

REVIEW ARTICLE

RITUAL AND EMOTION

GILBERT LEWIS, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980 [Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, General Editor Jack Goody, No. 27]. xvi, 232 pp. £10.50.

In *Art and Illusion* Ernst Gombrich concludes the chapter called 'Pygmalion's Power' with a photograph of a startlingly realistic Renaissance bronze, Riccio's *Box in the Shape of a Crab*. He writes:

If I had it ... on my desk, I might be tempted to play with it, to poke it with my pen, or to warn a child, most unpsychologically, not to touch any paper on my desk or the crab would bite it On the desk, in short, this object would belong to the species crab, subspecies bronze crab. As I contemplate it in its glass case, my reaction is different. I think of certain trends in Renaissance realism which lead to Palissy and his *style rustique*. The object belongs to the species Renaissance bronzes, subspecies bronzes representing crabs.¹

Gombrich intends this to illustrate the historical transformation from 'the archaic magic of image-making' to the subtler pleasures of modern artistic contemplation. But it is perhaps a better illustration of the appropriation of subject-matter in the human sciences: desk to glass case, bronze crab to bronze representing crab, living object to object of study. What in the midst of life bore significance, however mute and undoubled by reflection, must be laboriously reconstituted in quite a different medium, one in which the object enjoys none of its original transparent and intelligible immediacy. Yet the scholarly representation - this is the perennial problem - must in some sense remain faithful to the original, and we must have some way of judging whether it is successful in doing so.

Anthropologists encounter this problem most poignantly compounded in the attempt to understand ritual. The comparison with art history is profoundly appropriate: the art historian brings

¹ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London: Phaidon 1960, p.98.

to the object a trained sensibility, and the raw material from which he works is not so much the object itself as the perceptions arising from the engagement of this sensibility with the object. The labour comes in achieving the sensibility, in learning the idiom which the object's creator and his public shared. By Gilbert Lewis' excellent account, an analogous sensibility must be achieved by the anthropologist. He writes:

... understanding, in the context of another culture, depends on learning. Learning, not intuition: the anthropologist is more a true connoisseur as he learns more about the range of expressive modes and media used in the ritual of a society, the ritual styles and genres, and how they relate to other aspects of life and experience in that society. (p. 28.)

In using such words as 'expressive' and 'connoisseur', in fact, Lewis wishes to argue for more than a loose analogy between anthropology and aesthetic scholarship. He wishes to show that, like the art historian and literary critic, the anthropologist discovers and demonstrates elements in ritual and symbolism which are implicit and not discursively articulated by the practitioners. Symbols may be straightforward and unambiguous, but they may also be mysterious, evoking deeply held but unspoken values. And in the latter case the anthropologist can gloss them, 'just as we could convey something about the identity of a perfume if we paid it close attention and had skill with words' (p. 24). It is even possible to demand rigour of this enterprise.

Furthermore, in insisting that ritual is more like expression than like communication, Lewis accepts gladly that a good deal of ritual has to do with the expression of sentiments and emotions. On his showing there is good reason for including these dark matters fully within the anthropologist's province. For so long as anthropologists affirm their close ties with scholars of the arts they have a special expertise in the elucidation of culturally explicable feeling. In putting a rather stronger defence of this view than Lewis' own, I will imply in this review article that he in fact does not go far enough: it is not merely in ritual, but throughout social life, that anthropologists can, should, indeed often do, elucidate the forms and significance of emotion.

One extreme view which Lewis rejects would prescribe that the explanation of symbolism cannot go beyond what people say about it. Of course, in the light of the practice of ethnographers and the uncertainty and negotiability of ritual symbolism in our own lives (the bestowal of a wedding ring, for example), it might be asked how one could seriously hold that symbolism is explained merely by recording statements about it. But the view has been seriously put forward, and it is not as simple as I have depicted it. Lewis quotes Nadel as an exemplar:

Uncomprehended symbols have no part in social inquiry, their social effectiveness lies in their capacity to indicate; and if they indicate nothing to the actors

they are from our point of view, irrelevant, and indeed no longer symbols (whatever their significance for the psychologist or psychoanalyst).²

This statement can be paraphrased, adding information from the context in which it appears, as follows. Ritual symbols refer directly; they point to, indicate, certain convictions about the world, its nature, and the sort of effective action which may be taken in it. They replicate discursive beliefs. Symbols must therefore in their nature be clear, explicit, and conscious, and since they are so they serve this deictic function for anthropologists as well as for the people themselves. The uncomprehended, the ambiguous, the mysterious - one cannot miss the pejorative - is meat only for psychologists and their ilk.

On further reading, in fact, Nadel seems to treat ritual symbolism as discursive beliefs with a little emotion thrown in for effect. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that, in this view, one would treat a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as a humanist tract set to music. We may dismiss this as wholly inadequate, but Nadel's general statement still possesses force and continuing interest, for quite another reason: because it posits a division of labour between sociology and psychology. This position, I can confidently testify from my observation among British anthropologists, is alive and espoused fervently by many practitioners in the United Kingdom today.

There are sound and persuasive reasons why it should be so. Evans-Pritchard put the case in a very illuminating way:

A man on trial for a crime is found guilty by twelve jurymen and is sentenced by a judge to be punished. The facts of sociological significance are here the existence of a law, the various legal institutions and procedures brought into play by a breach of it, and the action of the political society through its representatives in punishing the criminal. Throughout the process the thoughts and feelings of the accused, the jurymen, and the judge would be found to vary in kind and degree and at different times ... but these variations would not be of concern, or at any rate of immediate concern, to the social anthropologist On the other hand, to the psychologist, who is studying individuals, the feelings, motives, opinions, and so forth, of the actors are of first importance and the legal procedures and processes of secondary interest. This essential difference between social anthropology and psychology is the *pons asinorum* in the learning of social anthropology.³

² S.F. Nadel, *Nupe Religion*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1954, p. 108.

³ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London: Faber and Faber 1951, p. 46.

We can agree, I think, that this does represent, however roughly, the images of the two disciplines in the anthropologists' eyes; and it is certainly the case that anthropologists have had to learn to be careful not to assume too much about what goes on in other people's heads.

But in fact if this division of labour were applied rigorously it would consign to the inner darkness of unreadable thoughts a good deal that is both necessary and interesting to sociology. Let us retain the analogy of the trial. Is it not the case that criminal trials in our own society frequently direct themselves to determining 'feeling, motive, opinions' and the like? Is it not a sociologist's concern, not a psychologist's, to monitor and explain motive and opinion among judges, for example, which determine sentencing practice? And does not much of the conduct - as opposed to procedural rules - in a criminal trial address itself to swaying the feelings, motives, and opinions of the jury? A straightforward account of institutions and procedures, in other words, without an account of the opinions and sentiments which accompany them, or the emotions which they discipline, would be merely legal and not yet properly social anthropological.

I will return to these arguments about the trial shortly. But if for the moment we drop that analogy and use another, that of the healing ritual, it becomes obvious that motives, feelings, and sentiments are integral to what the anthropologist studies. The same is true for occasions whose procedure is less easy to specify: feuds, disputes, death, sexual intercourse. Mauss and Durkheim were prepared to admit feeling to social life, indeed to ritual in particular, under the admittedly curious title of *effervescence*, agitation; why should we impoverish ourselves by ignoring their precedent?

Nor do we so impoverish ourselves: whatever social anthropologists say they do or should do, in fact their practice is, must be, to account for feelings, motives and sentiment. Let us consider the context of Nadel's dictum. Despite his confidence that symbols are explicit and purely cognitive, he does in practice, in writing about Nupe religion, provide a good deal of information and interpretation concerning their implicit and emotional effects, and this interpretation is clearly vital to our understanding. He writes of the symbols - which range in his account from invocations through ritual postures to musical instruments - that they

produce a certain mood, made up of emotional tensions and satisfactions, and of given expectations. Upon this mood fall the words which voice the aims of the ceremonial, so that they gain weight through the very context in which they are spoken or sung; and this mood is further effective as any stirring experience is effective, in offering stimulation and catharsis, in providing sensory pleasure, and, ultimately, in leaving a mark upon experience. (*op. cit.*, p. 106)

This certainly displays a psychology, a view of how minds work,

though it is by no means either academic experimental psychology or psychoanalysis. It resembles aesthetic scholarship, and is drawn from Nadel's sensibility as one present and engaged in witnessing and exploring the range of a genre, Nupe ceremony. We may, of course, wish to revise his thought or query details in his presentation, but what is important is that this aspect of the explanation is both illuminating and indispensable. Without it we would be forever puzzled at the Nupe's choice to present their activities and cognitive beliefs in this peculiar package. Nadel would have failed to account for the immediately self-explanatory character that, I suspect, both anthropologists and participants experience, in their different ways, in ritual.

Why, then, do anthropologists do one thing in practice and in theory say they should do another? One answer is that they hold in theory a mistaken view about the nature of sentiment. In their programmatic statements Nadel and Evans-Pritchard locate sentiment wholly within individuals, and treat it as a private and fundamentally unknowable matter. They identify the study of sentiment, in other words, with methodological individualism, the assumption that human phenomena are ultimately explicable by reference to individuals' experience and feelings alone. They implicitly agree with Steven Lukes' reasoning in rejecting methodological individualism. Lukes writes:

... many features of social phenomena are observable (e.g. the procedure of a court) while many features of individuals are not (e.g. intentions). Both individual and social phenomena have observable and non-observable features. If [methodological individualism] means that individual phenomena are easy to understand, while social phenomena are not ... this is highly implausible: compare the procedure of the court with the motives of the criminal.⁴

But the opposition between the rules of the court and the criminal's motives is misleading. The rules, to be sure, must be observable and easily understood, for otherwise they would not serve their function. The motives of the criminal, on the other hand, are not observable; indeed they lie in the past with the act to which they were linked. The court nevertheless assumes that the relevant details of the act with the relevant details of the motive can be retrieved, that they can be made subject to public discovery, and that they are, to that extent, easy to understand. (They may of course be disputed in court, but so may parts of the court proceeding itself.) Furthermore, displays of emotion in court on the part of witnesses, for example, may be taken straightforwardly to reveal intentions and motives, such as hostility to the court or the intention to lie to save one's skin. Among the conventions which allow the court to proceed at

⁴ S. Lukes, *Individualism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1973, p. 117.

all are those governing the expression - and the suppression - of emotions.

For the greater part of emotion - its occasions, its expression, its significance - is conventional, learned, and to that extent transparent and inferrable, though only by one who knows the culture well. Indeed the expression of emotion may require anthropological comment precisely because it is easy to understand in a particular sense: it is implicit, interpreted without articulate reasoning, too obvious to require such reasoning. The distinction between private, unreadable feelings, fit only for psychologists, and explicit public rules, to be studied by anthropologists, is a false one. Emotion and sentiment play a public and commonly intelligible part in social life, and to that extent we can and do study it.⁵

This is not to say that anthropologists possess a universal key, an algorithm, for determining the significance, especially the emotional significance, of expression in ritual. Lewis laboriously and to great effect rejects this view in the course of solving the thorny ethnographic problem which provides most of the illustrative material in his essay. The problem was this: the men of the Gnau, a people of the West Sepik District of New Guinea among whom he worked, cut their penises to make them bleed on certain ritual occasions. Other peoples in the area do so as well, and among them penis-bleeding is explicitly equated with menstruation and with ridding oneself of dangerous sexual pollution. The Gnau in their statements, however, do not equate it with menstruation at all. Yet the difficulty could not be solved simply by direct questioning, for the Gnau were unable to substitute an unequivocal explanation of their own for that of menstruation. For all that penis-bleeding was unmistakably of profound significance to them, their understanding of it was implicit and not clearly articulated. What was to prevent Lewis from producing a tempting and tidy explanation, substantiated by the Gnau's neighbours, to the effect that Gnau do *really* equate penis-bleeding with menstruation?

⁵ It has been put to me that, whereas the explicit and transparent demonstration of motive, honesty, is valued in American culture, the dissimulation of motive in favour of smooth and predictable social interaction, tact, is valued in British middle-class culture. The latter, it has been suggested, might be explained by the experience of the English Civil War, which was settled only at the expense of learning to hide one's religious sentiments in favour of public order. If accepted this would explain the taste among many British anthropologists for sharply dividing an inner and unexplained private world from an outer world of rule-bound behaviour. It would also explain the cold reception psychoanalysis has received in Britain. Ioan Lewis has puzzled over this in the introduction to *Symbols and Sentiments*, London: Academic Press 1977.

A great deal. Lewis compared the actions of the ritual, the verbal and material items which accompanied them, and the symbols and metaphors inherent in those actions and phrases with their appearance elsewhere in Gnau life. This is a slow and painstaking business, for neither the provenance nor the placement of each piece of evidence within the constellation of other evidence can be prescribed or predicted. He set the penis-bleeding, in other words, in the broadest possible context within Gnau culture. In the event his explanation veered steadily and decisively away from the specifically sexual, reproductive, and fearful connotations which penis-bleeding has among the other peoples. The Gnau practice has to do, not with gender and sexuality, but with the fostering of growth and maturation in individuals of both sexes, and with the application of ritual heat to that end. Rules for the application of penis blood do not have to do with the avoidance of sexual pollution, but with the orderly and caring bestowal of elders' maturing power on juniors.

Lewis' argument is convincing because it possesses, I think, a rigour which consists of two elements inextricably mingled. The first is that he has asked the right question, for in the final analysis it is a problem of the deployment of emotional accents within Gnau culture. Referring to Gombrich, he writes: 'the problem phrased more abstractly is to get classifier and modifier right: is *Don Quixote* a comic novel with tragic overtones, or a tragic novel with comic aspects?' (p. 132.) Given that handling the penis must have its sexual implications, is sexuality a major or minor theme in penis-bleeding? It is not the mere amassing of detail to support a case which renders an answer to such a question credible, for we are used to swallowing whole the most elaborate and aliensystems of thought which, considered purely in themselves, could as well be attached to one set of emotional emphases and values as to another. As Lewis writes: 'When we consider other people's symbols from the outside, our own beliefs uninvolved, make play with exotic material and images, we are liable to miss their true seriousness.' (p. 198.) Thus, for example, Lewis shows that the sister's son who receives the mother's brother's penis blood is likened to a creature sheltering in a hole, a plant nourished by ashes, and the moon led into the sky by the evening star. What unifies these bizarrely different images is the emotional emphasis on nourishment and protection which the mother's brother offers his nephew. It is this 'true seriousness', like the 'experience of feelings which one's own life involves', that persuades us that Lewis' argument is securely anchored in Gnau life.

This might be thought to be an argument for an intuitive and universal reading of symbolism, but the second element of Lewis' rigour, his insistence that symbols be read from their cultural context, implies to the contrary that symbols are quite culture-specific. Indeed, he sees in the context-bound nature of symbolic expression an argument against the view that 'meanings are intrinsic to the actions themselves'. Rather (again following Gombrich) he argues that 'expression, and its interpretation,

depends on choice and selection within a particular context and structure' (p. 5). There are no grounds, in other words, for a theory that ritual symbols are naturally motivated, that there is an 'intuitive natural resonance' between expressions and what they express. Symbols are chosen within a spectrum of possibilities, and the breadth of the spectrum and the allocation of values within it cannot be pre-judged. Even tears, Lewis argues (pp.27-28), require collateral evidence, some knowledge of the alternatives, to be interpreted. There are no symbols with an unequivocal and universally intelligible psychological meaning - tears or laughter, penis-like tubers or vulva-like fruits, mandalas or hermaphrodites - and to that extent the elucidation of sentiment and its expression must lie with the anthropologist, not the experimental psychologist or psychoanalyst.

And by extension this is also an argument against the simply understood and concrete world by which symbolism is measured by materialists. (The case against them, and for the primacy of culture and its interpretation, has been put quite effectively by Marshall Sahlins in *Culture and Practical Reason*.⁶) They might retort, of course, that such a position as Lewis' and Gombrich's leads to complete cultural relativism: without some common intuitively understandable significance of a concrete sort, they would say, we could never find the key to others' symbolism. But Lewis and Gombrich must not be understood to espouse such a view. They accept that in the case of the human body, for example, there is a weak sense in which symbolism is universal, in that once we know what a gesture means, we can see that it does so clearly. We can see, in other words, its 'true seriousness'. They accept the potential intelligibility among all humans without which anthropology, the human sciences, and common life would be impossible. What they reject is a strong sense of interpretation: that expressions reveal an unambiguous material or psychological world apart from their cultural context.

I could go on expanding and approving Lewis' arguments, but I hope I have made my point: Lewis quite rightly denies various kinds of reductionism, views that ritual or symbolism can be simply, rather than densely, explained. Perhaps his greatest efforts are directed against the view that ritual and symbolism are a kind of communication. Nor is ritual simply a way of making things happen. Of the three views - that ritual is communicative, instrumental, or expressive - it is most useful to regard it as expressive, like theatre; for by so doing one includes at the very beginning the most difficult yet most interesting features. And this decision opens the discussion onto some of Lewis' most incisive insights. He argues in detail that what is necessarily clear, unambiguous, and rule-like about ritual is how to do it, whereas the meaning may well be ambiguous, polysemous, and myste-

⁶ M. Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1976.

rious: ambiguous, in that it may offer two or more meanings simultaneously; polysemous, in that it may have discrete meanings to discrete categories of participants; and mysterious, in that it may be an invitation to contemplate the horizons of existence. He demonstrates these points decisively, through both abstract argument and the Gnau material, and I commend his work as a warning and an encouragement to field workers to face squarely the inherent complexity of rendering ritual into discursive prose.

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