

INTRODUCTION

The Comic Vision of Clifford Geertz

I

Once upon a time, in October 1988, just weeks before the cold war swallowed itself in a tumble of falling masonry in Berlin, overloaded Trabants pouring past the raised barriers at Hungarian checkpoints, a sea of vengeful fists and faces booing their hateful overlord off his balcony in Bucharest, a full-page advertisement in affirmative defense of being a liberal appeared in the *New York Times*.

An unorganized group of prominent academics and intellectuals had united briefly to pay up in order to rebut their president, the amiable, lethal, hotly ideological, charmingly anti-intellectual Ronald Reagan, who had turned “liberal” into a term of open and contemptuous abuse.

It has pretty well stayed that way, the forty-third president notwithstanding, for the succeeding twenty-odd years. The signatories said:

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

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

In one of his finest essays, in which he sought to identify both the moral point and the common ground of all inquiry into the human sciences,² Geertz fell to puzzling out “some of the most thoroughly entrenched tropes of the liberal imagination.” The latter phrase is of course the title of Lionel Trilling’s

famous collection of essays, and Geertz's essay was given as a Trilling Memorial Lecture at Columbia. Those tropes included—in one of Geertz's characteristic, inclusive, and disorienting lists—the integrity of other cultures; the sanctity of all human life (cruelty toward which is, for liberals, the one worst thing, so Richard Rorty says); the principle of equality as between men and women, supremely, but also as between classes, races, and generations; and the always mixed but largely brutal and desolate legacy of colonialism.

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

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

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

This business of “seeing through” the lenses you happen to have picked up and got used to goes very deep. When you remove your spectacles, it's hard to see anything. Good ones are custom-made; they will hardly suit anybody else. So it is with the glasses ground by liberalism. Geertz put his name and his reputation to the advertisement in the *New York Times* because he and his associates rightly felt that, catchall term that it is, their common property marked out as liberalism was being wantonly defiled by the abuse of mere power. And in the name of what? In the names—no doubt, the mixed and motley names—of neoconservatism, or the doctrine of small government and big money; of old nationalism, or the certainty of American righteousness; of a Godhead confidently enlisted on the side of both big money and Old Glory.

The fragments of liberalism were to be shored against these rough and ruinous beasts, and in the more than twenty years since the advertisement ap-

peared, there has been a hidden, unfinished, and titanic struggle going on for the soul of America as it flickered elusively behind and between the stipulations and amendments of the Constitution.

Geertz remained an undaunted and tireless officer in the liberal vanguard, never more so than in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. It is, however, the very nature of his intellectual achievement—as you might say, the magnification and varifocalism of the lenses he has ground—to put freedom or variety of seeing, the sheer multifariousness of the ways there are of being human, the certainty that differing people will live and die for these extreme peculiarities, bang in the center of his and our vision.

Once one can see the strangeness of other people as familiar, then the familiarity of one's own streets becomes estranged. This is a liberalism with a strong tinge of realism. As Geertz himself wrote,

We can at least say something (not of course that we always do) with some concreteness to it. I have never been able to understand why such comments as “your conclusions, such as they are, only cover two million people [Bali], or fifteen million [Morocco], or sixty-five million [Java], and only over some years or centuries,” are supposed to be criticisms. Of course, one can be wrong, and probably, as often as not, one is. But “just” or “merely” trying to figure out Japan, China, Zaire, or the Central Eskimo (or better, some aspect of their life along some chunk of their world line) is not chopped liver, even if it looks less impressive than explanations, theories, or whatnot which have as their object “History,” “Society,” “Man,” “Woman,” or some other grand and elusive upper-case entity.³

One cannot doubt that such a thing can be called liberalism; the concept of freedom is intrinsic to it, but that freedom is itself a constitutive value. It is not merely the desirable, nonmoral circumstance of action—“freedom to . . .” and “freedom from . . .” as Isaiah Berlin had it. It is the *content* of action, freely chosen, self-willed (or culture-willed), the product of an Emersonian self-reliance, dreamed up by America, for sure, but open to everybody to take up and live for themselves. That there are then better and worse ways to live in such freedom only needs pointing out to those cartoonists who pretend that liberalism has no way of distinguishing between good and bad, intelligent or stupid.

Brief lives and the history of nations may go reasonably well, or they may go crazily. The human scientists, each in their particular, overlapping idioms, tell their tales of human endeavor, each understanding them as best they can, and step back. The happiest result is not then “universal” as opposed to “local” (though if he had to, Geertz would always vote “local”); it is a distinct answer to a particular historical question.

II

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

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

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

One thing is needful, to “give style” to one's character—a great and rare art. It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!⁴

This kind of thing is no good to those busy module-managers trying to devise courses in social-scientific methodology for doctoral students. It is, however, precisely Geertz's concern to refuse and, if possible, paralyze the assumptions which direct such courses and which pour concrete over the brains of those who have to take them. The ideology of methodology is always a function of the bureaucratic authority which orders and ratifies the qualifications.⁵ The closer these courses in method come to the making of policy (and as the lectures in this collection indicate, Geertz was well aware of the way his ideas might be bent, for good and ill, to policy purposes), the more their function is to suppress disagreement and wave away conflict in order to ensure the complicity of the oppressed in the preferences of the management.

The inimitability of Geertz's style makes it intractable to discourses upon method. The style is the man, all right, and in being distinctively so cannot be turned into a technique. That same style in his hands is radically opposed to a view of human inquiry (so much influenced at present by the abominable machinations of managerialism) as the deployment of *skills* and the technology of subordination. The discipline of interpretation leads, when it is well pursued, to exact *expression*, and as an antipositivist philosopher much admired by Geertz, R. G. Collingwood, wrote, "Expression is an activity of which there can be no technique."⁶

Art, supremely, is the exact expression of thought and feeling; technique is by definition instrumental, its aim reproducibility. One studies Geertz's thought not as an exercise in (as the unspeakable language has it) "higher-order study skills," but (as Collingwood also puts it, of reading a great poet) in order

not merely [to] understand the poet's expression of his, the poet's emotions, [but that] he is also expressing emotions of his own in the poet's words, which have thus become his own words. As Coleridge put it, we know a man for a poet by the fact that he makes us poets.⁷

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

Clifford Geertz's essays do these things and pass these tests. That is what makes them works of art and human science in action, rather than applications of method. To read them is not to be drilled but to think, the thinking being done informed by the best feelings of which one is capable in the carrying out of the task of interpretation to hand. Geertz is both friend and master; inasmuch as we, his readers, look for instruction, we are his students.

III

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

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

Given his gifts, the *New York Review* was the ideal place for him to speak, with modest authority, upon nearly forty years' worth of the great world issues; from his first appearance reviewing, with muffled hilarity, his disciplinary ancestor, Malinowski, to his last, "Among the Infidels," a few months before his unexpected death and just after he was knocked down by an uninsured and incompetent driver as he traversed the road on a marked crosswalk.

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

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

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

Printing the full range of reviews from the 1967 essay on Malinowski to his last appearance in the *New York Review*, "Among the Infidels," only a few months before his heart operation went fatally wrong in the late summer of 2006, would take 150,000 words and go beyond the purposes of this collection. For my purpose here is to indicate, in this readable, accessible form, a representative selection from a momentous oeuvre: the work of a traveling American typical in his easy openness to the world in all its peculiarity yet exceptional in the acuteness of his vision, as well as the readiness and accuracy with which he knew what to think, how to connect perception to judgment, and how to settle both—informally as it were—in a vision of the human comedy.

Vision isn't quite the right word, however. Vision comes along with a capital letter on it; let's say instead, Geertz's way of being-in-the-world, a serious man on serious earth, is inseparable from his shaping sense of comedy. In lower case and lowish tones of voice—as his friend and admirer, Robert Darnton complained in a memoir, "he talked too fast and mumbled into his beard"⁸—he embodied in his writing and enacted in his thought a vision (dammit) of the modern comedy and its historical formation.

In this he followed Kenneth Burke, one of the mentors from whom he borrowed (with embellishments from Wittgenstein) his signature concept, "dramatism." Burke distinguished between tragedy, understood as impelled by human evil and the supernatural malevolence of history, and comedy, effortfully contrived by human stupidity and corrigible error, perhaps to be put right by human self-knowledge.⁹

In Geertz's sort-of-literary-critical volume of essays on the founding fathers and mothers of anthropology, he ends his preface by paying the book's formal tribute to Burke, "who has no direct connection to it or me, but whose work has served as its governing inspiration at almost every point."¹⁰

Burke had discovered in I. A. Richards the definition of a symbolic act as "the dancing of an attitude" (Geertz pounced on that). He had launched upon his search and research for "a grammar of motives" framed as *comedy*, for "a comic frame of motives would not only avoid the sentimental denial of materialistic factors in human acts. It would also avoid the cynical brutality that comes when such sensitivity is outraged." Burke then, with confident quirkiness, roundly defines comedy as "the maximum of forensic complexity."

Geertz was much seized by the comedy of things; indeed, there is no thinker of our time who is funnier. He has a blunt way with the widespread insistence of contemporary political and sociological writers, borrowed no doubt from

journalism, always to be looking for the truth *behind* the facts and their appearance, poking about for meanings and motives that, as they suppose, everybody is at pains to conceal, but that are, in the key adverb, “really” what is going on. Geertz’s truth, comically plain, is that “the real is as imagined as the imaginary,” that public action, symbolic of ourselves, is all there is to go on.¹¹

Comedies as written by Geertz are therefore peopled by peoples and without sanctimonious inflection: whether as individual thinkers, as nations trekking towards and away from progress, as churches and their congregations struggling for meaning and furious to strike down the meaningless, or as empires, past or present, doing their best for misery or emancipation.

IV

I have grouped the reviews under two headings before adding what Kierkegaard once described as his “final concluding postscript,” composed of the last lectures. The first section, “Sages and Anthropologists” takes in a queer enough *galère*; Geertz once remarked to me that “the *NYR* sends me books about the down-and-outs, the trouserless and the crazies,” and it was so. I have, for example, had to exclude Geertz’s review of *Ishi’s Brain*, the book about the last and most wretched Yahi Indian found mute and cowering in the Californian Sierra in 1911.

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

This is what he made anthropology do, taking the great opportunity thrown open by the Harvard Department of Human Relations in 1950 (still one of the most thrilling innovations by a university trying to make the world a better place), and carrying his subject to the neighboring disciplines for their edification. This first section is constituted by his meditations on this mighty topic, the help and hindrance of the sages, and the absorption of its lessons into the way we think now. His essay for *Encounter* on Levi-Strauss, at once lethal and handsome, which appeared in a later version in *The Interpretation of Cultures* caused Levi-Strauss to say, wincing, when they met, that “it was a bit hard”).

The second section is roundly entitled “Islams and the Fluidity of Nations,” and, in the new world crisis since that religion’s most hysterical commandoes crashed into the most complacent certainties of world wealth, the title needs

no more justification. But in a dictum concluding the essay *Toutes Directions* here (what he called his “house-painting guide”) Geertz’s admonition long before the World Trade Towers atrocity is that “the Islamic City . . . is losing definition and gaining energy.” The minatory moral of that is to locate the multiple sources of the energy and its manifold dramatizations—hence the two-part essay, its title taken, as you’d expect, from a *New Yorker* cartoon, “Which way to Mecca.”

Geertz, in spite of himself, also essayed a larger conspectus, and this section includes those reviews in which, majestically and modestly, he tackles the conditions of whole societies and their shifting places in the world. In two cases (in 1990 and 2005), he envisions the state of the world itself, followed by that half unsanctified by maleness. Naturally, his emphasis falls largely on those two areas, one vastly populous, the other still vastly empty but filling up, which provided the dual subject matter of his career: Indonesia and North Africa. But it was the predominant emphasis of his method to teach his reader how to look through the lenses of one society at the peculiarities of another. Always refusing to accept Hegel’s category of “world-historical nations,” his salutary lesson for his own society was to show it how to look at other principalities making modernity their own un-American way and to draw the moral that their protean shapelessness was the way the world is likely to go. For him, understanding was more a matter of bifocalism than comparativism *tout court*. (He kept uneasily in mind Santayana’s remark that people compare when they can’t get to the root of the matter.)

This collection is certainly intended to be illustrative—“Look, here’s the range; this is what the work was like.” It is also celebratory and valedictory. In part 3, “The Idea of Order” (Geertz was an admirer of Wallace Stevens’s poetry), the five lectures may as well be read as his farewell to the world. The second is a successor fragment of autobiography and self-evaluation providing a footnote to *After the Fact* in 1995 and to the first chapter of *Available Light* in 2000. But in each of these lectures, Geertz at once lifts his eyes cautiously up to a universal human horizon, while standing as firmly as it allows on the broken and irregular ground beneath his feet.

The autobiographical essay is also a long perspective thrown over American intellectual life and its soldiering in the cold war and postmodernity. The one before it is a paper so far given and published only at the Institute for Advanced Study and uncovering, in his characteristic way, “The Near East in the Far” as well as the future in the present. The third takes up some of the questions posed in an earlier three-part essay in *Available Light*, “The World in Pieces,” and once more rehearses the necessity to refuse grand theoretical accounts of globalization, still more the drum-beating anticipation of a clash of civilizations, and to take each oddity on its own terms, whether responded to

by the United States or the United Nations. The fourth—the James Frazer lecture—is, as its title announces, a reiteration of his antiuniversalist liberal-imaginative strictures in the name, nonetheless, of that excellent cliché, “common humanity.”

Finally, at the height of his powers but barely nine months before his death, he ends with his characteristically unsettling lecture given in memorial of Irving Howe and published in the journal *Dissent*, in which he dismantles some of the most reassuring political commonplaces of the day in order to suggest, without rancor, just how shaky are the nation-based narratives with which the powerful interpret the political world, meanwhile proposing others, preferable because local, because domestic, because less deadly, and holding open the future to its unlikelihood.

For many years Geertz had been talking politics as much as anthropology or history. Indeed, he invented out of the babel of the intellectual tongues of his time the outlines of what R. G. Collingwood asked for of his fellow scholar-citizens, “a science of human affairs.”¹² Geertz fashioned such a thing from the medley of what he called the “blurred genres” of contemporary thought,¹³ the using and controlling of which his first and last requirement was that human scientists refuse the unspeakable but alas widely spoken and lockjawed jargon of management and the policy sciences, and recover instead, in W. H. Auden’s fine phrase, a “sane, affirmative speech.”

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

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

This leads of course to an intensely personal sort of relationship between the proprietors as full human beings, there being no Deans, Department Heads, Standing Committees or whatever to hide behind, or

for that matter to dump upon, and the line between home and office gets rather blurred. You hold policy meetings in hallways and streets, seminars in homes, discuss problems evenings, Sundays and whatever. And the result of *that* is you either get along as, to use the vernacular term, friends, not just, to use the professional one, colleagues, or the thing doesn't work.¹⁴

As he went on to say, such arrangements resemble those in a small business, never far away from danger or disaster, its partners united in anxiety and in hope, only doing a few things but obliged to do them extremely well, "for otherwise who needs it?" The result, he said, is "a sort of dialectic of temperaments rather than a division of labor," a powerful alloy of deep friendship between very unlike characters—"the sort of thing that is reputed to have existed in Greece but is rather hard to find in contemporary academia"—compounded of trust, regard, affection, and an argumentatively shared picture of the world.

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