Frazer appears to endorse our own senses of irony?

As one who finds irony in others, Clifford also figures centrally in Rabinow’s (1986) account of postmodernism in anthropology and the promulgation of new ethnographic styles. The ethnographic text could conceivably move beyond dialog (the staged reproduction of an interchange between subjects) to heteroglossia (a utopia of plural endeavour that gives all collaborators the status of authors). Rabinow finds in Clifford’s suggestions a mood akin to that described for postmodernism by Jameson (1985) in art: more than a jumble of elements, the pastiche of nostalgia films, for instance, obscures the line between past and present, blurring the specificity of the past. This deliberate historical flattening reappears in the “meta-ethnographic flattening which makes all the world’s cultures practitioners of textuality” (Rabinow 1986:250). A proliferation of references to other representations empties any one of content; the referent of each image is another image.<sup>52</sup> Rabinow voices doubts about this as a recipe—above all that if we attempt to eliminate social referentiality other referents will occupy the voided position (1986:251)—and doubts whether such discourse strategies in fact fit the intentions of someone like Clifford.<sup>53</sup> If anthropology endorses modernist style in a particular way, so with postmodernism. Its exponents play with different contexts (as in juxtaposing literary and ethnographic productions) rather than blurring them. This play remains self-conscious; hence its capacity for irony.<sup>54</sup>

Reviewing Clifford’s biography of Leenhardt, Young notes its plenitude and its open-ended character: “Clifford has thought long and deeply about Maurice

Leenhardt, and something of the same complex collaboration between ethnographer and informant, something of the same kind of dialogue which produces an ethnographic text, has in this case ensued between biographer and subject” (1983:170). The reference to dialogue is also a reference to reciprocity, of recognising relationships (as between ethnographer and informant), not flattening them (cf. Clifford 1980). This is what gives postmodernist anthropology its special flavour—if the relationships involved between writer and subjects are to be negotiated, even fashioned as reciprocity, their cultural contexts after all cannot, as we might speak of Frazer’s writing, be scrambled.

In short, there is more talk of jumble than practice of it. Tracing the shift which Clifford evinces, Rabinow contrasts him with Geertz, although in the long view Geertz’s own self-conscious use of irony (cf. Webster 1982:92) presaged the shift. Geertz talks about anthropology as an uncentred *mélange* of disparate visions, fieldwork as colloquial, offhand. He talks about recent anthropology within a social context characterised by “a general muddling of vocational [disciplinary] entities” (1983:23), of anthropology “waddling in” (1985). Yet in the same address as he describes anthropology as seeking to keep the world off balance, pulling out the rug from under complacency (cf. 1984:275), he also institutes a very deliberate framing. The double negativity of his title, “Anti anti-relativism” (rejecting something without committing oneself to what that something has rejected), is play with frames. Moreover, when Geertz first introduced the idea of irony it was in reference to a moral tension between “anthropologist” and “informant,” that is, one embedded in the conduct of a specific social relationship. This makes play with contexts possible but blurring them rather difficult.<sup>55</sup> Why, then, do we entertain a notion of jumble, of scrambled contexts? What is the talk about?

The metaphor of play is a powerful one (as Crick adumbrates). It privileges one context above all: the writer framing off his or her writing with the theatrical message, “Everything within this frame is play.” Thus is play imagined as free play. Determining “fictions” appear to turn themselves into fictions, the novel with a new lease of life as an anthropological exercise. One is reminded here of Frazer’s admission in the third edition of *The Golden Bough* (1911–15) that the allegory of the priest/king could be unmasked as a dramatic device for allowing him to talk about primitive thought and society. Of course, it is the unmasking which is the drama—the playfulness is afterthought.<sup>56</sup> But playing with the

52. Compare Lowenthal’s (1985:382–83) discussion of the reaction to avant-garde amnesia—historical eclecticism in the arts has its architectural counterpart in postmodern classicism (classical motifs are employed with irony, for decorative effect, selected out of context in defiance of their origins and relationships, everything attracting the same degree of interest). Particularly telling is his quotation of a comment on modern Italian architects who salvage not history but their own emotions, nostalgia, and autobiographical incidents in order to escape the tradition of the new.

53. In distinguishing different sources of postmodernist commentary (he contrasts Lyotard and Jameson), Rabinow detaches pastiche from jumble as Crick detaches play from free play, to create the distance I also perceive as between irony (play with context) and “waddling in” (repudiation of context).

54. Thus, too, Crick’s account of the newer anthropological style which evokes, hints, reminds is thoroughly recognisable as argument. Its own play is in the deliberate juxtaposition of contexts: a contrast between, for instance, the fieldworker and that figure whom the fieldworker thinks he/she is least like, the tourist. Crick also argues that games require rules. “If ‘anything goes,’ one has nonsense, not a game” (1985:85). Boon’s attitude towards fieldwork is “playful,” because it is a concept of an ideal and action that should be simultaneously debunked and preserved (1982:x). He strives for a discourse that is *both* interpretive and systematic (1982:26).

55. Though the phrases “blurred genres” and “genre mixing” are Geertz’s. He writes (1983:23): “The instruments of reasoning are changing and society is less and less represented as an elaborate machine or a quasi-organism and more as a serious game, a sidewalk drama or a behavioral text.” Geertz’s original elucidation of anthropological irony appeared in 1968, in reference to participant observation as a continuously ironic form of conduct based on the recognition of moral tension between anthropologist and informant.

56. “Appalled by the luxuriance of the encompassing growths” of the expanding volumes, Marett (1920:177) notes that there had been a change of design. The unmasking is indeed afterthought, in

idea of postmodernism in anthropology raises questions about the kinds of social relationship to which we imagine it speaks. There are problems with the way it is represented, with pastiche interpreted as jumble. Asking whether we really wish to return to the kinds of thing Frazer wrote is one way of stating them.

#### MODERNIST PROBLEMS

That there might be problems of representation is suggested from aspects of contemporary feminist scholarship. Much feminist discourse is constructed in a plural way.<sup>57</sup> Arguments are juxtaposed, many voices solicited, in the way that feminists speak about their own scholarship. There are no central texts, no definitive techniques; the deliberate transdisciplinary enterprise plays with context. Perspectives from different disciplines are held to illuminate one another; historical or literary or anthropological insights are juxtaposed by writers at once conscious of the different contexts of these disciplines and refusing to take any single context as an organising frame. If this is recognisably postmodern, then feminist scholarship is akin to the postmodernist mood in anthropology (and see Yeatman 1984)<sup>58</sup> with its conscious play with context.

And if feminist scholarship is successful in this regard, then its success lies firmly in the relationship as it is represented between scholarship (genre) and the feminist movement (life). Play with context is creative because of the expressed continuity of purpose between feminists as scholars and feminists as activists. Purposes may be diversely perceived; yet the scholarship is in the end represented as framed off by a special set of social interests. Feminists argue with one another, in their many voices, because they also know themselves as an interest group. There is certainty about that context. The anthropologist is in a rather different position. There appears no such anthropological interest group. For anthropology, play with internal contexts—with the conventions of scholarship (genre)—*looks like* free play with the social context of anthropology as such (life). In fact the resultant uncertainty is intrinsic to anthropological motivation and the drive to study.

Boon (1982:21) asks whether we have to choose between anthropology according to a lot of would-be Frazers or anthropology according to a lot of would-be Malinowskis:

[W]hy not a pluralistic system? There are standards of "convincingness" in various cross-cultural styles and genres, just as there are canons of verisimilitude in realist-ethnography. To assess the accuracy of either Malinowski-like or Frazer-like (or Geertz-like or Lévi-Strauss-like) interpretations, we must plumb the complexities of convergent data—theirs and ours—and renounce the Enlightenment faith in analytic "simplicity," assumptions of direct determinacy, and hopes for unmediated communication, cross-cultural or otherwise.

Perceived cultures appear to one another in exaggerated form (as cultures), "each playing to another the *vis-à-vis*" (p. 26). Cross-cultural discourse inevitably deals in such exaggerations. Fieldwork must happen because communication in a common language does not: fieldwork keeps one half of two communicating cultures (*they*) intact while *we* undertake to write what happens. "What could be more extreme or theatrical and less standardized or objective? Ideally all cultures should be *wes* and *theys* to each other in turn. Politics, however, intrudes" (p. 26). There can be play, then, for the sake of communication between "others," as opposed to free play circumscribed only by individual choice. Perhaps it is the consumerist reduction of communication to self-edification, all knowledge to self-knowledge, which also represents communication itself as theatre and cultural life as text. The deliberate pastiches of postmodernist writing at once endorse and expose that view. Texts cannot survive being pluralised.<sup>59</sup>

The justification for pluralism paradoxically runs against the grain of the idea that we view cultures as dramas or texts. What, then, is the power of this latter imagery? It rests on a certain moral appeal: one text has the same claim on our attention as any other. But then the question follows, what model of the social world yields such a morality? Is it the sense of a shrinking world? Here we are side by side, in multicoloured clothes, jostling and elbowing, beaming satellite images to one another—all equally different and thus all equally the same.<sup>60</sup> Echoes of Frazer indeed. This is a world "with too many voices speaking all at once, a world where syncretism and parodic invention are becoming the rule, not the exception, an urban, multinational world of institutionalized transience" (Clifford 1986:147)—one that treats differences like consumer choice, multicultural events as international food, that

59. They must become (political) discourse. Note that "pluralism" is another of those terms (like "irony" and "pastiche") which can be appropriated either in defence of relativism and free play (see n. 44) or in defence of play and context juxtaposition. I wish it to work in the latter sense here.

60. Geertz labels this as the terror of anti-relativism (1984:265), a fear that everything is as significant, thus as insignificant, as everything else: "The image of vast numbers of anthropology readers running around in so cosmopolitan a frame of mind as to have no view as to what is and isn't true, or good, or beautiful, seems to me largely a fantasy." I am in sympathy with the view that these literary prescriptions may be more preached than practised, but anthropologists were never in the business of dismissing fantasies because they were hard to imagine.

a book which "must henceforth throw aside the last pretence of dramatic unity, and resolve itself into a series of dissolving views." 57. I have since come across a similar position argued in art criticism. Owens particularly draws attention to the feminist position (in this case voiced by an artist) that there is no single theoretical discourse (1985:64). What is at stake, he argues, is the status not only of narrative but of representation itself (p. 66).

58. Yeatman points to certain analytical strategies within feminist social science as postmodern, e.g., taking apart the art versus nature/public versus domestic paradigm (1984:47) but is critical of the extent to which feminist social scientists, for all their talk, still subscribe to modern paradigms.

sees distinctions in the end as cultural creations and not also the workings of social interests against one another—in short, where *all contexts are alike*. All contexts are alike insofar as they give rise to the situated statement, are the frames for people's performances—every reason to adduce example after example simply to show that people's beliefs and practices are all equally bizarre. Is Frazer's compendium, then, our hitchhiker's guide to the global village?

"Global village" is an interesting fiction. Few anthropologists can have actually studied a village that was not riven by conflicting social interests. Indeed, the English village I know best was radically divided between those residents who thought it was a village and those who did not. I do not think anthropologists could take on trust the idea of a global village any more than they really scramble contexts;<sup>61</sup> there is one interest which anthropological writing must continue to endorse, and that is the question of relationships involved in communication. Relationships are specifiable only with reference to contexts.

In considering the disparity between Frazer's popular reputation and his poor anthropological one, I have concentrated on the kind of books he wrote, because it is in people's relations to these artefacts that we see their acclaim or rejection of the author's ideas. Their internal organisation sets up a particular relationship between writer, reader, and subject matter.<sup>62</sup> Frazer shared a text and a language with his audience but proceeded to show how heterogeneous that text was, what a mixture of savagery and civilisation, the ordinary cognate with the exotic. Such a relationship affects the fate of the texts themselves. Contemporary anthropology writes its own history with a clear shift held to have occurred in the 1920s. Whatever Malinowski's overt target, it was Frazer whose writings he rendered the most unreadable. Thus it was not really the discovery of new ideas such as synchrony or ethnocentrism which made Frazer old-fashioned: it was their implementation as a fictional device for the framing of a new relationship between the anthropologist and his or her subject matter, one which also invited a new relationship between the writer and the professionals in his audience who identified with

him.<sup>63</sup> Anthropologists defined as a professional problem the organising of their writing so as to convey concepts for which their own culture had no ready space. A distance was set up between the society being studied and the society to which the anthropologist's chief audience belonged. In belonging to both, in a manner of speaking, the fieldworker presented him- or herself as a mediator. And what was presented as a mediation between life-styles was of course a mediation produced by the text—the way the society was described and the way the anthropologist came to analyze and theorise about it, self-conscious of the specificity of his or her own. Has that technical problem now gone away?

To some extent it has. Particularly over the last 20 years, certain apparent dichotomies between writer, audience, and subject have folded in on themselves. If anthropologists write now about "other peoples," they are writing for subjects who have become an audience. In describing Melanesian marriage ceremonies, I must bear my Melanesian readers in mind. That in turn makes problematic the previously established distinction between writer and subject: I must know on whose behalf and to what end I write.

Perhaps it is this above all which is captured in the pluralist proclamation of postmodernism, which brings the concerns of anthropology close to those of feminist scholarship, and which makes the preoccupation with fiction a thoroughly proper one. Postmoderns have to take care of their texts in new ways. The new ironic juxtapositions focus on the act of writing itself, and interest in the fictional status of what we write keeps open the question for whom we write. Retrospectively to ask about the persuasive fictions of earlier epochs is to ask about how others (Frazer, Malinowski, and the rest) handled our moral problems of literary construction. In answering the question, we create historic shifts between past writers in terms persuasive to our own ears, thereby participating in a postmodern history, reading back into books the strategies of fictionalisation. To construct past works as quasi-intentional literary games is the new ethnocentrism. There is no evidence, after all, that "we" have stopped attributing our problems to "others."

The 1920s shift between Frazer and modernist anthropology helps interpret the alleged shift from modernism to postmodernism in the 1980s. The phenomenon lies in how anthropologists represent what they do, what they say they are writing, and in the purpose of communication. Ideas cannot in the end be divorced from relationships. One could find precursors of modernism in the ideas of great generation of the 1870s

63. Jorion (1983) effectively argues that the emic-etic division in anthropological writing, which is held to correspond to different framings of the world, can also be interpreted as a tension internal to the anthropological text. The tension is between commonsense and technical understandings. In commonsense (emic) language, the anthropologist creates certain grounds for a mutual understanding with *his or her readers* which are then denied or distanced in the technical (etic) gloss. Two different relationships with the audience are thus set up.

61. I would echo Crick's conclusion that Dadaism involves anti-Dadaism: "if anything goes, seriousness, better description and more demanding fieldwork are on the cards too" (1985:86). "All this fiddling around with the properties of composition, inquiry, and explanation represents . . . a radical alteration in the sociological imagination. . . . If the result is not to be elaborate chatter or higher nonsense, a critical consciousness will have to be developed" (Geertz 1983:23). Geertz (1984) suggests that anthropology ultimately battles against provincialism. Cf. Rabinow's "critical cosmopolitanism," which he sets off from postmodernism. Outside anthropology, pluralism as "a reduction to difference to absolute indifference" (Owens 1985:58) is also held up as a spectre from which certain types of postmodernism dissociate themselves. Pluralism is suggested, of course, since "postmodern thought is no longer binary thought" (Owens 1985:62). But on the equivocation of pluralism, see n. 59.

62. In his analyses of ethnographic fiction, Webster (1982) points to several different constitutions of writer-reader relations; he further brings in the overlooked audiences of those about whom we write.



which preceded Frazer, as one could find a precursor for postmodernist writing in Frazer himself. But there has also been a notable sequence of practices in the evolution of new relationships between writer, reader, and subjects. Frazer is not a postmodern in the contemporary anthropological sense, and the modernism of Malinowski instantiated a different set of relations from those current in the generation which Frazer himself read. There can be only one guide to the present shift. The real question is whether a new fiction will come of all the talk. We shall not be able to return to a pre-fictionalised consciousness, but we might be persuaded that there are still significant relationships to be studied.

## Comments

M. R. CRICK

*School of Social Sciences, Deakin University, Victoria  
3217, Australia. 20 XI 86*

Looking back after two decades at Jarvie's account (1964) of "the revolution in anthropology," with its victor Malinowski and its victim Frazer, one is astonished at what a shoddy conception anthropology has of its own past. This is made perhaps the more so by Jarvie's hitching his tale specifically to Popperism, only one of a host of philosophies of science which bear a relation to the actual production and dissemination of scientific ideas somewhat akin to that of a "just-so" story or perhaps a "ripping yarn." In the mid-'80s the number of anthropologists who have conducted and published creditable historical work on the development of the discipline remains exceedingly small. Strathern does not reapproach Frazer with detailed historical information, but she provides us with an interesting framework with which we can ask pointed questions about how ideas come and go, why authorities look authoritative, how an approach becomes passé and then seems to become relevant again, how history realigns itself with our present shifting senses of context. The notion she uses here is "readability," with no doubt much recent semiotic and post-structural weight added to the previously seemingly innocent verbs "to read" and "to write." Frazer became "unreadable"; Malinowski was not "right" or "scientific" but produced a different kind of text. It is not that Frazer ripped things out of context to produce a text, whereas Malinowski produced a holistic sense of culture by keeping things in context; rather, in the post-Malinowski text, the relations between text, context, audience, native, ethnographer, subject, and object were fundamentally realigned. Strathern, then, brings to a historical problem in anthropology the insight that anthropologists above all "write" and that our work is tropic, that our authority is created by a set of writing conventions. White (1973) has already performed this service for history, and anthropology is now in the midst of a reflexive phase, thinking about the representation of representation and writing about writing about writing. While

some see these developments as exciting and long overdue, others are sceptical of their import and still others see them as ludicrous. In a post-paradigm state, the "textual" tradition for some yields useful self-knowledge; at the same time it is immensely annoying to the positivists, materialists, functionalists, and "outdoor" types in the discipline; in fact it may unify the extremely arrogant of almost all epistemological stances.

Apart from Strathern's comments on the Frazer/Malinowski issue, her paper is valuable because she brings to the literature on the "textual" tradition (and to post-structuralism and post-modernism in general) a calm, intelligent, and critical view. It is very difficult to write about post-structuralism or post-modernism, particularly because there is no clear matching between these movements within anthropology and their timing or characteristics in other fields. As Strathern notes, only a handful of anthropologists have attempted to write about these recent developments, but her sketch of some of their traits—a deliberate playing with context, irony, a shifting of boundaries, an anxiety-produced and anxiety-enhancing provocativeness—is fair enough. If Malinowski, instead of aiming to be Joseph Conrad to Frazer's Rider Haggard, had chosen to write like Cervantes or Borges, we should not now be showing the after-effects of a "close encounter" with something alien and horrible. Malinowski's modernism consisted in "being there"; fieldwork "allowed" thorough description of context, allowed the ethnographer to "play" at being a registration device. Ardener, in his Malinowski lecture (1971), set out for us clearly the epistemological mystique and shortcomings of the functionalist fieldwork tradition. What we have now, in a post-modernist phase, is no magisterial author setting out his or her hard data but, with a new (or perhaps better still "collapsed") sense of "subject" and "object," reflexivity, pluralism, a suspicion of authorial authority, and even heteroglossia. We have a new genre.

As Strathern makes clear, post-modernism is very much "after the event," so much so that it might ironically even be termed a project of modernism. We cannot define it; we do not know what type of event we are dealing with. But if it looks ludic and ironic as compared with earlier traditions such as positivism, of course this is a mirage; positivists were playing a game too, but they were not sufficiently conscious of the fact. Handled carefully, there can be reflexive insight; we need not get nonsense and confusion if we remain aware of the deliberate playing with frameworks which is so much a part of this current trend. Ignoring boundaries and strategically shifting them, far from being the same thing, can be opposites, for to shift strategically requires awareness of location in the first place. I am not sure that it is impossible to return to a "pre-fictionalised consciousness," as Strathern puts it. That surety perhaps rests on a faith similar to that of Frazer's colleagues whose belief in the existence of evolutionary laws in human and natural affairs meant that "backsliding" in human history was inconceivable. We must be realistic about the academic environment in which a "hyper-fictionalised" consciousness may take root; few are the advocates (or

even discussants), and the irate or bemused are legion. Rather than assume that the new genre is here to stay, we might see a phase in the competition of ideas in anthropology in the near future which, to misquote Bismarck, an expert in *Realpolitik*, will seem like a period of "blood and irony."

RICHARD FARDON

*Social Anthropology, University of St. Andrews,  
St. Andrews, Fife KY16 9AL, Scotland. 5 XI 86*

This is a timely, subtle, and witty piece. Such nuanced writing begs rereading by a commentator, and the rereading is bound to be more literal-minded and less suggestive than the original. I aim to draw out only some, possible, implications. The debate over anthropological responsibility, in which this article is a question from the floor, is a luxury we can never afford not to afford ourselves.

Although irony becomes an explicit focus of Marilyn Strathern's argument towards the end of the article, the entire essay can be read ironically. How ironic, she seems to be saying, that recent commentators have discovered irony, as if independently, in the writings of members of the founding generation of professional ethnographers. And how ironic that they should choose to present a current break with the authority of the writer in the same terms as Malinowski (especially seen through Jarvie's eyes) presented his break with Frazer. But irony is, of course, a dangerous trope, always liable to overreach the ambitions of its servants; for, to the extent that the two revolutions are the same, unpleasant consequences follow: the revolution must be a dramatic bid for academic attention (for Malinowski's was that, apart from much else), and in throwing out the idea of ethnographic context, the new revolution must be endorsing the Frazerian strategy of the scrapbook construction of monographs. And every first-year student knows that Frazer's work is the last gasp of high imperial evolutionism in cultural anthropology—surely we can't endorse that! The new order already seems less enticing.

Poetics and politics have been joined in the recent double critique of ethnographic writing; they form the subtitle of the current touchstone of the debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986). But the allusive quality of so much of the writing confirms that the poetics rather than the politics have been uppermost in the writers' minds (the politics we have been given tend towards the politics of poetics, or the poetics of politics, but hardly the politics of politics). It seems significant that the old revolution took place in a Britain that was in its colonial heyday (albeit the "British" anthropologists were a mixed bunch), while the new revolution comes from an America in a position at once, in some respects, more powerful and less well defined. The British anthropologists could hardly fail to be aware of the context in which they wrote, even if they chose to ignore it (see Arens 1983 on Evans-Pritchard); it is not altogether clear that the new revolution knows where it is taking place. Malinowski's extreme functionalism suggested to us

that pasts were made to serve our presents; whatever disarray the commentators on ethnographic writing may find in their present, most seem able to agree upon a relatively coherent charter for the past (all know Clifford 1983 to be the crucial text). This at least suggests a present in which writers share the use of a telescope. It is a present from which the past appears simple and clear-cut: monographs were monographs and ethnographers were ethnographers, and readers were made to know it. The new revolutionaries want to shake the apparent complacencies and replace old certainties with pervasive irony. But the older ethnographers were making space, as Strathern puts it, for concepts current in societies which were under overt political subjection; they were challenging the taken-for-granted mental territories of the dominant. Their authority was placed in the service of making some readings *impossible*. Has this argument lost its force with the demise of a few European empires? Will a still later revolution want to claim that irony, multiperspectival realities, radical contingency, and the other rhetoric of uncertainty were simple bad faith? Will it note that polyphony is more democratic than the solo performance in the way that writing a play is more democratic than writing a sonnet, or writing a *Te Deum* more democratic than writing a sonata?

Malinowski made Frazer unreadable; the new revolutionaries would make the ethnographic materials of anthropology infinitely rereadable—but not ethnographically. Interestingly enough, their argument does not make, for instance, Malinowski's *Scientific Theory of Culture* any less unreadable than it has seemed to be for a long time. Theory is out of bounds (Wagner 1986). And I have heard no evidence that sophisticated advertisements of self-doubt are very sympathetically received by the new audience of reactive anthropological subjects that Strathern rightly emphasises. Ironic rereading seems in danger of becoming cultural self-reference: reference to our academic culture and to our preoccupation with the ethnic differences within our nations (Fischer 1986). These have a place in our attentions, but should we entirely "metaphor-mise" the others with whom we started? As Strathern says, we have, or ought to have, a shared interest as anthropologists in the relationships which form the context of our communications. The political implications of recent textual analysis are revealed in the way that Strathern is able to play the rewriters at their own game. The textual toy is so powerful that we have to be careful where it is pointed. Strathern's remarks on context may transpire to be a deceptively charged contribution to this crucial debate.

ELVIN HATCH

*Department of Anthropology, University of California,  
Santa Barbara, Calif. 93106, U.S.A. 20 XII 86*

Much of the power of Strathern's analysis comes from her notion of distance between writer, reader, and subject. Frazer distanced himself not from his reader but from his subject, and we can see why this was so. From his perspective the exotic other was like us in one re-

spect, in that we all have the same underlying interests, aspirations, thought processes, and the like. This is why the distance between writer and reader was insignificant—both could look directly at the ideas and practices of the exotic other and see their point. The difference between the exotic other and us, then, was conceived by Frazer in quantitative terms: they do not have as high intellectual and moral capacities as we.

In modernist anthropology the cultural difference between them and us is conceived in qualitative terms. We do not all have the same underlying interests, aspirations, and ideas, and consequently other cultures need to be understood in their own terms: they believe in witchcraft, we in natural causation and chance, and so on. This is what Strathern refers to as the invention of ethnocentrism, and associated with it is the distancing from each other of writer/reader/subject. The writer is now an intermediary who stands apart from the reader in making the exotic other intelligible.

Another aspect of this distancing process needs emphasis. The modernist anthropologist not only makes the other intelligible but does so by employing a frame of reference that is foreign to the everyday world view of the people being studied: functionalism, personality theory, ethnoscience, structuralism, Marxism, cultural ecology, and so on. The ideas and practices of the exotic other are presented in the context of a framework they would not recognize, and this increases the distance between writer and reader, on one hand, and subject, on the other.

Such anthropological frames of reference as these may be discarded over time, yet they leave a residuum that continues to define the perspective of the anthropologist in observing human phenomena. This residuum includes ideas about the unconscious, human rationality, motivations, and categories of thought (including the notion of distinctive features). It is possible to argue that this residuum is essential to the anthropological enterprise: *some* perspective is needed if one is to grasp the ideas and actions of another (Frazer had one, of course, in his ideas about intellectual and moral capacities), and the articulation of such a perspective may be the most important task at hand. This perspective is synonymous with anthropological theory. It entails a framework that tells us how to look—that is, what to look for and how to understand what we see—though it may never tell us in advance what we may expect to find.

The postmodernist wants to reduce the authority of the ethnographer: to let the reader in on the dialogue between ethnographer and subject or to allow the reader to interact directly with (as Strathern puts it) *exotica* itself. Hence the resemblance between Frazer and postmodernism: the writer is no longer the intermediary between reader and subject.

In seeking to reduce the authority of the ethnographer, the postmodernist also raises questions about the privileged status of the anthropologist's perspective. Functionalism will not do, nor will structuralism, and so on. Yet it is impossible, in principle, to remove all of the perspective we bring to bear in construing others. We do

not really understand others in their own terms; had Evans-Pritchard done so in writing on the Azande he would have presented a dreary, day-by-day account of misfortunes, deaths, and oracular pronouncements and not the internal structure of a foreign system of thought.

Given the importance of perspective in viewing the other, I wonder if it is possible to remove the writer as intermediary and to allow the reader to interact directly with *exotica*. The *exotica* so presented will inevitably be fashioned—excerpted, pruned, and implicitly interpreted. Frazer provides a case in point. His was hardly a presentation of raw text, for he portrayed his “facts” in a way that gave them a very distinctive sense. This was also part of his weakness: he and his readers were largely blind to the fact that they had a perspective, so they were hardly capable of self-criticism. The situation with postmodernism is very different, of course, because this is an age of heightened self-awareness. Yet the removal of the writer as intermediary may serve rather to conceal than to clarify our point of view.

I. C. JARVIE

*Department of Philosophy, York University, 4700  
Keele St., North York, Ont., Canada M3J 1P3. 3 XII 86*

In a recent piece Gellner (1986) lauds social anthropologists for their sensitivity to the difference writing makes to society. He writes, “If men speak to hide their thoughts, they write to hide their society” (referring to the societies studied by anthropologists). The idea is also reflexively true of anthropological writings themselves, which can serve to hide both the narrow society of anthropologists and the wider society to which they belong (Jarvie 1986). Strathern's paper is a case in point.

Strathern's project is to reconceptualise the revolution in anthropology. What was formerly presented as a change in ideas and methods is now to be seen as the invention and diffusion of a new genre of literature. In place of writing in the style of the grand historical speculations of Frazer, the revolution fostered the close-textured, synchronic fieldwork monograph of Malinowski. Each of these genres is a “persuasive fiction.” The specific literary strategy of the ethnographic monograph is a reconstruction of fieldwork experience which manipulates “familiar ideas and concepts to convey alien ones.” This textual construal of the revolution in anthropology was made possible by another change or turn in anthropology: postmodernism. The traditional functionalist game of scoffing at Frazer's literary genre became vulnerable to the postmodernist *tu quoque*: both Frazerians and functionalists produced persuasive fiction. For Strathern, “the real question is whether a new fiction will come of all the [postmodernist] talk.” It is questionable whether this is the *real* question.

While understandably, perhaps, I prefer my own view (Jarvie 1964) of the revolution as a scientific one, involving as it does critical appreciation of past theories and methods combined with their refutation and replacement, I concede that the preference which some an-

thropologists display for an irrationalist alternative comes as no surprise. The revolution did alter the preferred form of anthropological writings, and the more superficial students of literature have only irrationalist explanations of change. Changes in literary fashion have rendered earlier scientific work (Frazer, Newton) "unreadable" (though not for historians). This is a problem, not an explanation, one that cannot be solved by declaring yesterday's science "persuasive fiction" and then, to avoid entrapment, conceding that today's science is persuasive fiction also, as will be tomorrow's science.

The *real* question in all this is what has happened to truth. Strathern takes over Ardener's phrase "persuasive fiction." The choice of words is pregnant. "Persuasive" has overtones of "appealing" or "attractive" but also of advertising and propaganda. "Fiction" is still richer. Most of literature is fiction, as contrasted to fact. But on behalf of fiction it is often claimed that there is in it poetic, literary, or symbolic truth. Behind the irrationalism lurks the esoteric claim to go deeper, for the "persuasive fiction" of anthropology, we remember, utilises familiar ideas and concepts to convey alien ones. The difference between the familiar and the alien being ethnographic, and ethnography being fiction, one wonders who is to be persuaded of what and how.

There are worse muddles and contradictions in Strathern's paper, but these are for philosophers. More pertinent to readers of CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY is the anthropology of it all, an anthropology summed up in her saying, "Ideas cannot in the end be divorced from relationships." What relationships are married to the ideas in Strathern's text? The list of references displays her affines among postmodernist anthropologists. The auspices under which the paper was prepared—first as a Frazer Lecture and then as an article in CA—reveal that her ideas are situated within the relationship of a working anthropologist to fellow professionals. These are apparently tolerant enough that one who characterises their work as "persuasive fictions" need not fear anathematisation; rather CA★ treatment!

If first-order ethnographic monographs are "persuasive fictions," meta-anthropological Frazer Lectures, then, are *a fortiori* "persuasive fictions" also. What, then, are such addresses to the profession at large supposed to persuade us of? Can they possibly be aimed at consigning the work of anthropologists to the same rubbish heap on which lie much of modern and postmodern art and all of postmodernist "theory" and philosophy? Are some anthropologists engaged in deconstructing their profession? Will they then ultimately jump into the dustbin themselves? These are not questions I know how to answer. Let me turn instead to one I can handle: what may be being hidden.

A minor theme running through Strathern's present persuasive fiction with which I can claim some familiarity is my own works. Strathern characterises two of my books as "a bitter attack . . . on modern social anthropology." No good my saying that "a critical appreciation of modern social anthropology" would be a better description; father-killing stories make better fiction than criti-

cal appreciation. Anyway, the author of the fiction is the sole judge of what is the correct description and of the relationship between the characters that that description entails. Her description is intended to maintain a distance in our relationship, to avoid endorsing either my view of the revolution in anthropology or my sharp critique of its reliance on often boring ethnographic detail. (Assuming that ethnographic monographs are fiction, we may wish them more readable and hence persuasive; for that they would better be modelled on the astringent Trollope, Surtees, or Waugh than, as they so often seem to be, on Melville, Dreiser, and Dos Passos.) For my part also there is great incentive to maintain distance from the irresponsible irrationalists who can label the work of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Firth, and Evans-Pritchard "persuasive fiction."

But both our efforts at distance are futile: ideas, Strathern informs us, cannot be divorced from relationships. Her rewriting of the revolution in anthropology is partly a critique of my account. This comment on her paper is a countercritique. The social context of this exchange is one in which what counts is truth, not relationships. The profession of anthropology and the discussion section of one of its leading journals exist not as a kind of PEN club but as a collective search for truth. Strong social and historical bonds connect anthropology to the traditions of science and of scholarship. The attempt to forge a connection to fiction hides the connection to science and scholarship, the social context from which anthropology derives and which gives it meaning. In this society "ideas cannot in the end be divorced from relationships" is the opposite of the truth. Such divorce is not only regular, indeed normal, but intrinsic to the social institutions concerned. Newton gets refuted by Einstein, the Old Testament by Darwin without a ramifying collapse of other social institutions and relationships (Gellner 1974:166–67). Not to understand this is not to have grasped the single most important fact about our society that makes it different from all others: the presence and tradition of science. We should resist fictional accounts of anthropology, however persuasive!

RIK PINXTEN

*Seminar voor Antropologie, Rijksuniversiteit-Gent, Blandijnberg 2, B-9000 Gent, Belgium. 20 XI 86*

Strathern's paper is a remarkably deep analysis of some of the characteristics of contemporary anthropology. I agree with many of her insights. However, since her scope is vast, I am inclined to differ in my appreciation of the "shifts" in anthropology on some points. I will focus on two of these.

1. *Persuasion.* Strathern stresses that any anthropologist is successful to the degree that his or her vision has "effectiveness." I largely agree with this epistemologically relativist interpretation, but, because I consider anthropological discourse a sophisticated, professionally interdisciplinary enterprise, I would have liked a more scholarly treatment of it. Indeed, for nearly 30 years

there has been an empirically based, well-developed discipline known as the new rhetoric or argumentation theory (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958) that provides us with the conceptual apparatus to describe, measure, characterize, and explain a wide variety of phenomena concerning the persuasiveness of a speaker to a particular audience. Moreover, this discipline has been put to use in discriminating the particular features of "scientific" versus "literary" types of persuasion, presupposing universal versus particular audiences. I think that Strathern's arguments would have been strengthened if she had used the concepts and insights of this discipline instead of drawing a rather impressionistic picture of "familiarity," "impact," and "audiences." This is not mere "play" on my part but the expression of my conviction that anthropologists can lay firmer foundations for their own discourse by borrowing from other scientific subcultures, especially when they want to discuss problems which are focused on by the latter. We should not "reinvent" what we can easily and profitably learn from our colleagues in other disciplines.

2. *Postmodernist play.* I am nearly persuaded by Strathern's emphasis on play in postmodernism. However, was not Lowie's "On the Origin of the State" an ironic title, attacking the very idea of historical pretensions? And was not Malinowski trying to provoke his audience in titling one of his books *The Sexual Life of Savages*? Thus, my impression is that we may have more play now than before in anthropology (due to reflexivity), but we are not the first playful generation. A very general intuition that I undoubtedly share with many anthropologists today may complement Strathern's "rapprochement" between Frazer and postmodernism: 19th-century evolutionary and historical views on the relationships between cultures were forcefully rejected by Boas, Malinowski, and others to be replaced by a "scientific" and exclusive emphasis on structure (and function), but with the general tendency to "historicize" or "evolutionize" the sciences (see Prigogine and Stengers 1984) a new interest is emerging in historical, evolutionary, and generally dynamic views of social and cultural phenomena. This trend manifests itself in the reflection of anthropologists about time, the other, structure, and so on. However, the notions of history, evolution, process, etc., used in our time will be different from and certainly more sophisticated than those of Frazer.

In this exciting period of epistemological analysis of our own discipline, irony can give us the distance we need, but it may be only a condition and not the content of our discourse.

PAUL RABINOW

*Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, Calif. 94720, U.S.A. 17 XII 86*

With her usual modesty and brilliance, Strathern shows us how the avant-garde fails to be old-fashioned. The new and the old are ambiguous notions carrying no in-

herent valences. Avant-garde, value-free positions—all texts are equal—can be just as ethnocentric, just as value-laden as the older scientisms. She demonstrates how a certain postmodern ploy—collapsing a history into a jumble of available others—does not escape but merely rephrases the intellectual and ethical issue of the anthropological enterprise: "Do we write the history of the idea of ethnocentrism, or a history of its different premises?" Clarity about premises helps.

Textuality rests on the moral claim that one view is as good as another. Strathern asks what moral world that implies. She answers: one in which all contexts are alike. This was not Frazer's world, and that is one reason he has become unreadable for us. He did not share the modernist conceptions of writing, thinking, and acting. For Frazer and his contemporaries the world had fixed hierarchies and known origins; consequently practices and institutions could be compared through the proliferation of instances. Frazer's method was premodernist in its fixedness; it did not contain a postmodernist proliferation of African and Melanesian voices. Reminding us that, without some sense of context, relationships—between individuals, societies, or texts—are impossible, Strathern alerts us to a current danger in our social practices now spreading into our sciences. "To construct past works as quasi-intentional literary games is the new ethnocentrism. There is no evidence, after all, that 'we' have stopped attributing our problems to 'others.'"

If the "real question is whether a new fiction will come of all the talk," Strathern demonstrates that knowing how to read requires ethical and intellectual comprehension of constraints as well as the powers of the imagination. Her position is perhaps old-fashioned, but her skill in fashioning helps us guard against the glitter of passing fashions.

ELIZABETH TONKIN

*Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, P.O. Box 363, Birmingham B15 2TT, England. 9 XII 86*

Malinowski's distinctive power lay not in the claims he made for himself as theoretical or fieldworking innovator but in his innovative writing. Faced, as all writers must be, with the need for a particular persuasive fiction that would represent his arguments to readers unfamiliar with his subject matter, he devised, as an authorial, authorising presence, the Western fieldworker finding his way into an alien culture. This narrative device replicated his experience and provided a mimetic entry for his readers too. Crucially, it simultaneously also effected a juxtaposition between the alien audience, "them," and the colluding writer and reader, "us."

This to me is Strathern's central and novel point. The new analysts of narrative are mostly dealing with genres of "fiction" which claim to create a world synthetically, not analytically as in "non-fiction." Strathern is right to argue that non-fiction also needs its persuasive fictions and that these affect the content being presented; in this

example they work to sustain that very Otherness which anthropologists today generally wish to transcend.

I think that some of her other good points can be pressed further. She shows very well that Frazer's professed aim of shedding "sober light on the exquisite pictures of the patriarchal age in Genesis" doesn't fit well with what he does. We can uncover still more contradictions in his texts. Frazer suggests that viewing the Bible as literature is not enough: it must also be seen as folklore. Biblical customs are recorded very widely. Now, this discovery might indeed reassure the believer, but it also confounds Christian claims to a unique history. And if the dying God who lives again is a common ritual theme, how can we trust the promise of the Resurrection? Frazer spoke to readers disturbed by Darwinism. His writing could, ambiguously, support quite different responses to Darwin and secularism. He gave fuel to the sceptics—Christianity could be explained as just another mythology—and to the ecumenical—Truth could after all be everywhere. Genesis was not *merely* literature. Besides comforting his readers, as Strathern shows, these ironic hints could, I think, have flattered the intellectual and offered means to rebuild shattered traditions (cf. the notes that garnish Eliot's *Waste Land*). Frazer's ambiguities were held together, his contradictions apparently overcome, by a unifying guarantee: that this was *scientific* scholarship, making use of all the new knowledge—brought about by imperialism. Overt claim and subliminal ideology: no wonder Frazer appealed to so many!

Malinowski took scientism a stage further. As Leach (1957) pointed out, the author-as-fieldworker who authorises his account by being there literally embodies positivism. Malinowski grafted this fiction onto an existing genre, the desert-island mode of travellers' tales, and by moving on into a detailed study of natives' lives, uncommon in a romance, persuaded non-specialist readers that they could be scientific too. One could grasp what he was saying and, as Strathern says, participate in his discoveries without being an anthropologist oneself.

Malinowski through his non-literary efforts added to his readership the specialists he trained and their students in turn, but only part of his literary recipe was followed by these professionals who worked to make anthropology a discipline. In Britain (to which I confine myself) the writers of this second generation successively removed the romance and indeed their authorising presences from the surface of their texts. Peter Morton-Williams told me that he and his post-war contemporaries were told as students to model their work on current natural-science writing. The aim was no longer to persuade the reader to enter a garden of delights but to treat that garden as a positive object to be decomposed. It is still the norm in "science" (academia?) to replace the supposedly subjective "I" by impersonal constructions. These of course mystify because they remove the writer's responsibility for what he or she says and imply that there is Authority for it. Technical language likewise can only make succinct sense to the initiated reader. Thus British social anthropology ceased to

be accessible to interested generalists. Its practitioners are just waking up to the consequences.

Strathern's article suggests how valuable it will be to bring together deconstructionism and our own expertise in social contextualisation to relate ideologies to audiences. We need now to scrutinise the changes in anthropological writing that emerged after Malinowski and before the as-yet tentative attempts of reflexive anthropologists.

STEPHEN A. TYLER AND GEORGE E. MARCUS  
*Department of Anthropology, Rice University, P.O.  
Box 1892, Houston, Tex. 77251, U.S.A. 17 XII 86*

What makes Strathern's reading work is what we might call a double chiasmus, signified by the double juxtaposition Frazer/Malinowski and Malinowski/Frazer. If we were formalists, we might write  $\langle F \times M \rangle \times \langle M \times F \rangle$ . Or, more hieroglyphically, perhaps

$$\begin{array}{c} F \times M \\ \times \\ M \times F \end{array}$$

Frazer is the *con*-text ("against text") for Malinowski. Frazer is his precursor, dialectic antagonist, and the source of his "anxiety of influence." Because Frazer is the text against which Malinowski writes, Malinowski's is the *con*-text ("with text") for Frazer and the text through which Strathern comes to understand Frazer's unreadability. But, having conned to the fact that Malinowski's holistic *con*-text of custom claims not to be a text and covers up its textualization, Strathern uncovers the *con*-text ("trick-text/text-trick")—understands how she was conned by the artifice of the text. This is how the *con* overcomes the text, and as in Derrida's inversion of the historical relation between Plato and Socrates in the image of Plato dictating to Socrates, we can now speak of Malinowski's influence on Frazer with as much justification as of Frazer's on Malinowski. Since for us there was never a Frazer before Malinowski, what can we make of Strathern's desire to convince herself of the sense of a gap that would make a history? Is this just another piece of structuralist synchrony? Maybe, but why not play with the chiasmi Strathern uses to make the gap, like "savagery in civilization"/"civilization in savagery" and "extraordinary to ordinary"/"ordinary to extraordinary," for example? As Strathern says, it makes as much sense for us to read Frazer and Malinowski as if they were writing about our problems as it does to read Frazer after Malinowski, but isn't there something else to play with here? Frazer is the inverse of Malinowski; together they represent the difference between allegory and symbol, hermeneutic and dialectic. Frazer is allegorical and hermeneutical; his is one story told in many ways. Malinowski is symbolical and dialectical; his are many different stories told in the same way. Thus Frazer wrote within a textual tradition that did not call that tradition or its textualization into question but worked,



as Strathern says, to explicate a discourse already known to his audience. He could use the method of *sortes*, of piling up examples, because the story had already been told. Frazer makes a continuity in a textual tradition that runs from Origen and Philo through Augustine and Aquinas, a tradition whose constant problem was to reconcile the seemingly incoherent jumble of exotic fantasies in the biblical text with Greek skepticism and rhetorical forms, to justify it to an economy of discourse that valued symbol, dialectic, syllogism, *dispositio*, and episteme—that is to say, form of discourse as form of knowledge over meaning, memory, affect, and ethic—that is to say, content. Perhaps we could say, then, that Frazer wrote because the accommodation between Christian and pagan, barbarism and civilization, Greek and Hebrew, East and West, self and other worked out in the Western tradition had come under renewed attack from such pagan ideas as evolution, which, as Strathern observes, constituted a disruption in textualization far more severe than the “plain style” of the Cartesians and Baconians because it projected a kind of totalistic emplotment that was both megamyth and metanarrative. Frazer made a new reconciliation. He used the new story of evolution against itself, less in refutation than as a textualizing strategy that made the Bible credible in a new way. As we would say, he used its “negative capability.” And now we can answer Strathern’s question why Frazer’s work attracted so much attention in his day. Frazer worked out a new reconciliation between Christian and pagan, using the new pagan story of evolution to retell the old biblical story and telling the new one as if it had been foretold. His was a reassuring tale of reconciliation, continuity, shared discourse, and shared ethos.

Malinowski, on the other hand, wrote with an emerging pseudopagan discourse of science that valued and exemplified disruption and the new—so long as they worked only at the level of content. The form of discourse remained constant, so the many different tales of the other could be told in a form that never varied. The ethnographic genre, whether invented by Malinowski or not, symbolizes what Strathern describes as Malinowski’s problem—to tell a story about the exotic as if it weren’t exotic. The incomprehensible exotic is rendered understandable by an understandable form that must always hide its practices of textualization lest they undermine its understandability. Textualization was a problem for Malinowski that he could never acknowledge as a problem except in a manner of surreptitious revelation or in opposition to prior textual practices—notably Frazer’s. Malinowski’s text was not part of a continuous hermeneutic tradition with a collection of intertextual references; it was projected from the Trobriands as if it had no textual companions. Its gestures toward the tradition of anthropological discourse were defiant and disruptive, those toward the larger discourse of science insinuating and bombastic. Perhaps we can read Malinowski, then, as the quintessential instance of the dialectic that overcomes the resistance of the other by absolute incorporation, even as it seems to have recognized the independence of the other.

But isn’t all this easy inversion a little too pat, and far too simplistic? After all, is Frazer free of the symbolic and dialectic? Doesn’t the very trope of evolution recapitulate the whole dialectic and its urge to symbolic transcendence? And even though the church fathers used allegories as a major tropic strategy, didn’t Augustine and Aquinas come to terms with the Greeks in both rhetoric and logic? And what about the whole thrust of neo-Platonism? And wasn’t Malinowski as allegorical as anyone else, rewriting *The Heart of Darkness* and all that? Isn’t his notion of “grasping the native’s point of view,” though amusingly imperialist and redolent of Western metaphors of thought and understanding, a succinct paraphrase of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics? And what about relativism? That doesn’t square with incorporating the other, does it? If anyone incorporated, it is more likely to have been Frazer.

Does this mean, then, that Malinowski was already written somehow in Frazer as a kind of subtext and Frazer in Malinowski as a pre-text just because neither allegory nor symbol has ever achieved total hegemony, perhaps because they already implicate one another like Christians and pagans so that every pagan insurrection is really only a means to a further transcendence? No, what we have in mind involves neither the transcendence nor the easy irony of modernism. The context is not already there either as a previously structured field of signifiers, as in the “culture” of Frazer, or as a field of structural signifieds, as in the “cultures” of Malinowski. Context is neither a transcendental signifier nor a transcendental signified, for it emerges only within and by means of the contexts it creates as it is created by them. So, the context is neither there already nor not there, and that is why postmodernism is not ironic; irony requires an outside, a place to step back from the context, a *topos* where impartial, objective narrators are not already figured in the ironies that figure them. Except as illusion, no moment of pure freedom enables authors to describe as they de-scribe or grants texts immunities from communities of readers. Just as there is no place outside the text that does not already implicate the text, there is no text that does not implicate the outside that implicates it implicating it. And so neither texts nor authors break free of the con-texts they can but parody.

In the approximate final third of her essay, Strathern addresses the contemporary reactions to the predicaments posed for anthropology at the moment by the historic chiasmi she has so perceptively explored. Today neither Malinowski’s denial of intertextuality nor Frazer’s certitude about the textual tradition in which he wrote can hold. Thus in place of “many different stories told in the same way” or “one story told in many ways” we are faced with “many stories that can be told in many ways” as a problem of postmodern consciousness—“postmodern” having become a term simultaneously disdained as fashion and seductively embraced across the human sciences as a license to unfix canonic readings and reinvent traditions of research practice. Appropriately and remarkably, this part of Strathern’s essay parodies the influential “postmodern” documents (mostly those of Clifford) being widely read by an-

thropologists, which she seems to disdain at times as "all the talk" (as if nothing more were at stake or nothing more substantial were already being produced as ethnography in this mode); the last part of her essay is thus full of hesitations, ambivalences, equivocations, and ironies. There is an unresolved polyphony in her assessment of this postmodern turn that alternates between caution, dismissiveness, and respectful appreciation for the thrust of the critique of anthropology that is being offered. For example, she recognizes with great sophistication the dangers for effective communication in the spiraling inflation of meanings that the multiple and idiosyncratic contemporary uses of the terms "modernism" and "postmodernism" have wrought. Yet, she relies heavily on a particularly idiosyncratic use of these terms in developing her assessment of recent critiques of anthropology. (We believe that anthropology never self-consciously had a "modernist" moment until the present, when the influences of literary and cultural *classic* modernism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are finally being brought to bear by bridging scholars such as Clifford, Rabinow, and Crapanzano who are equally schooled in literary theory and in the history of anthropology. The fact that "classic" modernism has worn thin and is being debated and assessed more broadly in the human sciences under the banner of postmodernism is a complicating factor for its explicit and unprecedented introduction as a critique of anthropology at the moment. Strathern is very aware that the present discourse she targets as postmodernist originates essentially in debates that anthropology in its own history has until now ignored, yet she relies heavily on more parochial and odder senses of the terms "modernism" and "postmodernism" derived from recent papers by Ardener and Crick, as if they fit smoothly into the history of anthropology.) To cite another example of equivocation, Strathern denies that Frazer can be considered a postmodernist or even a predecessor for a postmodern style in anthropology, yet she repeatedly evokes the contextless jumble in Frazer's writing to suggest in a cautionary way that this might be where "all the talk" is leading. Here, she parodies the technique of recuperating past figures by finding a current significance for them (e.g., Clifford's treatment of Leenhardt) while denying that this should be done, at least with Frazer. Further, she worries about inattention to cultural contexts and systematic relationships in postmodernist play, but she also acknowledges that those who have recently indulged in this are indeed in control of their strategies of juxtaposition and, at a very sophisticated level, concerned with both context and textualization of cultural phenomena.

The various ambivalences in the last part of Strathern's essay are fought to a standstill, and she concludes, true to her parody of the postmodern essay, by evoking with a gesture an ideal or a "good" that is undemonstrated and just the other side of those things which have been the subject of her critical gaze; she intimates that after postmodernist talk "there are still significant relationships to be studied." (We would very much be interested in an elaboration of what she has in mind here.)

What distinguishes Strathern's parody of a "post-

modern" document most saliently from the real thing is that she is not self-consciously in writerly control of her ambivalences and hesitations as a practicing postmodernist supposedly is, or intends to be. Rather, her equivocations are distinctly those of a reader trying to come to terms with provocations like those perpetrated by Clifford, among others. And the point, we believe, of these provocations for anthropologists is not so much to change writing practices radically, as some fear, as to change the conditions of reception of anthropological work, to create an environment open to many more alternative readings of anthropological work than now occur. Far from "a new fiction" coming "of all the talk," the point of all the talk is to prevent a new fiction from arriving by declining to prescribe what should be but instead characterizing what already is. (The polyphonic ideal of the postmodern essayist in anthropology is just that—an ideal, one among others, that masks a rich body of work that is, at least since the 1970s, both experimental in ethos and, at the same time, more interesting and more sophisticated than but thoroughly in line with preceding ethnographic traditions.)

With a practice such as ethnography, in which writers have not seen themselves self-consciously as *writers*, changes in reception—comment and debate on "research findings"—are far more likely and powerful than suggested changes in writing practices (which do eventually follow in the wake of changes in reading), and it is this focus on reception that the postmodern provocations in contemporary anthropology have developed. Ironically (or parodically?), Strathern's essay both exemplifies this effect of "all the talk" and, on the surface, underemphasizes it.

## Reply

MARILYN STRATHERN  
Manchester, England. 13 I 87

Perhaps what saves non-fiction (by definition never "the real thing") from transcendence is its own capacity for standstill at the end: that dealing with one problem will raise others. I am very grateful to the commentators for showing this, for a naive ethnographic-like enquiry into certain anthropological usages has evoked the problem of history, a call for political awareness, and query of my terms. Indeed, my reporting on two sets of terms—Frazer castigated for being "out of context" and "irony" in the vocabulary of my contemporaries—is properly brought to a standstill, for I cannot in fact comment upon them without also determining the meaning they will have in my essay. Naivety will not do.

Nevertheless, I say "ethnographic-like" advisedly. The essay attempted to delimit certain relationships implied in the way anthropologists talk about themselves (and it is "all the talk" about themselves that if anything I "disdain"—they are poor self-representers, not surprisingly [in the mode of psychoanalysis] incapable of apply-

ing to themselves their mediating expertise). One may dispute whether I have accurately reported on the idioms in question. However, that does not seem to be the thrust of Jarvie's objection that I have wilfully turned aside from truth. His comments appear directed centrally at the task I delimited and make a starting point.

I must be a poor communicator for Jarvie to have construed from my account an antinomy between science and fiction. But his response as though I had must give one pause about the runaway character of evocation. If I respond in turn that my attention was not to "literature" but to "writing," I have already compromised significant relationships between them. But to speak plainly: the real question, Jarvie says, is what has happened to truth. Truth about what? On internal evidence it would not appear that truth need rest on the close rendering of what people say, on making explicit one's premises, on distinguishing evaluations as a special type of proposition, or on giving reasons for generalisations—all procedures which I hope I would adopt in establishing ethnographic verities. Jarvie's question is immediately followed by a misrendering—no doubt a slip but the metaphor of (determining) fiction was never imputed to Ardener; the next paragraph hints at muddles and contradictions too awful to reveal, though we are assured of the author's credentials in the matter; rubbish heaps and dustbins are conjured in the language of realism where all is self-evident, and the generalisation that ethnographic detail is often boring is as unsupported here as it was when he first made the assertion.

An apology, then: I am sorry if I have not extended Jarvie the strategic empathy which must underwrite any effort at understanding between persons. But my intention was never to understand him—that is not the kind of relationship at issue. What is at issue is the way ideas are communicated and the effect this has on the structuring of relations between persons. It is clear that I have a long way to go in understanding the relationships between Jarvie's reaction to "persuasive fiction" (fit only for anathematisation) and his noting that the Old Testament gets refuted by Darwin. "The Old Testament" did not "get refuted" by "Darwin," but let me take the shorthand charitably. It remains the case that exactly *this kind of idea* (all of the Old Testament; one scientist's discoveries against a holy book; etc.) has currency in a world indubitably characterised by a "ramifying collapse of other social institutions and relationships." I suppose I must take on board the possibility that Jarvie does not live in that world.

Although the other commentators are more charitable, they are not I think uncritical. One way and another most point to a move beyond focussing on textualisation, which then becomes the ground again to a refiguring of "history" or "politics." To take Tonkin's contrast, one would like to think that this reversal is elicited by the focus on fiction: to characterise non-fiction as a type of fiction gives insight into the kinds of choices we make when, in another semantic frame, we externalise the one in relation to the other.

Thus Crick points out how shoddy anthropology's conception of its past actually is, while Fardon comments on the simple past being constructed by the new revolutionaries. Hatch adds historical detail about Frazer's ideas, as Tonkin does on the reception of both his and Malinowski's, and Pinxten recalls the tradition in argumentation theory that would provide the present argument with the theoretical sophistication it lacks. These are all valuable strictures on my impressionistic picture, and I am grateful for Tyler and Marcus's further elucidation of Frazer's continuity with a textual tradition that does indeed make him both new and not new. However, most of the comments are concerned with the political implications of the self-referential character to the present turn in anthropology.

Crick, chiding me for optimism in registering a shift of ideas, points out that postmodernism may be considered a project of modernism, an observation Pinxten's remarks on play bear out. Yes indeed, as Jameson and Crick himself elsewhere and Tyler and Marcus here suggest, all the features were already there: we have to account for the fact that the present epoch *looks* ludic and *talks* about irony. Fardon dwells on the danger of irony as trope, with a nice ambiguity about the way I press it into service and a nice contrast between the infinite readability of ethnographic materials and the way in which the present revolution may in fact make some readings impossible (the materials will not be read "ethnographically," and by that he means politically). This is the danger of cultural self-reference. Hatch also makes a political point: that the removal of the writer as explicit intermediary may conceal rather than clarify positions which also exist. We do not really understand others in their own terms, and "anthropological theory," with its foreign ideas, has here a significant distancing role. Irony will keep the distance, Pinxten suggests, provided it does not come to define the content of our discourse. Apropos other playful generations, it is of course the place that play occupies that is important: ironic distance has an effect of its own.

Effects ricochet: Rabinow brings us back to the danger in our social practices—the new ethnocentrism in rewriting history. He is right about my being an old-fashioned reader (not "the real thing" in another sense), a "position" and thus a crucial context for the essay. Tonkin provides a further context for understanding the transcendent nature of Frazer's unifying guarantee, his appeal to scientific scholarship. Indeed, her extensions of the ambiguities and contradictions I do no more than adumbrate helpfully break up the concept of "audience" to which I monolithically refer, with its hint that I was a less than adequate contextualist here. But I am out-contextualised by Tyler and Marcus. They construct a double edge of their own. On the one hand, they delightfully rerepresent my interdigitation of Frazer-Malinowski-Frazer, and their pursuit of the accommodation between barbarism and civilisation I found illuminating; on the other hand, they retreat from the play with inversions because they want to get the history straight and put contextualisation on a theoretical base. It is thus rele-

vant to their position, not mine, that I deploy an idiosyncratic usage of “the” modernist/postmodern break, as it is that they take a decision as to whether postmodernism “is” or “is not” ironic, for it is important to their enterprise to divest context of authority. Hence the important observation that all the talk is to prevent a new fiction from arriving—the new writing is not a new set of representations but an attempt to mediate between research findings and readers who will receive them in new ways. It is the old closures on receptivity which must be dismantled. This is indeed important. But if in the end I shy away from self-reference (and pan out words to make them appear not to bear [ap/bear] internal reference to one another), it is not because I do not conceive that “there is no text that does not implicate the outside that implicates it implicating it” but because we lose the difference that the outside makes. Externality gives self-reference its meaning. And there is a reason for putting this asymmetrically and not merely invoking what is also true, that the proposition works vice versa, for this would both be and not be a pat inversion. In fact, the pat-ness of inversions does not worry me—precisely for the reason that the internal relationship between terms does not exhaust my usage of them. Tyler and Marcus remind us that every inversion we deploy is self-referential (savagery-civilisation/Malinowski-Frazer); but the deployment of *particular*, concrete inversions is not. The particularity creates a context, defined necessarily by the internal referencing itself as “outside.” Thus the savagery-civilisation reflex was, at the height of its anthropological currency, challenging assumptions about the progress of human culture. My seeing Malinowski as the precursor of a certain Frazer reflects upon conventions in the writing of anthropological history. Any such contextualisation can of course be recaptured as in turn self-referential, in the same way as “other” can always be collapsed as a version of “self.” But to regard this last position as a final one is to *hide the movement* through which it was reached. It is as important to bring “the other” to bear on the nature of our inversions (“they” the Trobrianders would not recognise “our” Western distinction between savagery and civilisation) as it is to recognise the further inversion (us/them) so implicated. That shift in scale is not produced without the intervening move, the “rupture” indeed to which Tyler refers when he writes (I had not read it before): “Post-modern ethnography is an object of meditation that provokes a rupture with the commonsense world and evokes an aesthetic integration whose therapeutic effect is worked out in the restoration of the commonsense world” (Tyler 1986:134). The question is how we construct the intervening move. We still “need” to know that there is a significant sense in which other people’s intellectual systems do not reflect upon our own and may thus serve as external points of reference for it. How we so press them into service raises the further question of our responsibilities in the matter.

Finally, then, and implicit in Jarvie’s appreciation, to which I return, is what I meant by significant relationships, the “other side” of my subject as Tyler and Mar-

cus so appositely call it. If it is the case that particular fictions inscribe particular relationships between writer, reader, and subjects, then it also follows that if the new fictions are persuasive enough they will make us perceive significant relationships that it will be our new responsibility to define. I was being hopeful. All the equivocations and anxieties in the last part of the paper, including an unsuccessful internal parody (I try to shift perspective, but of course that privileges perspective), turn on a reluctance to yield a present and older sense of responsibility. Fardon makes the point. The special responsibility of the anthropologist has been, so to speak, to monitor rupture: to scrutinise the way in which Western science and scholarship, quite as much as governmental and popular culture, have defined the externality of other people’s societies and cultures. I could not agree more that, and I borrow Tyler’s (1986:139) words again, the “critical function of ethnography derives from the fact that it makes its own contextual grounding part of the question.” We must, as anthropologists, monitor ourselves. But the world is not entirely composed of anthropologists. Whether we like it or not, our ethnographic subjects continue to play an externalising role in the judgments of others. This is a political fact with which our communications—not least among ourselves—must deal.

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