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Functionalists Write, Too: Frazer/Malinowski and the Semiotics of the Monograph¹

James A. Boon

What does the ethnographer do? – he writes
(Geertz 1973:19).

Part of the business of anthropology is to make superficially exotic practices appear familiar and superficially familiar practices exotic. Regardless of how such practices are experienced by observers, they are interpreted by observers in writing: notes, articles, books. That ethnographic description and ethnological comparison occur *as writing* suggests the fundamental symbolic remove from whatever immediacy or presence anthropological discourse presumes to embody. All varieties of writing are semiotic systems – shifting signs and symbols that stand for (replace, substitute, differ from) what they are conventionally understood to ‘represent’. Moreover, any writing of ethnographic detail and ethnological generalization in whatever style or format is constrained by sets of rules and values that at their fullest extent we call cultures.

Fieldwork – ‘being there’ – offers no exception to these semiotic facts. Fieldwork is not only a way of doing; it is also a device for writing, a format for organizing description, a conceit around which ethnographic discourse revolves. (It was not always so.) At this level fieldwork, despite the fact that it happens, is a ‘fiction’. Cross-cultural interpretation requires outside help, even when fieldwork works. Cultures cannot be penetrated simply with passports, survey sheets, statistics, genealogies, dictionaries;

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or intuition, benign tolerance, indomitable self-confidence, or studious self-effacement (although each of these may occasionally help!). Rather, cross-cultural interpretation must be *made* to happen; and it is made to happen by means of semiotic operations derived from sources beyond the conditions of fieldwork proper, as narrowly construed in the functionalist school.

This paper contrasts some of the semiotic properties of functionalist books with one kind of comparative book they replaced. Because all anthropological accounts (whether or not they place fieldwork at the center of their endeavors) exist in writing, it is germane to compare different varieties of anthropology *as texts*. In the present case, this exercise also facilitates our begging the difference between ethnography and literature, since one of the texts discussed is by James Frazer. Many works in the history of cross-cultural discourse have blurred the now-standard dividing line between description and invention. Two formats that strike me as particularly important in this respect are Menippean satire, including books like (!) Thomas More's *Utopia* and Mutatuli's *Max Havelaar, or The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*; and ironic comedies of remotest manners, like Forster's *Passage to India*. Several articles in this issue of *Semiotica* suggest links between ethnography and travel narrative; they reveal semiotic shapes in conversations and interviews between observer and informants and in fieldnotes, diaries, and other intimate communications or supposedly private documents. Much anthropological interpretation has crystallized in self-therapeutic letters-home; Margaret Mead's corpus is testament to this fact: her books were all rehearsed in epistolary forms. Yet, the only modern professional text I know that critically implements the porousness of anthropology/literature in a way that enlarges both sides of the divide is Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques*.²

In the following pages I disturb the distinction between anthropology and literature in a playful, puffed-up commentary that takes its cue from Frazer's early touting of Malinowski. My general point is that 'fieldwork' itself is a symbolic device at the heart of a conventional, ultimately arbitrary, kind of writing. By recognizing that the end-products of cross-cultural discourse – its books – are themselves conventionalized genres, we can better explore the entire range of semiotic operations of which anthropology – in the bush and at the keyboard – is composed.

Open-air Ethnography

Whereas 'isms' *look* positive, they are all negatively infused, taking their form antithetically to other 'isms' (some elements of which, paradoxically, they often end by incorporating) (Burke 1970:24n).

Anthropological functionalism commenced broadly, in fact sweepingly, and only narrowed as it prospered. Bronislaw Malinowski, ‘godfather and standard bearer’ of functionalism in Britain, first championed the idea of fieldwork as a total immersion in a particular society (1960:xxviii). Yet he concluded his initial book-length account of ‘native enterprise and adventure’ in the Trobriand Islands, not with final field data about *kula*-type inter-island exchange networks, but with a florid salute to comparative studies extending well beyond Melanesia:

Thus the details and technicalities of the Kula acquire their meaning in so far only as they express some central attitude of mind of the natives, and thus broaden our knowledge, widen our outlook and deepen our grasp of human nature.

What interests me really in the study of the native is his outlook on things, his *Weltanschauung*, the breath of life and reality which he breathes and by which he lives. Every human culture gives its members a definite vision of the world, a definite zest of life ...

Though it may be given to us for a moment to enter into the soul of a savage and through his eyes to look at the outer world and feel ourselves what it must feel to *him* to be himself – yet our final goal is to enrich and deepen our own world’s vision ...

The study of Ethnology – so often mistaken by its very votaries for an idle hunting after curios, for a ramble among the savage and fantastic shapes of ‘barbarous customs and crude superstitions’ – might become one of the most deeply philosophic, enlightening and elevating disciplines of scientific research. (1960:517)

Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), Malinowski’s book on Trobriand trade and economic life, became an instant classic. This happy fate was foreseen by James G. Frazer, the eminent Scottish comparatist whose celebrated *Golden Bough* (1890 ...) had inspired Malinowski to pursue anthropology. Frazer’s preface to *Argonauts* expresses boundless praise:

It is characteristic of Dr. Malinowski’s method that he takes full account of the complexity of human nature. He sees man, so to say, in the round and not in the flat. He remembers that man is a creature of emotion at least as much as of reason, and he is constantly at pains to discover the emotional as well as the rational basis of human action. The man of science, like the man of letters, is too apt to view mankind only in the abstract, selecting for his consideration

a single side of our complex and many-sided being. Of this one-sided treatment Molière is a conspicuous example among great writers. ... Very different is the presentation of human nature in the greater artists, such as Cervantes and Shakespeare: their characters are solid, being drawn not from one side only but from many (1961:ix)

The implicit compliment – Malinowski stands to ethnography as Shakespeare to literature – was gradually forgotten by its beneficiary. As Malinowski developed functionalist method and theory, his followers professed diminishing esteem for Frazer, the ‘father of institutionalized academic social anthropology’ (Jarvie 1969:1).

Frazer’s *Golden Bough* became an antithesis (along with evolutionism and diffusionism) of developing functionalism. I. C. Jarvie reviews the matter as purely political strategy:

Bronislaw Malinowski plotted and directed the evolution in social anthropology. It was a genuine revolution, aiming to overthrow the establishment of Frazer and Tylor and their ideas; but mainly it was against Frazer. ...

One should not be misled by the curiously affectionate personal relations between Malinowski and Frazer. Admittedly Frazer wrote a nice foreword to *Argonauts* and Malinowski wrote a magnanimous tribute to Frazer after the latter’s death; but this should not disguise the fact that Malinowski started a war for control and won it.

Malinowski’s new ways were fieldwork (‘come down off the verandah’) and functionalism (‘study the ritual, not the belief’).... The difference between Frazer’s work and Malinowski’s is not merely in methodology, as it should have been. In Malinowski’s hands the science of man was twisted into an inductivist and relativist science, with no clear connections with the basic metaphysical problem of the unity of mankind at all. In all these I think the role of Radcliffe-Brown was that of a consolidator. His contribution was to strengthen the doctrine of functionalism by bringing in the element of structure; in almost all else connected with revolution he went along with Malinowski. (1969; 173–175)

With hindsight, the reason for the apparent revolution appears clear enough. Frazer deemed primitive life ritual – echoed in our own folklore, superstitions, and ceremony – an allegory of a sensational tragic theme that underlies basic religious and political institutions: the office holder is slain to perpetuate the office. As we shall see, the only thing whole

in *The Golden Bough*, eventually 13 volumes long, is the allegory itself. In contrast, functionalists came to construe primitive groups as routine individuals interrelated through the stable mechanisms of their whole-societies, whose workings could be thoroughly documented by the lone participant-observer. Theirs was an open-air anthropology freed from the complacencies of the armchair. The standardized history of modern British social anthropology is often presented as a self-congratulatory chronicle of the scientific fieldwork method emerging triumphant out of Victorian blather.

The contrast between Frazer and Malinowski was exaggerated in retrospect by functionalists (and was reexaggerated later in Jarvie's tabloid-like account). Their compatibility ran deeper than a token tribute paid by the elder in the novice's professional-birth announcement later reciprocated in the elder's official death-notice. The functionalist preference for ritual over belief (or more fancily action over idea, or perhaps nowadays praxis over exegesis) in fact recalls Frazer's methodological advance over Tylor's less paradoxical *Primitive Culture* (1871). Tylor had reduced nonliterate religions to beliefs in the pervasive agency-spirit of matter – the primitive doctrine of animism. Frazer bypassed the pale foreshadowing of doctrine to emphasize the rich array of primitive rites. *The Golden Bough* internalizes the contrast between itself and its subject matter; its prose implies a paradox of verisimilitude: unbelievable rites written believably. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* attempted merely to collate and compare native creeds implicit in field reports. *Primitive Culture* offered not a prose of rites but a creed ('animism') of presumable native creeds. (Any discrepancy between source material and ethnological account remains back in the piece-meal field reports by missionaries, civil servants, or travelers). Frazer, on the other hand, ushers a basic discrepancy (we might call it rite/write) into ethnological tomes themselves, as a motive force generating *The Golden Bough's* expanding volumes of prose. This contrast between Tylor and Frazer suggests a development from one-dimensional reportage to multi-dimensional representation. Why else would Elliot, Joyce, Lawrence, and similar readers have thrived on Frazer?

Thus, Malinowski's emphasis on rites itself derives from Frazer. Unlike Frazer, however, Malinowski's prose accounts adopt mechanistic models and conventions of space-time isolates that are associated with realist and naturalist novels (and theories of novels). Nevertheless, and this is the crucial point, both Frazer and Malinowski could be – in the Auerbachian sense implying representational illusionism – *read*. Moreover, judging from the early reactions to Malinowski's books of even professional anthropological readers, Frazer became passé less because Malinowski converted Frazer's rambling evolutionism into systematic science than because Frazer's expanding literary allegory was updated

by Malinowski until it resembled narrative realism. As A. I. Richards has recalled:

In comparison with works such as those of Frazer, Crawley, Westermarck, or Durkheim which we read at the time..., [Malinowski's] work seemed lively and stimulating, and we began actually to visualize ourselves 'in the field.'

The couvade was no longer a laughable eccentricity but a social mechanism for the public assumption of the father's duties towards the child. (1964:19)

'Actually to visualize ourselves "in the field"' Richards read Malinowski as Emma Bovary read novels.

The most conspicuous continuity between Frazer and Malinowski's writing was their means of legitimating interest in matters savage. Like Frazer, Malinowski drew an analogy with an episode from the mythical Mediterranean to lend an instant aura of grandeur to Trobriand usages. It was *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* before Malinowski could risk *The Sexual Life of Savages*. And the inscription 'Argonauts' alone conveyed the sort of synthesis he heralds in the Frazerian conclusion to his 1922 opus. This parallel between practicing Melanesians and heroes from classical legend enabled Malinowski to convert humble Trobrianders into a book – a monograph – that required readers to preoccupy themselves with exploits less exotic than remote. Malinowski gave his readers fair warning:

Thus the first and basic ideal of ethnographic field work is to give a clear and firm outline of the social constitution, and disentangle the laws and regularities of all cultural phenomena from the irrelevancies. The firm skeleton of the tribal life has to be first ascertained. This ideal imposes in the first place the fundamental obligation of giving a complete survey of the phenomena, and not of picking out the sensational, the singular, still less the funny and quaint. The time when we could tolerate accounts presenting us the natives as a distorted, childish caricature of a human being are gone. This picture is false, and like many other falsehoods, it has been killed by Science. The field Ethnographer has seriously and soberly to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary, and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the-way. (1960:10–11)

Today this passage, too, sounds like an oblique attack on Frazer, but judging from his introduction, Frazer himself did not think so. Moreover,

the material in *Argonauts* was no more objectively drab and commonplace than the title. Nor was the *kula* the sum, average, and common denominator of all Trobriand activities; rather it was a particularly well-formed set of institutions, certainly as select as, for example, the Zuni ceremonies, Dobu magic, and Kwakiutl potlatches that later shaped Ruth Benedict's justly celebrated *Patterns of Culture*. Why else would the *kula* account have so influenced Benedict herself, or that other arch-deductivist, Marcel Mauss?

Finally, like Frazer, Malinowski lingered over the sensational. Even in books less Frazerian than *Argonauts*, he dressed drab practices in literary analogy, sometimes through convoluted negativity:

The whole mortuary ritual is, in fact, perhaps the most difficult and bewildering aspect of Trobriand culture for the investigating sociologist. In the overgrowth of ceremonial, in the inextricable maze of obligations and counter-obligation, stretching out into a long series of ritual acts, there is to be found a whole world of conceptions – social, moral, and mythological – the majority of which struck me as quite unexpected and difficult to reconcile with the generally accepted views of the human attitude towards death and mourning. Throughout this ritual, the unfortunate remains of the man are constantly worried. His body is twice exhumed; it is cut up; some of its bones are peeled out of the carcass, are handled, are given to one party and then to another, until at last they come to a final rest. And what makes the whole performance most disconcerting is the absence of the real protagonist – *Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark*. For the spirit of the dead man knows nothing about all that happens to his body and bones, and cares less, since he is already leading a happy existence in Tuma, the netherworld, having breathed of the magic of oblivion and formed new ties. ... The ritual performances at his twice-opened grave and over his buried remains, and all that is done with his relics, are merely a social game, where the various groupings into which the community has re-crystallized at his death play against each other. This, I must add with great emphasis, represents the actual contemporary view of the natives, and contains no hypothetical reference to the origins or past history of this institution. Whether the dead man always had his spiritual back turned on the Trobriand mortuary ritual, or whether his spirit has gradually evaporated from it – it is not for the field-worker to decide. (1929:148–9; emphasis added)

The passing, sober resolution of *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) hardly registers after the evocative account of exhumation and, above all, the

theatrical allusion to the drama of the Dane. Malinowski's structural-functional successors tried to purge such 'digressions' from the monograph genre. Evans-Pritchard, for example, branded them with the least flattering comparison he could think of, Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, this 'discursive, or perhaps I should say chatty and feminine, book with a leaning towards the picturesque, what I call the rustling-of-the-wind-in-the-palm-trees kind of anthropological writing, for which Malinowski set the fashion' (1962:96). But the eventual deprecation of some of Mead's and Malinowski's liveliest discourse should not prompt us to forget that the Malinowskian monograph was launched as the flagship *Argonauts* on Frazer's literary vogue. Although the genre rode that vogue's crest into other, less literary lagoons, they were never, while Malinowski himself stood at the helm, commonplace, drab, or ordinary ones. (My extended metaphor should condition us for Frazer, directly.)

The Monograph Genre

What do functionalists do? – they write too. And what do they write? – monographs. The monograph genre formed, with the fieldwork method, the heart of functionalism. Frazer was superseded by both a new kind of method and a new kind of book. The monograph was an intensive, concerted description and analysis of routine life collected (and in this respect Radcliffe-Brown's *Andaman Islanders* did not qualify) in the native language during a protracted visit to an intact society. It was offered neither as a handbook for colonial functionaries; nor as evidence supporting theories about classification, evolution, or diffusion of physical, customary, or linguistic traits; but as pure description, with a dash of humanistic hopes:

Perhaps as we read the account of these remote customs there may emerge feeling of solidarity with the endeavours and ambitions of these natives. Perhaps man's mentality will be revealed to us and brought near, along some lines which we never have followed before. Perhaps through realizing human nature in a shape very distant and foreign to us, we shall have some light shed on our own. In this, and in this case only, we shall be justified in feeling that it has been worth our while to understand these natives, their institutions and customs, and that we have gathered some profit from the Kula. (Malinowski 1960:25)

The monograph remained the ultimate means prescribed by Malinowski for realizing that 'science of Man' whose 'most refined and deepest version' would produce 'the understanding of other men's point of view' (1961:518). Echoing developments in literary realism – what Frye

calls the ‘art of verisimilitude’ (1957:136) – monographs underscored the earthy activities of native populations, to counteract earlier images of vapid otherworldliness. The author as fieldworker was always implicitly present; the author as author was always implicitly absent – a standard convention of realist fiction (cf. Booth 1961). Monograph readers presumably share the observer’s experience as he documents a working social machine that is seen through evocations of the practical and emotional lives of the individuals implementing it. Frye’s characterization of realist ‘archetypes’ in literature again applies: ‘Realism ... evokes the response “How like that is to what we know!” When what is written is *like* what is known, we have an art of extended or implied simile. And as realism is an art of implicit simile, myth is an art of implicit metaphorical identity. ... In myth we see the structural principles of literature isolated; in realism we see the *same* structural principles (not similar ones) fitting into a context of plausibility’ (1957:136).

As with any revolutionary leader, Malinowski’s freshness, so ‘lively and stimulating’ to Richards and others, withered in the routinizations of his followers. A stylistic taboo on authorial viewpoint helped rigidify the monograph format. Its orders of contents – physical surroundings firmly first, religion vaguely last, kinship and social organization determiningly at the core – became so unquestioned that any departure from the convention, such as Bateson’s *Naven*, was instantly conspicuous. Because the proper fieldwork method was presumed equal to solving any problems, the genre provoked little self-consciousness. In an oft-cited rule-of-thumb, Evans-Pritchard allowed ten years for producing a first monograph after two or three years’ fieldwork (cf. Fox 1977:viii). Yet increasingly methodology was formulated for fieldwork alone, with writing left to occur, one supposes, commonsensically – that is, in accordance with implicit monograph conventions. Functionalists balanced the agonizing circumspection of the meticulously standardized *Notes and Queries* on the proper collection of field data with automatic adherence to the monograph’s order of contents. In part the emphasis on social structure developed by Radcliffe-Brown and others reinforced the tendency to conformity. Radically differing cultures were paradoxically inscribed in disarmingly similar books. If anthropologists are to generalize, we may never quite overcome this paradox; yet we can at least bear witness to it. What subtleties of other cultures has the discourse of the normative monograph obscured?

Functionalist monographs portrayed cultures as functionalists imagined them: island-like space-time isolates of interlocking, reinforcing systems of relationships. When this preconception is duly acknowledged, there is nothing wrong with it; and structural functionalists and structuralists alike (with Durkheim’s help) moved beyond atomistic views of societies

and cultures as agglomerations of evolved traits, sometimes accelerating, sometimes lagging in the process. Many functionalists, however, would resist my suggestion that the preferred genre of the monograph itself accounts for some of the success of the functionalist school. They would wish monographs to *re-present* what societies are, as an entity apart from how they can be inscribed.

One path to constructive semiotic doubt about the functionalist monograph entails pondering what it routinely, or perhaps strategically, omitted. The standard average monograph characteristically lacked several chapters:

(1) Chapters on relations between a particular culture and others, and on that culture's own sense of others. Evolutionists, 'conjectural historians', and students of migration and diffusion – despite their storied excesses – managed to convey a truth functionalists avoided: no society is, culturally, an island. Monographs need not have neglected evidence of alternatives to a society's beliefs and practices. Such alternatives can often be investigated indirectly next door (as in Lienhardt's study of the Dinka [1961], which complements Evans-Pritchard's Nuer material [1940, 1956]). In functionalist approaches, even restudies of a given society could not give attention to dialectics: recall the disputes between Redfield and Lewis about Mexican villagers or debates over Zuñi ethos and character in tribal studies (see Murphy 1971:27–31). In investigations of acculturation as well, the fiction of a stable space-time isolate with a singular set of key social mechanisms remained the guiding image of standard accounts.

(2) Chapters on the history of conceptualizing the population as a 'culture' (cf. Boon 1977a) and on the ultimate fact of fieldwork: the significance of a stranger inserting himself into the routine context of a face-to-face society. Although this last 'chapter' pervaded Malinowski's initial Trobriand accounts, it never became an integral component of monograph-writing. *Argonauts* contains protracted confessions:

I would get out from under my mosquito net, to find around me the village life beginning to stir, or the people well advanced in their working day according to the hour and also to the season, for they get up and begin their labors early or late, as work presses. As I went on my morning walk through the village, I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals; I could see the arrangements for the day's work, people starting on their errands, or groups of men and women busy at some manufacturing tasks. ... Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, formed the atmosphere of my daily life, as well as of theirs. (1960:7)

Not only did this sort of information become a mere token in later functionalist works, but Malinowski's early candor was eliminated altogether: 'It is very nice to have a base in a white man's compound for the stores, and know there is a refuge there in times of sickness and surfeit of native' (1960:6). Unfortunately Malinowski's sense of the irony of his own situation was also eliminated: 'In fact, as they knew that I would thrust my nose into everything, even where a well-mannered native would not dream of intruding, they finished by regarding me as part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco' (1961:8). 'Surfeit of native'. And reciprocally, surfeit of anthropologist!

Much selective forgetting of these strengths in functionalism's founder was necessary before the posthumous publication of Malinowski's field diary could create its stir (1967). His diary converts the ethnographer's 'surfeit of native' to earthier expressions. (Trobrianders had doubtless voiced their own sense of nuisance in comparable ways.) Professionals disturbed by Malinowski's private inscriptions apparently still believed that the champion of fieldwork was less fallible, less human – more objective – than his subjects of study: a brand of arrogance by no means confined to social anthropology. To Malinowski's credit, we can imagine that had he been stranded several years in the traditional courts of Versailles or the Escorial, to which he favourably compared Trobriand life (1960:10), these natives too would have been derided in his diary, although with different epithets.

But my point is that functionalism increasingly resisted reflexivity. Developed as a normal science, it eliminated any sense of absurdity surrounding the investigator's position, even after the collapse of colonialism meant that the absurdities could no longer be so easily avoided. Functionalists neglected to acknowledge that all cultural traditions interrelate, British empiricism and confident 'common sense' included. In addition they failed to ask, of all things, what corresponded to 'anthropology' in the societies they observed. The promise of complexity and full-vision in Malinowski's *Argonauts* was routinized as a neo-utilitarianism stretched even to the bizarre Trobriands. Functionalism became an anthropology without irony.

Frazer Recalled

Let us set aside the ideological clarion call for open-air fieldwork and look from functionalist-books back to the Frazer-book they replaced. *The Golden Bough*, more systematic than monographists would later admit, demonstrated that primitive, archaic, and contemporary religious rituals and institutions were variations on the theme of the legend of Aricia. The organic argument was less a matter of evolution or history than

allegory. For Frazer human ritual diversity bore empirical witness to the fundamental paradox behind kingship and perhaps any system of social authority: it is necessary to kill the *person* filling the *office* of priest-king (thus vividly distinguishing the institutional component from the individual) in order to regenerate the nature-base that sustains the society. This ‘strange and recurring tragedy’, so conspicuous against ‘the polished Italian culture of the day’, enabled Frazer to coordinate complex social and ritual usages: from the link between periodic licentiousness and abundant harvests, to dissociable souls and the amalgamation of temporal and ecclesiastical power. To cite just a fragment of this once-famous beginning:

... No one who has seen the calm water of the Lake of Nemi, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it. Diana herself might still be lingering by this lonely shore, haunting these woodlands wild. In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy. ... The lake and the grove were sometimes known as the lake and grove of Aricia. In that grove grew a certain tree round which, at any hour of the day and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prow. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon. He was at once a priest and murderer; and the man for whom he was watching was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. For such was the rule of the sanctuary: a candidate for the priesthood could succeed to office only by slaying the incumbent priest in single combat, and could himself retain office only until he was in turn slain by a stronger or craftier. Moreover – and this is especially significant – he could fling his challenge only if he had first succeeded in plucking a golden bough from the tree which the priest was guarding.

The post which was held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of King of the Wood: but surely no crowned head every lay uneasier or was visited by more evil dreams... we picture to ourselves the scene as it might have been witnessed by a belated wayfarer on one of those wild autumn nights when the dead leaves are falling thick, and the winds seem to be singing the dirge of the dying year. (Frazer 1959:31–32)

An implicit theory of social contract and role differentiation (though it was never quite phrased this way), linked to the ritual recognition of nature’s cyclical rhythms, guided Frazer’s quest through ethnographic whatnots. At a time when the empire was just past its prime, he managed to convert

those aspects of colonialized populations (human sacrifice, fertility rites) that were abhorrent to Victorian and Edwardian public sensitivities into an acceptable specialization for Britain's first chair of social anthropology (at Liverpool). Frazer rendered tawdry ethnographica palatable: and he challenged the standard civilizational prejudice for *lettres* by proclaiming the significance of all peoples' religious practices:

The position of the anthropologist of to-day resembles in some sort the position of classical scholars at the revival of learning. ... And as the scholar of the Renaissance found not merely fresh food for thought but a new field of labor in the dusts and faded manuscripts of Greece and Rome, so in the mass of materials that is steadily pouring in from many sides – from buried cities of remotest antiquity as well as from the rudest savages of the desert and the jungle – we of today must recognize a new province of knowledge which will task the energies of generations of students to master. (Frazer 1959:xxv)

'Rude savages' had fascinated natural scientists throughout the century, as is evidenced by the voyage of Darwin's *Beagle* in 1831 and the expeditions late in the century by W. H. R. Rivers et al. Malinowski only eventually dismissed Frazer's vision, but he immediately converted the expedition-format into the fieldwork-format. Malinowski inscribed native practices not as exotic specimens but as downright human experience. Frazer on the other hand, neither expeditionist nor fieldworker (and really not much of an evolutionist), represented the culmination of traditional compilations of 'fardles of fashions' and cabinets of curiosities (cf. Hodgen 1971: ch. IV). His inspired connoisseurship of exotic rites was never geared to the rites' practitioners, whether tribesman or archbishop. Tomes by Frazer and others working in his image (such as Crawley 1927) were books of records with rites-transposed commended to the reader's imagination for empathetic response. An expandable, interpretive catalogue of the world-wide range of human ritual usages had first appeared in English in 1625 in Samuel Purchas's *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, it last did so in the fullest edition of *The Golden Bough* (see note 1).

Malinowski made Frazer's books of records obsolete by writing books purportedly of the people: Tró Briand garden magic is presented, we are to assume, as experienced. But the functionalist revolution required a people to be inscribed in monograph form. And it would be difficult to prove the constraints on monographic discourse any less conventional, indeed any less 'literary', than Frazer's allegory. Functionalists, after all, write realism, a discourse as 'tropic' as any other.³ Frazer, on the other hand, wrote sometimes sentimentalized neo-romance. Frye again provides the apposite contrast: 'Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; [realist]

naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean ... the tendency ... to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to 'realism', to conventionalize content in an idealized direction' (1957:136–137). Frazer's implied savages suffer (along with the civilized religions succeeding them) the consequences of building societies 'on the sands of superstition rather than on the rock of nature' (1959:xxvi). In contrast functionalist natives go about their sometimes peculiar businesses – subsistence, navigation, magic, myth, burial – simply to reinforce their social teleology. Malinowski replaced Frazer's allegory (less abruptly than many functionalists later insisted) with a metaphor of mechanics, not celestial but mundane, psychological, and everyday. This metaphor is indeed a 'world's vision' such as Malinowski called for, but it was not quite sustained by functionalists themselves, and it lacked the 'love of the variety and independence of the various cultures' that the earlier, still Frazerian Malinowski had professed.

As Vickery (1973) stresses, Frazer (like Proust) must be read with Renan and Chateaubriand. If we place him in this company, we are more likely to savor his 'prose style of pellucid grace touched with an irony suggestive of Anatole France' (Baugh 1967:1590). But Frazer's vision, too, may have been touched with irony – Romantic irony? – which perhaps further explains the increasing disdain of functionalists.

Leach (1970:65) has alluded unflatteringly to parallels between Lévi-Strauss and Frazer; such is the fashion (cf. Boon 1977b). Yet not even Lévi-Strauss's foreshadowing of the twilight of man in the post-Nihilist finale of *Mythologiques* surpasses Frazer's concluding scene (following a thin evolutionary metaphor) of crepuscular Christianity; perhaps Frazer retained ambivalent suspicions of Phoenix-like, rather priest-king-of-Nemi-like, ritual resilience:

Without dipping so far into the future, we may illustrate the course which thought has hitherto run by likening it to a web woven of three different threads – the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths drawn from observation of nature, of which men in all ages have possessed a store. Could we then survey the web of thought from the beginning, we should probably perceive it to be at first a chequer of black and white, a patchwork of true and false notions, hardly tinged as yet by the red thread of religion. But carry your eye further along the fabric and you will remark that, while the black and white chequer still runs through it, there rests on the middle portion of the web, where religion has entered most deeply into its texture, a dark crimson stain, which shades off insensibly into a lighter tint as the white thread of science

is woven more and more into the tissue. To a web thus chequered and stained, thus shot with threads of diverse hues, but gradually changing colour the farther it is unrolled, the state of modern thought, with all its divergent aims and conflicting tendencies, may be compared. Will the great movement which for centuries has been slowly altering the complexion of thought be continued in the near future? or will a reaction set in which may arrest progress and even undo much that has been done? To keep up our parable, what will be the colour of the web which the Fates are now weaving on the humming loom of time? will it be white or red? We cannot tell. A faint glimmering light illumines the backward portion of the web. Clouds and thick darkness hide the other end. . . .

Our long voyage of discovery is over and our bark has drooped her weary sails in port at last. Once more we take the road to Nemi. It is evening, and as we climb the long slope of the Appian Way up to the Alban Hills, we look back and see the sky aflame with sunset, its golden glory resting like the aureole of a dying saint over Rome and touching with a crest of fire the dome of St. Peter's. The sight once seen can never be forgotten, but we turn from it and pursue our way darkling along the mountain side, till we come to Nemi and look down on the lake in its deep hollow, now fast disappearing in the evening shadows. The place has changed but little since Diana received the homage of her worshippers in the sacred grove. The temple of the sylvan goddess, indeed, has vanished and the King of the Wood no longer stands sentinel over the Golden Bough. But Nemi's woods are still green, and as the sunset fades above them in the west, there comes to us, borne on the swell of the wind, the sound of the church bells of Rome ringing the Angelus. *Ave Maria!* Sweet and solemn they chime out from the distant city and die lingeringly across the wide Campagnan marshes. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi!* Ave Maria! (1959:741–742)

The appropriate semiotic channel for this message is oral delivery from a secular pulpit. Yet many anthropologists have never experienced this text. Nowadays, whatever ethnographers do, they seldom read Frazer. For a discipline that strives to understand principles by which cultures communicate, here then is a pretty state of affairs: Frazer as scapegoat, buried (alive?) with Crawley and the like, abandoned in the name of functionalist science.

Functionalists would have been more consistent had they not disowned Frazer but contextualized him and mechanistically explained his corpus. This task, however, might have proved difficult, because Frazer's work seems antithetical to its own context. To explain how Edinburgh

rationality produced Frazer or how British academia sustained his somewhat deviant work requires us to confront a semiotic paradox that functionalists avoided: how cultures, perfectly commonsensical from within, nevertheless flirt with their own 'alternatives', gain critical self-distance, formulate complex (rather than simply reactionary) perspectives on others, embrace negativities, confront (even admire) what they themselves are *not*. However faulty its allegory, Frazer's *Golden Bough* both conveyed and exemplified, both described and epitomized, a profound motive force throughout human cultures: rituals, myths, and religions (and in Frazer's own case *rites-written*), mutually exaggerate, reciprocally radicalize, their meanings. The lowest common denominator of cultures in the prose of *The Golden Bough* is something less like mechanism and more like antithesis.

Conclusions

I have suggested that functionalist monographs are as conventional and nonrepresentational as Frazer's allegory. Similarly, ethnographic descriptions are as figurative as literature. Do we need both a kinship theory of epics, romances, lyrics, and novels and a stylistics and discourse-theory of ethnographies? How can anthropology and literature shirk each other, as long as ethnographers write? Can the two enterprises be set mutually into critical perspective, so that our glib confidence in the boundary between them may be shaken?

To start, we might join Frazer in deeming Malinowski anthropology's Shakespeare (I would prefer to call him a Balzac or a Zola) by way of the Trobriands. Would functionalists then accept Lévi-Strauss as anthropology's Proust by way of tribal myth (cf. Boon 1972: chapter VI)? Unlike Frazer, I seek an anthropological Molière as well, since comedy is the most difficult of all cross-cultural achievements, especially in our ponderously solemn age. Science-minded anthropologists will doubtless complain that my analogies make living cultures themselves secondary (oddly enough, however, *they* are always awaiting anthropology's Newton or Einstein!). Not at all; rather, the literary analogy acknowledges that living cultures in anthropology are inherently written, inscribed; how else could they be 'known'? Furthermore, what anthropologist would deny that writing – literature, ethnographic detail, comparative interpretation – is constrained by conventions that we designate 'cultures'?

But many people will understandably object: if anthropology is as genre-laden as literature, what becomes of the issues of falsifiability and accuracy? One answer: they are, like cultures and languages themselves, elaborately conventionalized. The fact that functionalist fieldwork and monograph-writing were standardized as 'normal' anthropological science

does not mean that the standards were natural or objective; it means rather that they were consensual: disciplinary 'social facts'. By the same token, Frazer's writing might have endured as the norm of a collective endeavor. By the grace of God and Malinowski, it didn't. I say so seriously, because if forced to choose one or the other exemplar, I too would vote for Malinowski, even though Frazer's allegory of perpetuated ritual-role differentiation plus nature-base may surpass functionalist mechanism in clarifying certain phenomena. But my question is: need we choose? Must we have either anthropology according to a lot of would-be Frazers or anthropology according to a lot of would-be Malinowskis? Why not consolidate the differences: anthropology according to a lot of would-be Hocarts! Or better yet, why not a plural 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 semiotics of convergent data and complex messages – theirs and ours – and renounce positivist hopes of analytic simplicity, assumptions of direct determinacy, or semiotically naïve faith in unmediated communication, cross-cultural or otherwise.

In the meantime the analogy between literature and ethnology deserves further play. Most symbolic anthropologists could, I suspect, name their current Dante, especially if I add 'by way of Ndembu'. But this question is too easy, since Victor Turner himself has commented on Dante in light of Ndembu symbology (1975:17). (Dante lovers who cringe at the thought are beneath anthropological contempt, right down in Ndembuesque Inferno). Nearer home, we might pose Clifford Geertz by way of Indonesia and Morocco as our James (William and Henry?): or is he our Trilling? Is Raymond Firth anthropology's Trollope by way of Tikopia? Any candidates for Melville?

Once these dissertations are complete, what about the other side? Who is the Edmund Leach (by way of what) of literature? Or in extending the metaphor to Leach, should we select an author-critic-philosopher: the Wilde, the Edmund Wilson, the Taine (Marvin Harris?), the Saint-Beuve, the Leo Spitzer, the eventual always-already Derrida of anthropology? Text-involved *littérateurs* may show little interest in the analogy – all the more reason, then, for commending the anthropologist in whom litterateurs (Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence...) were interested: Sir James Frazer, our Spencer, Scott, and Tennyson by way of everywhere. *Le roi est mort...*

Notes

1. A somewhat different version of this paper forms part of a chapter on 'The exaggeration of cultures' in my book *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology*

in the *Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions and Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). There I develop topics only alluded to here, for example: the semiotics of 'averaging' and typing in ethnographic and historical descriptions; the cultural shape of 'common sense', following Geertz; rationality as a religious value and a product of history rather than nature; the role of polemics in works by Evans-Pritchard, Leach, and many others in both standardizing and dislocating modes of ethnological discourse. For relevant sources, see the bibliography in *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*; see also the review article by Marcus and Cushman on 'Ethnographies as texts' (1982).

There is currently extensive restudying, reanalyzing, and rereading of Malinowski. For recent thoughts on *kula*, see Damon (1980) and Weiner (1976): see also Young (1979). Malinowski's diary (1967) is put to creative use in Herbert (1980). Payne (1981) makes interesting suggestions about Malinowski's style in the fieldwork 'trilogy': however, he assumes the diary offers a privileged access to forces behind Malinowski's writing and ends by projecting onto the works a psychobiography. My aim is not to review works on Malinowski's texts but to state vividly the Malinowski/Frazer (monograph/romance) distinction, in order to shake it. I thank Michael Herzfeld, Lee Drummond, and Walter Herbert for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article.

2. For elaborations of these points, see my *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, and Boon 1979.

3. Ethnographic discourse is 'tropic' in the same way White (1974, 1978) has argued for historical texts. Even conventional-looking ethnographies – for example, Mead's work on the Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli of New Guinea (1963) – do strange things with first-person pronouns. An extreme example may help illustrate ethnography's 'tropic' qualities. Genette's influential study (1979) of narrative structures detects in Proust's prose a device he calls the 'pseudo-iterative': it poses events thick with accumulations of excruciating particularities as if they were typical. I can best suggest the device with a parody: 'It was one of those days when starlings and crickets sing sweetly and Aunt Leonie would have her recently returned runaway cook make extra efforts to please the palates of a visiting dignitary, just recovered from a bout of...'. That ethnographic monographs are inherently concerned with the bizarre, the everyday, and the palpably universal makes their discourse a field-day for pseudo-iteratives. Some anthropologists have tried to debunk pseudo-iteratives in standard ethnography, without considering why they cannot be completely avoided. Mary Douglas, for example, remarks: 'In my opinion it is less accurate to say that most Africans are nature-worshippers than to say most London journalists are Greek Orthodox' (1975:75).

Any ethnological generalization, like the ethnographic pseudo-iterative, interweaves contrastive propositions and exaggeration; it cannot be reduced to reportage.

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Brown, R.H. (1990) 'Rhetoric, textuality, and the postmodern turn in sociological theory', *Sociologic The Malinowski Monographs* showcase groundbreaking monographs that contribute to the emergence of new ethnographically-inspired theories. In tribute to the foundational, yet productively contentious, nature of the ethnographic imagination in anthropology, this series honors Bronislaw Malinowski, the coiner of the term "ethnographic theory." The series publishes short monographs that develop and critique key concepts in ethnographic theory (e.g., money, magic, belief, imagination, world, humor, love, etc.), and standard anthropological monographs based on original research that emphasize the ana Structural functionalism, or simply functionalism, is "a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability". This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole, and believes that society has evolved like organisms. This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms