

Chapter 5

As they like it: overinterpretation and hyporeality in Bali.

Bali overflows with meaning. As the illustration below shows, meaning has even found its way into exported Indonesian representations of themselves. A glorious intellectual genealogy climaxing with Bateson and Mead, Geertz and Boon, ends limply in advertising copy for Bank Bumi Daya. In Bali even capitalism has been aestheticized. Or is it aesthetics commoditized? In the advertisement Balinese epitomize Indonesia; while dance epitomizes Bali. And meaning is what motivates Balinese dance. But how did meaning get into the dance? And according to whom?

The right rhythm for your business



Every motion how small it may be has a meaning and gets the full attention from this Bali dancer. If not, she is not a real dancer.

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The problem these days, to paraphrase Evans-Pritchard, is that there's only one method in social anthropology, the interpretive method - and that's impossible (Needham 1975: 365). It is not however self-evident that social actions are either interpretable or, what follows, meaningful, except in a trivial sense. For instance, there is a well known and very difficult movement in Balinese dance, *magulu (w)angsul*, which involves moving the head from side to side smoothly, while keeping it vertical. I once asked some dancers what the meaning (*arti*) was to be greeted with a laugh and told it had none! It was appreciated because it was so difficult to do well.¹ To succeed was to be *tekek*, firm, precise; just as good speech should be *seken*, clear, definite. Only when a dancer has mastered the use of the body can they assume a *sebeng bingar*, an expression of deep inner contentment, radiate light (*masinar becik*) when dancing, so that the audience feels *buka girik*, as if it has been tickled and aroused. It is about achieving an effect. Balinese are highly critical commentators on what is considered good or bad, but do so largely without recourse to meaning. Such Balinese reflections on their own practices though stand in stark contrast to what scholars insufflate into them. Interpretation is so central to the definition of the anthropologist as knowing subject, of the object of study and the required disciplinary practices however that questioning its universal applicability must be rather like questioning the existence of God in the Vatican. The result is to pre-empt inquiry into the conditions under which it is justifiable or appropriate to rely on interpretation or to impute meaning.

On interpretation

In anthropological practice, interpreting has come, profligately, to embrace any activity from expounding the meaning of something abstruse, to making clear, to giving a particular explanation.² In short, it is what anthropologists do. The word has a more specialist sense: the method, goal or subject matter of hermeneutics. This is not just an obscure German philosophical genealogy culminating in Habermas, but by routes as diverse

¹ Felicia Hughes-Freeland, a former student of mine, uses detailed ethnography from Yogyakarta to provide a devastating critique of the habit of reading meaning into dance (1986; 1991).

² Appositely, one of Wittgenstein's key expositions is on the confused senses of interpretation. Significantly paralleling Balinese usage, he notes that to interpret is 'to do something' (1958: 212).

as Weber and Freud has permeated human scientific thinking; and has even had a significant impact via Heidegger on post-structuralists such as Foucault and on Derrida. My interest however is especially in anthropological uses of hermeneutics. It so happens that the doyen of Interpretive Anthropology, Clifford Geertz, has used Bali to illustrate his method. Geertz's work expounds and exemplifies many of the kinds of interpretive methods and assumptions invoked by other anthropologists. So, rather than engage in sweeping generalizations, I confine myself to interpretation as it has actually been practised on Balinese.

Interpretation creates a dilemma for anthropologists. As Dan Sperber notes

the project of a scientific anthropology meets with a major difficulty: it is impossible to describe a cultural phenomenon...without taking into account the ideas of the participants. However, ideas cannot be observed, but only intuitively understood: they cannot be described but only interpreted (1985: 9).

Sperber's task therefore is to get from intuitive understandings to true descriptions, which may be falsified and so are scientific. Taking examples from Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer religion*, Sperber argues the extent to which an anthropologist reworks supposed observations in the course of even the most apparently raw factual account. What mediates is

anthropologists' technical vocabulary...a medley of words to be used where straightforward translations are wanting: 'sacrifice', 'divination', 'priest'...'symbol', 'marriage'... When they seem to be developing a theory of sacrifice, they are, actually, pursuing [the] work of second (or nth) degree interpretation' etc. (1985: 25, 27).

This is what makes

interpretive generalizations differ radically from descriptive generalizations. An interpretation is adequate when it is faithful, a description is adequate when it is true (1985: 29).

As usual I find myself agreeing heartily with the first half of what Sperber writes and disagreeing furiously with the second. Not only description and explanation involve interpretation in some sense or other, but so do translation and even transcription. The idea, however, that you can drive a wedge between fidelity to ideas and true descriptions looks gently dated and unnecessarily dualistic (Quine 1953a; Davidson 1973), although the vision still seems to excite the occasional analytical philosopher. For some

reason, even quite intelligent anthropologists retain a touching affection in the powers of impartial observation, when we spend so much time asking people to explain what it is we have just seen. Sperber attempts to escape by resort to a scientized epidemiology of representations, which is a subtle form of representationism and semiological regression (Fabian 1991c). His 'participants' however turn out to be the usual passive, defanged objects of anthropological inquiry, whose ideas conveniently reflect or instantiate collective representations, the raw materials of the thinking anthropologist.

The prize for good guesses

Considering how broad the claims made for interpretation, it turns out to be quite a difficult animal to track down. When it comes to spelling out what is involved in the approach he has made his own, Geertz becomes rather coy. What does come across though is that an interpretive theory of culture is 'essentially a semiotic one' (1973c: 5). As Geertz relies very heavily for his theory on the work of Ricoeur, it is worth quoting the organ grinder himself:

the primary sense of the word 'hermeneutics' concerns the rules required for the interpretation of the written documents of our culture...
Auslegung (interpretation, exegesis)...covers only a limited category of signs, those which are fixed by writing, including all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing (1979: 73).

The difficulty is that this interpretation or exegesis is not confined to the analysis of signs in any obviously Saussurean manner. Hermeneutics is redolent of supplementarity: it promises *more* than semiotics, a 'surplus of meaning'. It is this *more* that worries me.

The supplement that is promised derives from the workings of that delightfully arcane notion: the hermeneutic circle. Geertz wields his semiotic trowel with some panache.

Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape (1973c: 20).

This is odd in a way, because there are not many bodies, or people, in Geertz's analyses, except occasionally as props to get the narrative going (Crapanzano 1986: 69-71). Ricoeur is more prosaic.

We have to guess the meaning of the text because the author's intention is beyond our reach...if there are no rules for making good guesses, there are methods for validating those guesses we do make...[which] are closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification. To show that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what we know is something other than showing that a conclusion is true. So in the relevant sense, validation is not verification. It is an argumentative discipline comparable to the juridical procedures used in legal interpretation, a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability...we are also enabled to give an acceptable meaning to the famous concept of the hermeneutic circle. Guess and validation are in a sense circularly related as subjective and objective approaches to the text. But this circle is not a vicious one...the role of falsification is played by the conflict between competing interpretations. An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation (1976: 75-79, my parentheses).

The whole juggernaut is driven by the wet dream of the almost unbelievably probable interpretation. In the last resort though, there is no yardstick for judging the quality of an interpretation, which is not recursively defined by the interpretive method itself.

Ricoeur is admirably explicit and so highlights what tends to be submerged in Geertz's suasive prose. Once again there is a convenient Cartesian split of truth about the world and what pertains to the higher reaches of Mind. Mind however is oddly passive. On the crucial question of how you decide between rival interpretations, it is 'the conflict' which is supposed to do the work. An approach which purports to clarify the intricacies of forms of argumentation ends up in this instance by muddying the waters to the point that Jonathan Spencer has remarked of this strain of American anthropology that there has been 'the abandonment of *any* consideration of problems of validation' (1989: 159). One of the drawbacks of a post-modern, post-interpretive, post-global world is a tendency to abandon critical thinking to a spurious democracy of argument in which anything goes.

For Ricoeur, the meaning of the text originates in, but becomes detached from, the author's mind. It turns into public property to do with what one will; but few are qualified to do so. For interpretation 'presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the

demands of (later) readers' (Sontag 1961: 6). By postulating an ironic doubling with a wealth of hidden deep meaning (Foucault 1970: 303-387), gerundively hermeneuts create a potentially inexhaustible resource to be exploited and where they effectively exercise unregulated control. A semantic free market is declared, with procedures (guessing and checking guesses) supposed to ensure that all works out for the best.³

A difficulty of interpretation is that you cannot begin guessing without some background of prior texts (pre-text or inter-text) and without determining beforehand what kind of object you are dealing with in the light of what you already know (a further determination). In short, hermeneutic methods require preinterpretation, with little restriction on how you procure the results. As we can never approach something innocently, we inevitably introduce assumptions and presuppositions. We begin preinterpreting in the act of listening. The reason so much of this paper is devoted to a critique of interpretation is I am still trying to free myself to the degree I can from yet more unthinking preinterpretation.

The text instead is passive: it awaits the active resourceful interpreter (commonly male) to prize open and enjoy its riches. Ricoeur's juridical metaphor develops the theme. For the interpreter assumes further powers as judge to interrogate, and conduct whatever forensic procedures he (use of a male term seems appropriate in this instance) will on the objectified products of mind by a mind set apart in judgement, knowing, superior. The findings are not subjective however, for objectivity then grafts itself onto validation in a manner that is far from clear. The connection rests upon the assumption that this mind approaches objectivity through its all-encompassing superiority, which transcends subjectivity and objectivity (unlike Geertz, Ricoeur is concerned to avoid the traps of a 'Romanticist' grounding of interpretation in the subject and intersubjectivity, 1981). But whose subjectivity, whose objectivity and whose criteria of validation are these? The answer is the interpreters'. Finally, Ricoeur leaves the choice between probable interpretations remarkably open, uncontextualized and unsituated. Who decides which interpretation is more probable and by what criteria? On Geertz's and Ricoeur's account, for all their demotic imagery and show of humility, the power quietly abrogated by the interpreter is a dictator's dream. The familiar language of reason and reasonableness clouds an epistemological

³ Sontag brings out nicely the implicit connection with the New Right. 'Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it' (1961: 6). I develop this point further in the Introduction.

battlefield, on which, through their own choosing, the odds are stacked in favour of the big battalions.

In trying to defend the unrestrained freedom of the interpreter against all-comers, Geertz's former student and apologist, James Boon, delivers the approach and himself an accidental *coup de grâce*.

Metaphors of text and of reading applied to anthropological fieldwork strike some critics as fancy devices to silence or disempower the interlocutor. I would reply that "read texts" radically construed, certainly speak back; they may, moreover, change their mind's message on each re-reading (1990: 52).

There is a serious problem of agency here. Texts have minds. But this still leaves the question: who 'radically construes' the texts, or rather 'the constructed understanding of the constructed native's constructed point of view (Crapanzano 1986: 74)? Perhaps this is why, in the end, the texts' minds look strangely like their interpreter's. The autonomy granted to 'the interlocutor', as opposed to a person as agent, resembles a calf reared for slaughter or the icons in an interactive video game or virtual reality machine.

Textuality

What is the object of anthropological interpretation? Famously, it is culture inscribed as a text. Interpreting

the flow of social discourse...consists in trying to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms (Geertz 1973a: 20).

The human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical (1) inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their *methodology* develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text-interpretation (Ricoeur 1979: 73).

Social action becomes a text by the act of ethnographic inscription (Geertz 1973c: 19). There is the further extension though that this is possible only if action – or what humans make of events themselves – have some at least of the features of a text (Ricoeur 1981: 73-88). Further, texts (or text-like productions) *contain* meanings, their '*propositional content*' (Ricoeur 1979: 81; invoking the conduit metaphor, see Reddy 1979). Put

this way however, meaning as a concept and in its particular ascriptions becomes open to critical consideration. It must be reclaimed and mystified. In a neat sleight of hand, Boon therefore announces that meaning is ‘fundamentally transposed, converted, substituted’ (1990: 209). Displacing the problem, just as declaring ‘culture’ to be ‘multiple constructions that are *at base* contrastive’ (1990: 209), is somehow supposed to resolve the difficulties.

However, ‘events only *seem* to be intelligible. Actually they have no meaning without interpretation’ (Sontag 1961: 7). There are two senses of ‘text’ here. In the narrower one, text refers to what Barthes called ‘work’ which ‘is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books’ (1977: 156-57). In the broader one, text ‘is a methodological field...*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*’ (1977: 157). In the latter sense, it is of a higher logical order than Ricoeur’s text, which is itself a complex whole built out of sentences (1976: 1-23).

There are two obvious problems. First you cannot write an epistemological space. Second, it conflates culture and work/text. Unless you inhabit a peculiarly recondite world, culture is not a text. Before Boon declares me yet again a vulgar positivist, let me explain what I wish to say by this. It may be fruitful to treat culture heuristically (one of my least favourite words) *as if* it were a text. I doubt it. But many post-modernists have made great reputations (and brought about the felling of many trees) to celebrate the catachresis. It has become conventional in the last decade or so among those suffering post-modernist trendiness cheerfully to talk about how texts have constituted people in ever more unlikely ways. Quite what being constituted by a text – be it a book, a methodological field or a condition of intelligibility – would actually involve is charmingly mind-boggling.

The problem with subsuming the whole strange eventful gamut of human actions and events across history under the soubriquet of ‘Text’ is not only that it hypostatizes and homogenizes whatever has happened, but that, if everything is Text, the notion is vapid (cf. Baudrillard on Foucault’s idea of power, 1987). It becomes an abstract substance, empowered with amazing, if largely imaginary, qualities. In short, it becomes a Transcendental Agent, beyond history, and with thrasonical hermeneuts and deconstructionists as its immanent intelligence to tell us what It is up to. Text becomes an excuse not just for pastiche but to make what you

please of other peoples' lives and how they represent themselves, to mix and match at will in a consumers' utopia.⁴

There is something pleasantly amateurish, reminiscent of Baron Frankenstein in the horror films, about the attempts of anthropologists such as Geertz (with assistance from Boon) to jolt the decaying corpse of culture into textual life. Since then, however, a consortium of Literary Critics has taken over the business of transmuting the whole gamut of human and social activities into texts on an industrial scale.⁵

Overinterpreting

Treating culture, or life itself, as a text avoids a recognition of textualizing as a cultural practice. People write, speak, read and listen; textualize events and actions in circumstances, which depend on the existence of previous practices of textualizing. The Literary Tendency is itself part of such practices; but solipsistically its practitioners hypostatize practices into abstract objects (texts) and imagine particular practices to be constitutive, essential or even universal. The sort of approach I prefer however treats practices as particular, historical, situated and varying in degree and kind. I assume that, far from having a determinate, extractable essence, facts are underdetermined by explanation (Quine 1953a, 1960) or, put another way, that 'reality transcends the knower' (Inden 1986: 402).

⁴ My argument reiterates part of Foucault's criticism of Derrida (1972b: 602, translated by Spivak 1976: lxi-lxii).

⁵ I refer to the Lit Crit Mode of (Re-)Production as an industry because it is one of the major growth areas with much sub-postmodernist boilerplate writing. In the social sciences, its forms range from the New Historicism (Veese 1989) to the work, at its best perhaps, of Spivak (e.g. 1988) and Bhabha (1990) to come full anthropological circle in the writings of people like Appadurai (1990). A more extended critique of this literary tendency will have to wait another occasion; but the discussion below of interpretive practices on Bali covers some aspects. The recidivist skull beneath the svelte postmodernist skin comes out neatly, for example, in the writings of one of its more sensitive practitioners, Homi Bhabha, for all the ironic reflexivity and self-conscious detachment he invests into rethinking the nation as an ambivalent, abstract object. Within four pages of the Introduction, the practice of *narrating the nation* – a self-evidently western idea of narrative, of course – reinscribes itself (significantly in the passive tense, by rounding up the usual suspect semantic and epistemological metaphors of space) into a strategy for 'a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated' (1990: 4). *Plus ça change...* The scope for catachresis reaches a giddy apotheosis in Appadurai's analysis of globalization (e.g. 'global cultural flow', 1990: 301) in which an imaginary processual object is built out of a series of constitutive metaphors of knowledge (see Chapter 4 above).

On this account, any activity or practice, the agents who engage in them and the patients who are their subjects, are themselves partly a consequence of, but are not fully determined by, past practices and activities. Among practices, some rework past practices (e.g. commenting, criticizing, correcting); others aim at transforming patients (e.g. graduating, curing, managing) and the agents themselves (e.g. crowning, praying, self-disciplining; cf. Foucault 1986a). Yet other practices are concerned with trying to eliminate the underdetermination of actions and events, including much academic writing and ‘ritual’ (see chapter 7). I choose therefore to treat both explaining and interpreting as often practices of determination, or essentializing, in some form.

What I call overinterpreting is overdetermining one interpretation where alternative equally plausible interpretations are possible, or have in fact been put forward. As a practice, overinterpreting usually starts with preinterpreting prior to any engagement with what is actually to be interpreted and concludes in defending the interpretation against criticism. Evidently Balinese, for instance, may well on occasion also overinterpret for whatever reasons. Where they differ from hermeneuts is that the latter’s justification for existing is that they somehow add more to what the locals are perfectly capable of saying for themselves. This something is a logical method for validating probable interpretations, presumed - in a fine example of preinterpretation - to be so superior to Balinese methods that no interpreter has bothered to inquire what they are (cf. Chapter 3 above) or if they even exist.

One of the best ways of clarifying what I wish to suggest by overinterpreting is to put forward a null hypothesis. It is that no act of anthropological interpretation takes place dialogically and dialectically during fieldwork between ethnographer and local intellectuals – let alone centrally involving local intellectuals arguing among themselves – but rather before the ethnographer’s arrival in, and after departure from, the field. It is then possible to distinguish anthropologists by the degree to which they breach the null hypothesis in their work. In my experience of an island crowded with expatriate experts, sadly it holds up remarkably well. If it makes a mockery of most anthropologists’ and other specialists’ pretensions, that is their problem. If you stop and think about how many anthropologists or others speak the vernacular language well enough to engage in the critical exchange necessary to argue through rival interpretations, far less understand Balinese arguing amongst themselves, the imaginary nature of much interpretation *as a practice* rather than as a posture stands out with grim clarity.

Two practices among others related to interpreting are textualizing and contextualizing,⁶ which I take to be always situated acts. (On this account, context and situation are not Cartesian mental and physical domains within semantics. All actions are situated; and contextualizing is one kind of action.) By contrast to a recourse to Text, or even textuality, (con-)textualizing is a historically situated action aimed at changing the *status quo ante*. To develop Goodman's analysis of representation (1968: 27-31), some agent represents, textualizes or contextualizes something *as* something else, commonly to some subject on an occasion for a purpose. The relevance of this argument here is that it enables us to reconsider interpretation not as a finished product, we are to admire, believe or even criticize, but as a practice which takes place on an occasion for a purpose. Anthropologists very rarely ask what is the purpose of what they do.

They are not alone in this, nor in glossing fast over what it is that they actually spend much of their professional time doing. One practice is textualizing, reworking events into writing through a double process. The author articulates the events in question with previous descriptions and writing practices, in so doing making the events discursive, interpretable and understandable (Hall 1980: 129). The author also reproduces the events, commonly in writing, for the delectation of her peers and the Advancement of Knowledge. Taken to absurd lengths, you end up overtextualizing people (Boon) or the world (Appadurai, Bhabha), and recursively anthropomorphizing the texts. Now there are many occasions when people textualize events and actions, but they do much else besides.⁷

⁶ They are not the only ones. Years ago I provisionally sketched out four kinds of practices which Balinese seemed to me frequently to engage in (Chapter 2 above). They were: essentializing, contextualizing, making do (which suggests having to reach a practical decision whatever the exegetical niceties), and elaborating. Some time I hope to get the time to rethink and develop the idea. As with the far more detailed account of named Balinese practices later in this chapter, they are less classificatory sub-species of interpretation (or overinterpretation), but overlapping practices. It would be possible to produce a taxonomy of kinds, and degrees, of overinterpretation, but that itself risks becoming an unnecessary act of essentializing and overinterpreting in turn.

⁷ There is an interesting Balinese practice of *majejangkitan*, highlighting ambiguities often in mundane statements and to the discomfiture of the original speaker. It draws attention to the textual preconditions of speech and understanding, but also to their situatedness. I was told of the following exchange with some glee:

*Misan tiang, demen tekèn durèn.
Yèh! Mirib demenan ia neda padang.
My cousin likes durian.
I thought (she) preferred grass.*

As they seem to find texts realler, or at least cosier, than life, perhaps it is not so odd that aficionados of the Literary Turn in the human sciences should project their own practices and predilections onto the rest of the known and, in their case, knowable world. This world is there *to be read* and contextualized. Anthropologists often appeal to context. What appears as an exercise in interpretive charity and anti-essentialism depends, however, on furbishing the natives first with a rich realm of Textuality in which their strange remarks make sense ('Birds are twins' is the paradigm case). Then their utterances and actions can be reinscribed using the familiar language of textual procedures (metaphor, synecdoche etc., the stock in trade among others of both structuralism and hermeneutics). Historians and literary experts specialize more literally in reconstructing how people read texts, and so to constructing Texts.⁸

Either way, as anthropologists engage in it as a practice, contextual interpretation often becomes a way of idealizing specific social actions. Contextualizing the text or weird statements shows how the native Mind instantiates or insinuates itself into the world. I am not referring here actual minds on particular occasions: what people did or said. That is purely contingent. It is not clear what contextualizing that would consist of. Contextualizing highlights what is essential, general, indeed generic, not to particular persons, but a Culture or People (the Nuer, the Balinese), which is the politically acceptable synonym for Mind. Anthropologists have long used context as an authenticating and emancipatory strategy. 'Understanding something in context' confirms you were really there, saw and understood. (The idealist rejoinder is to turn 'being there' effectively into a question of literary genre, Geertz 1988.) Contextualizing easily becomes emancipatory from the critical evaluation of evidence; and so permits anthropologists to write themselves interpretive blank cheques. It culminates in inventing quite fantastic worlds, which the authors firmly believe to be real.

Overinterpreting Bali

Misan is first cousin; *misa* is a female water buffalo, with a terminal 'n' indicating the genitive, as in 'my water buffalo'.

⁸ My thanks to Ron Inden for his comments on the draft of this chapter and, in particular, for a useful discussion on contextualizing as an academic practice. Incidentally, these critical remarks make use of a Balinese rhetorical device: *negakin gedebong*, sitting on the stem of a banana palm. My ostensible target is anthropologists, because I am one and I know their practices best. If anyone else reading this piece finds anything seeping through (in Bali, the image is wet sap through the underpants), then so be it.

How does an interpretive analysis actually work as against ideal statements of method? Let us take examples from two of Clifford Geertz's most celebrated essays into interpretive anthropology and one from Boon, who has adapted Geertz's method in a distinctive way.

In *Person, time, and conduct in Bali*, Geertz elaborated upon the work of Bateson and Mead (e.g. 1942). The anonymization of persons and the immobilization of time are thus but two sides of the same cultural process', the third being 'the ceremoniousness of so much of Balinese daily life' (1973f: 398-99). The crucial means in achieving this is *lek*. Geertz argued

that *lek*, which is far and away the most important of such regulators, culturally the most intensely emphasized, ought therefore not to be translated as 'shame,' but rather, to follow out our theatrical image, as 'stage fright' (1973f: 402).

Nearly twenty years later nothing had happened to make Geertz question his interpretation or its assumptions.

Nor is this sense the Balinese have of always being on stage a vague and ineffable one either. It is, in fact, exactly summed up in what is surely one of their experience-nearest concepts: *lek*. *Lek* has been variously translated or mistranslated ('shame' is the most common attempt); but what it really means is close to what we call stage fright... When this occurs, as it sometimes does, the immediacy of the moment is felt with excruciating intensity and men become suddenly and unwillingly creatureal, locked in mutual embarrassment, as though they had happened upon each other's nakedness. It is the fear of faux pas, rendered only that much more probably by the extraordinary ritualization of daily life, that keeps social intercourse on its deliberately narrowed rails and protects the dramatisical sense of self against the disruptive threat implicit in the immediacy and spontaneity even the most passionate ceremoniousness cannot fully eradicate from face-to-face encounters (1983c: 64; cf. 1973f: 401-2).

What though is the ethnographic evidence upon which Geertz validates his guesses? We do not know. How did Geertz know what Balinese felt? Did they participate in this analysis of their essential being? Or was it despite them? We are not told.

The remaining examples are from Geertz's most sustained interpretive foray, *Negara: the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali*. Epitomizing the king as the centre of the state (a much recycled Orientalist

theme in South East Asia), Geertz develops a series of dichotomies around the contrast of inside *versus* outside.

So is body to mind, countryside to settlement, circle circumference to circle center, word to meaning, sound to music, coconut shell to coconut juice (1980: 108).

What is Geertz's evidence, for instance, that body is opposed to mind, or word to meaning? And what word does Geertz have in mind for 'meaning'? Once again the reader is not told, nor can you work it out even if you are familiar with the literature on Bali.

A central part is Geertz's analysis of kingship rests on the link between three symbols or imaged ideas: '*padmasana*, the lotus seat (or throne) of god; *lingga*, his phallus, or potency; and *sekti* [misspelt by any convention], the energy he infuses into his particular expressions, most especially into the person of the ruler' (1980: 104; the second parentheses are mine). Of the *lingga*, he announces:

'On earth, the ruler acts on behalf of Siva, and the essence of his royal power is embodied in the *linga* [which] the brahman...obtains...from Siva and hands...over to the founder of the dynasty as the palladium of his royalty' the image summarizes the deep spiritual connection (Hooykaas calls it an 'indivisible trinity') between the supreme god, the reigning king, and the state high priest (1980: 106; citing Hooykaas).

This seems exemplary stuff. What is Geertz's evidence for his analysis though? It is in fact a quotation from the Dutch philologist, Hooykaas (1964b: 143) citing another Dutch scholar, Krom (1931: 124). A review of what Hooykaas wrote however suggests matters are not quite so straightforward.

Textual extremities

My last example is from Boon's *Affinities and extremes*, which offers an Aladdin's cave of choice. Given his interest in Balinese textuality, the following passage is apposite.

Outside reformist circles, Balinese textual practices minimize neutralized commentary. Reading groups (*sekaha mebasan*) may discuss distinct episodes from favored narratives; but their busywork is ideally another ingredient of ritual celebrations. To enact, cite, or even refer to a text may unleash its power. Exegesis in any strict sense does

not number among the functions of traditional textual and ritual experts... Just as Bali has little ascetic remove from life-in-society, so it demonstrates little interpretive remove from texts that would make them partly alienated objects of exegetical reflection. In Bali's 'interpretive scene' the restricted role of exegesis proper facilitates a play of affinities, analogies, and contradictions across social forms, performance genres, and ritual registers (1990: 84).

I love the smack of the 'strict' disciplinary proprieties, the natives evidently need so badly. But, what are Boon's grounds, first, for this sweeping summation of Balinese textual practices as anti-interpretive and ritualistic? He cites my old teacher, Hooykaas: 'temple priests, exorcists, and puppet masters alike "have some share in the brahman's panoply of magic weapons"' (1990: 84, quoting Hooykaas 1980: 20). This hardly underwrites Boon's assertion. Further, on what evidence does Boon justify his statement that Balinese textual practices are not exegetical but about the melding of genres? It is shadow theatre (*wayang*).

Wayang's epistemology resembles Western examples of so-called Menippean satire, a form of parodic rhetoric that multiplies voices and viewpoints, tongues, citations, pastiches, and etymologies (1990: 86).

Oddly the sources cited are for Java, not Bali at all. Presumably shadow theatre has an essential being which transcends history, place and persons altogether.

Interpreting the interpreters

In *Person, time, and conduct in Bali*, Geertz takes two kinds of calendar (from Goris 1933) and aspects of behaviour he characterizes as 'ceremony, stage fright, and absence of climax' (1973f: 398, the last, especially, is from Bateson 1949). In other words, Geertz is working largely with interpretations of interpretations. For an analysis which claims not only to pay close attention to Balinese behaviour, but even to reveal what Balinese experience 'with excruciating intensity', curiously he offers no detailed examples of Balinese practice, still less of Balinese talking about and commenting on themselves. Geertz doubly transfixes Bali: on a sustained dramaturgical metaphor and on a pathological general description of personality. He preinterprets, because the analysis rests upon western commonsensical assumptions about the nature of both theatre and the person. Balinese have quite different, highly developed and largely

incommensurable ideas (on theatre, see Hobart 1983; on the person, see Connor 1982a; Duff-Cooper 1985b).

The analysis hinges on the cultural associations of the word *lek*. Balinese actors waxed lyric about stage fright, for which however they used the word *jegeh*, plain 'frightened'. Significantly, when actors talked of stage fright or when people referred to themselves or others being *lek*, they dwelt not on the inner state, but on its manifestation facially, in one's speech and body movements, which squared with their careful differentiation of the body, expressions and movements. Balinese did indeed refer to *lek* in performing, but as *sing nawang lek*, not knowing *lek*, of actors who played roles like that of the mad princess, Liku, whose part requires groping other actors' genitals on stage and blurting out the unmentionable. By imposing interpretations upon actions in the absence of – or rather, despite all – the evidence, yet again Geertz overinterprets.

In *Negara*, among innumerable asides, Geertz opposes periphery to centre, body to mind and word to meaning, as if the relationship between these were transitive. The centre : periphery opposition, upon which much of *Negara* is predicated, is a particularly fine, if now rather tarnished, stroke of orientalist genius (see e.g. Heine-Geldern 1942). For someone ostensibly so opposed to the assumptions of Dutch structuralism (1961), Geertz manages to find dual oppositions where Balinese usually use triadic or quite different schemes altogether. In fact, almost all frames of reference to the self I know of involve at least three overlapping and potentially interacting qualities (e.g. Duff-Cooper 1985b: 68-71 on the *trisarira*; chapter 2 above on the *triguna*, *triwarga* and *tiga-jnana*). Granted Geertz's erudition, we must question whether his blithe opposition of body to mind as if it were quite self-evident is a slip born of a rhetorical flourish. It is unlikely. The whole structure of *Negara* depends upon a (Cartesian) contrast between political geography and 'symbology'.⁹ An obvious point about the various Balinese schemes for relating thought and action (Chapter 2 above; Wikan 1990) is that they presuppose that body

⁹ Despite their claim to radical chic, the Lit Crit tendency remains firmly the loyal opposition within a conservative and dualist epistemology. To achieve this requires transcendent entities, especially 'meaning' to be wreathed with an aura of factuality, commonly through catachresis, involving notably conduit and spatial metaphors of knowledge (Salmond 1982), although rarely as magnificently as in the following example.

The ambivalent, antagonistic perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production (Bhabha 1990: 4).

and mind are not dualistically separated. In the light of these evasions, it should come as no great surprise that Geertz should treat the constitutive concept of interpretation, 'meaning', as equally unproblematic. In *Negara*, as his other writing on Bali, Geertz not only skirts round the whole issue of semantics, but also avoids inquiring into Balinese usage, which is intricate. How far has Geertz created the object of his interpretations, meaning, by conflating what Balinese distinguish? It is not a promising start to establishing more probable interpretations. What is rather frightening, especially in an interpretive approach which promises to take 'us into the heart of that of which it is an interpretation' (1973c: 18), is that it may never have occurred to Geertz that Balinese might think and talk about such matters among themselves.

A remarkable feature of Geertz's interpretative approach to the (*ipse dixit*¹⁰) central symbols of Balinese kingship is that it involves precious little engagement with Balinese thinking in action. It is in fact, in Raymond Williams's phrase (1983), an exercise in identifying keywords. Geertz generalizes from the carefully textually circumscribed analyses of earlier Dutch scholars, such that (to quote Geertz himself in his definition of how religion works, 1966: 4, my parentheses) by 'formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and...clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality...[the results] seem uniquely realistic'. As with religion, the 'aura of factuality' is a product of the process itself. It requires confusing what Volosinov distinguished as theme and meaning.

Only an utterance taken in its full, concrete scope as a historical phenomenon possesses a theme... Theme is the upper, actual limit of linguistic significance; in essence, only theme means something definite. Meaning is the lower limit of linguistic significance. Meaning, in essence, means nothing; it only possesses potentiality - the possibility of having a meaning within a concrete theme (1973: 100-101).

The timeless phantasmagoric world of Balinese kings is not just the result of the interpretive method and its presuppositions. It is the world the hermeneuts have condemned themselves to occupy.

In the passage cited by Geertz, what he omits, significantly, is that Hooykaas was questioning this simple identification.¹¹ Qualifying

¹⁰ Latin for 'on his own account', 'on his own authority'.

¹¹ For a radically different analysis, which is carefully argued from detailed accounts of Balinese themselves, see Wiener 1995a. Hooykaas is quoting Krom who was in fact engaged in an argument with Bosch on the applicability of Cambodian evidence to Java. Bali gets tagged on as the tail to the hermeneutic dog.

Stutterheim (1929-30) on the link between *lingga* and ancestor effigies, Hooykaas pointed out that

the Sanskrit neuter word *linggam* in the first place means ‘a mark, spot, sign, token, badge, emblem, characteristic’... The word *lingga*, moreover alternates with *linggih*, staying... Those upright pointed, flat, oblong stones are marks, *lingga*, of the ancestors, and after performances of due ritual they may become their place of descent, their seat: *palinggihan*, *linggih*, *lingga* of their purified and deified spirits (1964b: 175-76).

One might have expected an interpretive anthropologist to have leapt at the possibilities opened up by *lingga* being a mark, sign, token etc., terms which are constitutive of Geertz’s entire project.¹² To do so would have complicated Geertz’s neat symbolic closure though; to have followed so obvious a lead into Balinese semiotic categories would have vitiated the entire epistemological grounds for Geertz’s endeavour. To judge from Geertz’s analysis of the pivotal role of imaginary symbols in the construction of kingship, the doubtless unworthy suspicion arises that at times the interpretive anthropology of Indonesia is simply Dutch philology with the scholarly *caveats*, doubts and qualifications taken out.

While Geertz claims to be able to reach down to the excruciating intensity of Balinese inner states (cf. Needham’s 1981 critique), Boon instead identifies Bali as a locus of the intersection of texts, which situates it firmly as an object of Western and Indonesian textuality. He rightly reminds the reader of the risks of isolating Bali as a pure object, free from preinterpretation. The cost however is high. As Johannes Fabian noticed long ago, Boon’s method

avoids calling the Knower and the Known into the same temporal arena. Like other symbolic anthropologists, Boon keeps his distance from the Other; in the end his critique amounts to posing one image of Bali against other images... The Other remains an object, albeit on a higher level than that of empiricist or positivist reification... As an ideology it may widen and deepen the gap between the West and its Other (1983: 136-37).

¹² To describe [the *negara*] is to describe a constellation of enshrined ideas... Ideas are not, and have not been for some time, unobservable mental stuff. They are envehicled meanings, the vehicles being symbols (or in some usages, signs), a symbol being anything that denotes, describes, represents, exemplifies, labels, indicates, evokes, depicts, expresses – anything that somehow or other signifies (Geertz 1980: 135).

Boon's concentration on the multiple textual constitution of Bali leads to a curious ahistoricity. Note in the extract how Balinese textual practices and their implications are cast throughout in the timeless present (a 'thousand years of familiarity with the art of writing' 1990: 84). In the criss-crossing of metaphors and images, where motley's the only wear, what gets lost is that many Balinese have been to school since the 1930s, now read newspapers and have been watching television since the late 1970s. What would Boon make of the delightful cartoons in the *Bali Post*, which comment scathingly on the doings of Balinese and foreigners? Are these not 'traditional', therefore dismissible? Or are they yet another manifestation of the infinitely adaptable 'Menippean satire'?

Along with this detemporalizing goes a pervasive essentializing. In a few broad brush strokes Boon encapsulates the entire range of Balinese textual practices, past and present in all their diversity, and evaluates the lot as not involving exegesis 'proper' or 'in the strict sense'. As very little has been written on his one example, text-reading groups – and what has recently (e.g. Rubinstein 1992) undermines his argument – Boon is on shaky ground here. It is doubly insecure in that Balinese read and comment on a whole range of kinds of work for different purposes on different occasions (Hobart 1990b; Wiener 1995a, 1995b). Anyway, in my experience works are performed in theatre far more often than they are read. Are we to narrow the definition of text to exclude these? If not, what is Boon's evidence for his assertion? There are less than a handful of translations of performances and no detailed account of Balinese commentaries, whether by the actors or audiences. Instead of evidence, we are offered another familiar preinterpretation, with a long genealogy: Balinese are ritualistic and, if not incapable of, quite uninterested in 'neutralized', let alone critical, commentary. Were they to, not only would Boon have to take account of them, but his variety of exegesis would be dead in the water. Therefore Balinese do not. To succeed in ignoring so much of what is evidently happening suggests quite how important preinterpretation is to much anthropological analysis.

Keeping distance

For all its claim to a radical new insight into Bali, anthropological hermeneutics reproduces earlier approaches to a surprising extent. For instance, Geertz reiterates and even makes central to his whole vision the increasingly rancid old chestnut that Balinese avoid climax (Bateson and Mead 1942; Bateson 1949). As Jensen and Suryani have pointed out

(1992: 93-104), the whole argument is implausible and rests on all sorts of preconceptions.¹³ We all preinterpret in varying degree. But this implies neither that our preinterpretations are of the same kind, nor that we cannot criticize them or learn better. For this reason, the excuse that all description, interpretation and translation involves ‘betrayal’ (Boon’s reply to my criticisms, 1990: 205, fn 2) is not just limp, it is a defence against engaging with those with whom we work. Boon’s texts that speak back to him do so on his terms. They produce a simulated engagement (Fabian 1991b), which distracts attention from the very real and immediate dilemmas which anthropologists face.

Boon’s approach raises a final point. An interpretive analysis does not require intensive fieldwork, as one might have expected it to. Nor does it require any command of Balinese.¹⁴ That is the extractive function of mere ethnographers like myself. Interpretive anthropology exists to explain to us and to the world what we have found. What distinguishes these brands of hermeneutic anthropology is the distance – in every sense – its practitioners keep from any engagement with the people who are producing the ‘texts’ and ‘meanings’, and the conditions under which they do so. It sheds a new light on the supremacy of the text over the people who do the writing, speaking, reading, performing, commenting, criticizing and joking.

The purposes of interpretation

Interpretation presumes a double account of knowledge. This account must depict the nature of native knowledge, distinguish itself from this and then explain how it can understand the former. Understanding is possible through the ‘intersubjectivity’ the anthropologist has with the natives, by which he can appreciate their meanings and symbols. Although both sides share a common human nature, its expressions are different; and so the relationship of knower and known. The repeated refrain of Balinese ritualism – ‘extraordinary ritualization’ (Geertz 1983c: 64, cited above), ‘ritual celebrations, ritual experts, ritual registers’ (Boon 1990: 84 cited above) – is crucial to that differentiation. The passages purport to be descriptive. They are however commentative and evaluative. By making

¹³ When Balinese are permitted to speak for themselves a quite different picture emerges. For instance, the *Gaguritan* Padem Warak (the song of killing of the rhinoceros, translated by Vickers 1991) depicts a ‘ritual’ in terms we would by most accounts consider to be sustained and repeated climaxes.

¹⁴ Geertz’s analyses are based on seven months in Bali; Boon sadly had to leave Bali because of illness shortly after starting fieldwork. By Geertz’s own admission his Balinese is minimal (1991). Boon’s problems with Balinese in his writings make it evident.

Balinese live in a closed and threatened world, incapable of critical reflection on themselves, they justify the intercession of the interpreter, who is more than just endowed with superior rationality. He is open, empathetic, critical, well read and with a superior vision. The depiction of Balinese could have come straight from an Orientalist: 'ritual has a strong attraction for the Indian [read 'Balinese'] mind' (Renou 1968: 29; my parentheses). Balinese add an extra twist by being uniquely dramatisical as well.¹⁵

To aspire to unchallenged authority, it is vital to preclude the suspicion that interpretive knowledge is at the whim of the hermeneut and his imagination. So the pre-existence of meanings and texts must be established. Boon has to predetermine culture as being text or Text (it varies); and Geertz overdetermine its meanings. Anything less intimates the vicarious nature of the whole enterprise. Text (for Boon) or meaning (for Geertz) therefore becomes not just the object of study, but a Transcendental Agent. Consider 'the systems of ideas which animate [the organization of social activity] must be understood' (Geertz 1973f: 362, my parentheses).¹⁶ Or, texts 'certainly speak back; they may, moreover, change their mind's message on each rereading' (Boon 1990: 52). Boon finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks. Such indulgence might be

¹⁵ There is more in common between the interpreters of Bali and Orientalists (whom they cite so often) than the formers' loud disclaimers would suggest. Consider how applicable the following quotation is, even more so if you substitute 'Balinese' for 'Oriental' and 'interpreter' for 'Orientalist'.

The knowledge of the Orientalist is, therefore, privileged in relation to that of the Orientals and invariably places itself in a relationship of intellectual dominance over that of the easterners. It has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves. But that is not all. Once his special knowledge enabled the Orientalist and his countrymen to gain trade concessions, conquer, colonize, rule, and punish in the East. Now it authorizes the area studies specialist and his colleagues in government to aid and advise, develop and modernize, arm and stabilize the countries of the so-called Third World. In many respects the intellectual activities of the Orientalist have even produced...the very Orient which it constructed in its discourse (Inden 1986:408).

This might be all very well except that, as I have argued in the Introduction, Geertz's work is widely taught, cited and emulated in Indonesia.

¹⁶ Crapanzano's perceptive comments on how the narrative devices by which 'Geertz likens his nonpersonhood to being "a cloud or a gust of wind"' (1986: 71) attain a new significance. I have made use of ideas in an unpublished paper by Ron Inden (n.d.[a]) in this analysis of agency.

fine, except that it silences and denies the thinking of the people with whom we work in the clevernesses of intellectual fashion.¹⁷

Meaning or text, being transcendent, is not available for ordinary mortals to understand – certainly not the ritualistic, non-exegetical Balinese. The ontology requires there to emerge an immanent intelligence of this transcendent agent to explain what is going on, lest the uninitiated miss it. Fortunately the hermeneut is at hand to do so. What though are the subjects through whom this agent exemplifies the workings of its Will? For Boon, as you might expect, above all it is the literati of priests and puppeteers. At first sight, it is harder to see who embodies meaning in Bali for Geertz. A moment's reflection shows why he lays such stress both on anonymization, detemporalization and ceremonialization and on stage fright. All Balinese are on stage: they *all* instantiate meaning, which operates through ritual symbols (hence the crucial role of symbols and ritual in kingship.) Lastly, how does the hermeneutic intelligence work? Proximately, for Geertz, it is by an intersubjective empathy: one that neither requires the anthropologist to be coeval, or even go there. It also leaves the question of 'how can a whole people share a single subjectivity?' (Crapanzano 1986: 74). Ultimately though, it is through a kind of conscious philosophical reasoning, epitomized as the reading of a novel, with its ever 'more detailed reading of episodes, texts, and institutions selected for the multiple counter-types, contradictions, and even ironies they contain' (Boon 1990: ix).

For all the talk of intersubjectivity and explicating the native Mind in its palpable, excruciating intensity, hermeneuts actually pay scant regard to people as subjects or, better, agents. It is not necessary to ask about Balinese criteria of analysis, because Balinese are preconstituted as incapable of self-reflection (except mechanical 'meta-social commentary', Geertz 1973d), criticism and self-transformation. Balinese are objectified into the raw materials to be thought. Gerundively they are not merely

¹⁷ In fairness to Boon, he is not the only, or even the most celebrated, scholar to get his intellectual knickers in a textual twist. Consider the following:

alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytical capacities may emerge – youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new 'ethnicities', new social movements, 'the politics of difference'. They assign new meanings and different directions to the process of historical change (Bhabha 1990: 3).

Note the conflation of possible complex agents (Hobart 1990b; Inden 1990) such as ethnic groups with 'analytical capacities', 'nostalgia', 'the everyday' in a semantic soup. As Sontag has pointed out however of nostalgia (1977: 15), such representations are agentive and self-fulfilling.

describable, but comprehensible, and so to be comprehended. Preinterpretation is enshrined in the disciplinary practices of university courses in anthropology: to train incredulous young minds into the realities of society, culture, kinship, ancestors, ritual, rationality, taboo and what they will find when they finally get to the field. (As with all good discipline, there are lots of exclusions. The authors you are not supposed to read are numerous and far more interesting on the whole.) Postinterpreting takes up almost as much time, not just in textualizing and contextualizing the insights, but in defending the interpretations against criticism (e.g. Geertz 1983b; Boon 1990). Purporting to advance understanding of human action, the human condition, the nature of textuality, by claiming to engage other hearts and minds as no other approach, interpretive anthropology may enshrine a hidden political agenda (Pecora 1989). It certainly offers at once a superior form of surveillance and a reassurance that other people out there are understandable and understood, manageable, controllable. It has also proven eminently marketable back home.

In their actions if not their words, interpretivists stress the relationship of anthropologist and reader at the expense of that between anthropologist and native. They play to the sensitivity of the reader; and in so doing displace the native yet again. The anthropologist's role is double: both inquirer and author. As author, she is the conduit for the ethnographer's experience. But she reworks that experience in writing; and so anticipates the experience for her successors. Volosinov forewarned of the consequences of confusing theme and meaning: the circularities of endless signification and representationism, which have been the hallmarks of the Literary Critical cul-de-sac. In rejecting, rightly, naive realism, the hermeneuts have backed into a hall of mirrors. 'In finished anthropological writings...what we call our data are really our own constructions of other peoples' constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (Geertz 1973c: 9). The problem is that in the writings in question the constructions are of meta-level far beyond Sperber's *n*th degree. Ethnographers do not intuit other peoples' constructions. They elicit informants' representations or inferences of others' utterances, acts or representations. Only then do they get to what they write in their notebooks, or more often reconstruct afterwards. Crosscutting this process is the imposition of technical terms, in which Sperber detected further levels of interpretation. Interpretation is not sequential abstraction: simply 'trying to rescue the "said"...from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms' (Geertz 1973c: 20). There is a continual to-and-fro in which we select and direct our attention and our informants'. After all that what appears in seminar papers, then the published ethnography, is further reworked. What is more, interpretivists like Geertz and Boon largely work with other authors'

constructions. In stressing the value added in western centres of learning, the effect ironically is subtly to reinscribe the extractive mode of ethnography, now you collect constructions not facts. There is no critical dialogue with those whose constructions they are: no engagement with local intellectuals or academics. As an analytical framework it is about as illuminating as soviet production statistics and as stimulating as a sex manual for the politically correct.

However precarious the constructivist tower of Babel, it rests upon familiar substantialist and realist foundations. An interpretive approach is substantialist in that it is concerned with that which is ‘unchanging and consequently stands outside history’ (Collingwood 1946: 43), here symbols, the ‘said’ not ‘its perishing occasions’ (Geertz 1973c: 20). It is realist in the sense that it fails critically to consider the presuppositions of those whose activities are under scrutiny. It is the anthropological equivalent of what Collingwood trenchantly described in history as ‘the scissors-and-paste’ method (1946: 33; on realism, see Collingwood 1940: 21-48).¹⁸

The method by which it proceeds is first to decide what we want to know about, and then go in search of statements about it, oral or written, purporting to be made by actors in the events concerned, or by eyewitnesses of them, or by persons repeating what actors or eyewitnesses have told them, or have told their informants, or those who informed their informants, and so on. Having found in such a statement something relevant to his purpose, the historian excerpts it and incorporates it, translated if necessary and recast into what he consider a suitable style, in his own history (1946: 257).

Collingwood’s delineation of the scissors-and-paste method is, not coincidentally, a classic description of overinterpretation.

¹⁸ Interpretive anthropologists are less obviously realist than their more positivistic colleagues, in that they recognize the engagement of mind with their object of study. It remains realist to the extent that they condense mind to text, genre and rhetorical device and ignore the presuppositions, notably the purposes, of others’ actions and their own inquiries.

Geertz and Boon may be matchless, but they are not alone, in overinterpreting Bali. I cheerfully wrote about how Balinese viewed process sometimes in cyclical terms in my thesis (1979: 24-25). When I subsequently thought to check this, to my mortification I discovered that I had imposed a spatial metaphor on what they talk about quite differently. On some future occasion I hope to consider other styles of overinterpretation in the work of anthropologists like Duff-Cooper and Howe.

To conclude this discussion, how does the approach I am starting to sketch out differ from an interpretive approach? Oddly enough, in the little world of anthropology, the two approaches share quite a lot in common, not least because I have learned much from the interpretive approach. Some of the divergences emerge in the differences between guessing and questioning. Both involve preinterpretation, but of different kinds. The anthropological hermeneutic approach enshrines a very conservative sense of dialectic: modifying your questions and guesses. In the versions discussed, it excludes any consideration of the participants' categories in use or the need to revise the assumptions of the analysis in the light of these. It does not allow the possibility of attempting radically to rethink the presuppositions and purposes of the analysis. Still less does it consider the continual reworking of one set of discursive practices in the light of another. Nor can it contemplate that this reworking must be done in large part on the spot, where people argue back, criticize the analyst at each point and suggest alternatives. Lastly the criteria for evaluating guesses, circularly, are part of the same logic of validation as those for formulating the guesses. This hermeneutics is, in the end, hermetic.

By contrast the approach I am suggesting (foreshadowed by Bakhtin/Volosinov and Collingwood among others) is quite different. It recognizes that what an anthropologist works with is the historically particular outcome of asking questions, dialectically of materials of all sorts, dialogically of people and that both change, as does the anthropologist, in the course of inquiry. The purposes and circumstances of that inquiry crucially affect the results, both for the ethnographer and those who are raising questions as part of their own lives: the two not always being separable.

Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next... meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding (Volosinov 1973: 102).

Questioning is of two contrastive kinds. One assumes the object of inquiry to be knowable and susceptible to explanation by fairly predictable sequences of questions. It is exemplified in how teachers instruct students in the appropriate moves in inquiry as part of learning a discipline, be it chemistry or law. The other assumes what you know to be conditional in part on the questions, so critically reflecting on provisional answers requires you continually to rethink the assumptions behind the question. Collingwood considered the latter to be exemplified by critical

philosophical and historical thinking. I think there is a case for adding critical anthropological thinking.

Such critical thinking is certainly not exemplified in reiterating the absence of climax or the presence of stage fright decades later from the safety of your own university. That is reinventing the wheel as an octagon. It requires expending enormous effort not in critical thinking, but in ignoring what the people you are studying are doing and even trying to tell you. Unless such critical thought involves continually rethinking the questions we ask and reflecting on our own presuppositions through our emerging understanding of other peoples' questioning, it lands up like the hermeneutic circle as the sort of one-legged dialectic, a hermeneutic hop. For this reason, you cannot tidy up the problem of interpretation simply by formulating clear, falsifiable, inductive steps (although that would be a definite improvement), or splitting the process, as does Sperber, into two stages. The effect is to make your own thought stand as yet more hierarchical over those whose thinking you are studying and to deny the fact that they too are likely to be thinking and questioning in ways which the claimed hegemony of closed interpretation would make unknowable.

Some Balinese practices

Any reader who is not terminally committed to existing brands of interpretivism will not be surprised to learn that Balinese engage in all kinds of writing, oral composition, theatre, painting and so forth, which have always been changing (Hobart 1991b; Vickers 1990; Wiener 1995a, 1995b). They have a broad range of overlapping practices, which do not easily match our categories of interpreting, commenting, criticizing or re-enacting. To highlight the differences with the interpretive approach discussed above, let me begin with meaning.

Balinese usage would require a monograph (which I plan to write) to do them justice. For simplicity of exposition, let me begin with my present understanding of the terms Balinese use to evaluate and understand utterances, and even actions. First, there is what is the most important, *pamekas*, in what someone says or does. Second, there is the explanation or clarification of a statement, *teges* (a definition also used by the Balinese scholar, Ktut Ginarsa 1985). Third, there is the *tetuwek*, the objective or target (*sasaran*), the point (*tuwek* is the point of a weapon) of saying something, or a person (or group) pointed to, or to be affected by what is said. Fourth, there is the purpose or the directed aim of speech, its *tetujon*.

Fifth, there is *daging raos*, literally ‘the meat’ of what one says, the matter under discussion. Sixth, there is the *arti*, which may be translated as ‘meaning’, but often has connotations of ‘intended reference, significance’ (e.g. Ginarsa 1985: 39). Seventh, there is the *pikolih*, what results from saying something, the manifest outcome, the effect. Finally, there is a *suksema*, which is untranslatable (it suggests subtle, immaterial, fine). Provisionally I think it is something like the subtle effect on the listener after due reflection. Balinese widely make use of at least four (especially *tetuwek*, *tetujon*, *pikolih* and *suksema*) in analyzing speech and action. Something of Balinese usage might be related to a combination of the functions of language (Jakobson 1960) or speech acts (Austin 1975). Balinese stress the purpose of the act – be it speech, dance, painting – and the effect on the listener or spectator.

In Volosinov’s terms, all but *teges* (which significantly is the most literary term) form part of the theme, rather than the meaning. There is a high unbridgeable gulf between Balinese and their interpreters’ ideas about meaning. This may be in part related to differences in speech practices.¹⁹ Balinese has an extraordinarily large vocabulary, consisting mostly of terminal words referring to very specific features, states or movements. (There are at least 22 named eye movements or positions, 46 specific terms for hand movements, 13 named sleep postures for a single person, 6 more for two people etc.) To know a word is to know what it refers to or how it is used. Treating Bali as essentially a problem of deep understanding, of unravelling in English an almost inexpressibly dense and involuted ‘symbology’ (Geertz 1980: 98ff.) centred on a few key words, may be to miss much of how Balinese address their own language is use. Certainly one of my most infuriating, and sadly frequent, experiences is watching theatre and suddenly losing the thread because of the use of a highly specialized word which I do not know. Not infrequently these are puns which leave the anthropologist puzzled as to why, for instance, meticulous agricultural advice on how to plant vanilla should convulse the audience in ribald laughter.²⁰ The proliferation of terminal, specific words is accompanied therefore by associative assonance, both conventional and extemporized, between words with quite unrelated referents.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Ernesto Laclau for drawing the implications of Balinese usage to my attention and also for suggesting a more general difference between redescription and explication, see below.

²⁰ The link follows Balinese conventions on assonance (which are sometimes quite unexpected to an English-speaker), here a well known one between *panili*, vanilla, and *teli*, vagina.

Apart from the semantic terms already mentioned, there is also a minimal critical vocabulary which the Balinese with whom I worked insisted that I learn if I were to understand them talking about history and theatre. I apologize in advance for the indigestible litany of terms. As with body movements, Balinese often eschewed general categories that were hybrid (as is the notion of interpretation itself) in favour of more specific kinds of practice, exemplified in the widespread use of what we would call verbs. Some deal with what we would call knowing (*uning*), such as examining (*maréksa*), questioning (*nakèngang*), trying out (*ngindayang*), demonstrating (*nyihnyayang*) and proving (*muktiang*). These shade into the more hermeneutic operations of guessing (*nurahang*), illustrating (*ngèdèngang*), understanding (*ngaresep*), explaining (*nerangang*). These in turn linked with more obviously performative practices like embellishing (*ngiasin*), advising (*nuturin*), confirming the truth of (*ngawiaktiang*), commanding (*nganikain*), and pointing to the moral (*ngalèmèkin*).

Besides these, there are two terms which are primary candidates for glossing the English ‘interpreting’. They are *ngartiang*, paraphrasing, glossing, translating; and *melutang* unpeeling, unravelling, disentangling. Both are forms of what Balinese refer to as *ngaraosang indik*, commenting, or talking about. There is another sense of interpret, exemplified by the French use of *interpréter*, as in performing a musical piece. This includes reading in general, *ngawacèn*; reading manuscripts aloud, *ngogah*, *kadundun* (literally ‘to be woken up’) which is usually succeeded by *ngartiang*, translating or paraphrasing them; *nyatwayang*, telling a story, *ngaragragang*, developing or elaborating a plot by actors, a puppeteer or story-teller. This shades into *ngaredanayang*, creating or recreating a story or text. As practices they overlap. Elaborating a plot requires telling a story, illustrating, demonstrating, explaining, embellishing and not least saying what is the moral of it all. As Balinese go to some lengths to treat not just readers and actors, but audiences as active participants in reworking and re-creating what happens (Hobart 1991b), trying to split creation from interpretation is unhelpful.

Perhaps I can best make the point by an example from theatre.²¹ The elder of two servants asks a question of the prince, who replies. They then *ngartiang* his words. The prince is singing in *kawi*, the servants speak Balinese. The parentheses are mine.

²¹ The play was a *prèmbon*, a historical genre in which some of the actors are masked, some not, about the prince of Nusa Penida, an island off Bali. It was performed in the research village in March 1989.

Old Retainer: To whom should one...(pray for grace)?
Young Retainer: That's right! That's what we should ask.
Old Retainer: That is what your servants beg, M'lord.
Prince: Praise God.
Young Retainer: 'My dear chap! My dear chap!'²²
Old Retainer: What's going on?²³
Young Retainer: 'Don't fool around when working. Don't listen to idle speech (of people who denigrate the importance of performing ceremonies). I am speaking of acts of devotion. You should never be done with them. There is none other, as you said earlier, than God.'

Note how much was left unsaid. A great deal of interpretation seems to me to be possible only, as Nigel Barley once put it, through the hovercraft effect - passing rapidly and noisily over the subject in hand, with much mystification and to no long term effect. I needed a group of Balinese, including two actors, to argue through this exchange and fill in what *they* thought make sense not just of the gaps, but what was said. Their postinterpretation was for my benefit.

Both actors and members of the audience with whom I worked on this piece were explicit that the retainers were *ngartiang* the prince. At no point in the play did they translate the prince's words *verbatim* or anything near. Instead they paraphrased, explicated or expatiated upon them. The actors, here and in the other plays I have worked on, were not translating the essence of the speech, but elaborating and making what was said relevant to the immediate situation. As royal characters in shadow theatre speak *kawi*, much of the play is taken up by the servants expatiating in Balinese. *Ngartiang* is also used of translating between languages and of giving an explication (*teges*) of what someone said in the same language. On the occasions I have heard Balinese read and *ngartiang* written works in *kawi*, there was usually far more overlap of the original and the translation. Insofar as the aim of a reading may be to clarify and explicate its meaning in Volosinov's sense, apart from determining its thematic relevance, it makes sense both that this should be the occasion that Balinese used the word *teges*, which is the least situationally sensitive word in the register, and that the overlap should be greater.

²² The word used was *Paman*, a fond but respectful expression royals use to their ministers and close retainers.

²³ The old retainer acts as if it is the young retainer who is speaking to him, not as paraphrasing (*ngartiang*) his master's words.

One reason for spending time on *ngartiang* is that the root *arti* is the main candidate for glossing ‘meaning’. I have heard Balinese use it at times especially in recent years. I cannot tell though how far this usage is affected by *arti* also being Indonesian, where it has been affected by European usage. An example of my own unwitting preinterpretation and its consequences emerged when I checked my research tapes for how Balinese used *arti*. To my chagrin I discovered that it was I who kept using the word, after which the people I was working with would use it for a few sentences, then revert to the other commentative terms for meaning outlined above.

At the risk of oversimplifying, it is possible to distinguish two modes of interpretation, ‘metalingual redescription’ and ‘uncovering’ or explicating.²⁴ The practice of *ngartiang* overlaps with *melutang*, peeling or unravelling what is said to determine as far as possible its matter, point and purpose. The term is used particularly of two styles of speaking: mature speech, *raos wayah*, and veiled speech, *raos makulit*. These two are partly related because mature people often speak indirectly or disguise the point of what they say; and you have to be mature to pull off veiled speech successfully. In listening to mature speech it is often not obvious if you miss the point, because the words also refer, *nuding*, to another manifest or ostensible topic. Listening to the more skilled orators in public meetings and reading many kinds of manuscripts requires one to unpeel them. Some of the latter require great skill, experience and subtlety. By no means all adults have the ability. Even in popular theatre, as in the example above, my own inquiries back up seasoned commentators’ views that at times many young people only think about the explicit subject matter and have little idea of there often being a further point or target (*tetuwek*), or particular purpose (*tetujon*) to what is being said. As very little has been published on these practices, it is not surprising Boon seems not to know of them. It is pretty hard though to get through an ordinary day with Balinese (and certainly not a meeting or play) without needing to unpeel what they say; or more often, if you are an innocent anthropologist, failing to note that there was anything to unravel.

²⁴ The clarity of the distinction may owe more to my overdetermination than to Balinese usage. As I understand them, Balinese interpretive practices involve realizing, recognizing, appreciating and acting upon the implications of your reflections, to which redescription and explication are overlapping means.

The end(s) of interpretation

As an expression ‘interpretation’ sits uneasily on the plethora of Balinese interpretive, commentative and performative practices. It is referentially ambiguous (*ngèmpèlin*) in significant ways. Rather than try to classify or summarize the range of practices - which would be *cara magemelan yèh* like trying to grasp water - I outline three occasions which, by most standards, we would consider to involve interpretation in some quintessential form. These are interpreting the speech of a deity, reading a dynastic chronicle and explaining a theatre performance to an anthropologist.

One common practice is concerned with understanding the will of powerful, non-manifest agents. One of the most dangerous forms is learning about *sakti*, exceptional kinds of efficacy (often glossed as ‘mystical power’) by reading and unravelling (*melut*) certain manuscripts. I can say little about this, although I have been invited on a number of occasions, because to experiment would have cost me the trust of most Balinese I work with.²⁵ Having truck with power is always potentially dangerous, especially if it is non-manifest (*niskala*) and so even more indeterminate than usual. So it is wise to reflect on, and sift through, such evidence as you have carefully. Likewise caution is advisable when inquiring about the past, because it too is non-manifest. There are only the traces (*laad*) on the landscape, in written works, in peoples’ memories. They all require inferring what is the case (*tattwa*) from the evidence available.

To try, almost certainly in vain, to lay the ghost of Balinese ritualistic proclivities, I shall consider an example of how Balinese in the research village dealt with a necessary encounter with the non-manifest. As with the reading of a royal chronicle, it was an important occasion, took place in a temple and was accompanied by what Geertz and Boon would call ritual. However, rather than invoke a class, or aspect, of actions designated ‘ritual’, I prefer to follow Balinese in noting simply there are different forms of propriety and action suited, from past experience, to dealing with different kinds of being (on the problems of ritual, see Chapter 7). What transpired had precious little to do with hermeneutic interpretation, but dwelt at length on the purpose (*tetujon*) of the inquiry,

²⁵ Having worked in a celebrated centre for such writings, Lovric (1987) is informative. She died not long afterwards. Hooykaas worked on well-known texts involving *sakti*, e.g. the *Kanda ‘mpat* (1974) and *Basur* (1978).

how to go about it, what the outcome (*pikolih*) implied and what action was required, if any.

Understanding Divinity

The temple priest of the local agricultural association had become too old to continue in office. The association decided therefore to inquire about the deity's wishes (*nyanjan*) as to a successor. The first attempt had failed, because the medium of whom they had inquired had come up with a successor's name, but there was no one of that name around. (The old priest gave me a hilarious imitation afterwards of the medium's tremulous speech. What this says about unleashing power or Balinese ceremoniousness I dread to think.) A famous medium was then invited to the temple. After discussion of the purpose of the occasion, the deity duly spoke through him before an audience of thousands. It was, after all, an exciting occasion: anything could have happened. The deity excoriated the village priests for sundry failings (justified according to the onlookers I spoke to), gave a history of the priesthood of the temple, then announced the personal names (correctly) of the two sons of the old priest, as his successors to the two temples where he served. The village leaders convened a meeting to discuss the speech and agreed to implement the recommendations (and they were recommendations, as they could well have been ignored). The question of whether they needed to *melut* (unpeel) what was said was not discussed. The crucial matter was whether the deity's statements of fact about the past were true, and so whether the recommendations were believable and appropriate. The process was less to do with interpretation than a rigorous – and quite juridical – examination of evidence, motives, opportunities and so on. To evaluate what happened required, however, knowing a great deal of what had happened in the village and assessing its reliability.²⁶

²⁶ In subsequent talk around the village, the key issues were that the medium had not been tested with fire (*kapintonin*) to see if he was conscious (*éling*) and so play-acting (*ngaé-ngaé*); and whether anyone might have leaked details of the past history of the temple. Popular opinion was that it was unlikely (but unprovable), because it did not seem to be in the interests of the few who did know.

My diary entry for that day is interesting. The relevant passage reads: 'It kept running through my head that this was a good case against Sperber and Wilson: whether it is mutual knowledge, shared context or whatever, it certainly isn't couched in a propositional form which permits the kind of inference they draw' (referring to Sperber & Wilson 1982).

History for what?

The second example was about a dispute over who owned a temple with extensive rice lands (see Hobart 1990). A senior prince of a powerful dynasty had been invited to repair two ancient masks in the temple in question. On learning that there was a dispute over who should take care of the temple, he said that his family chronicle had details on how the temple was founded. A meeting of senior people in the village decided it would be useful to know what was written there to see if it were relevant. (There was a conflict of vested interests, but that is not directly germane to what follows.) The prince agreed to witness the reading and, on the appointed day, arrived with a large entourage, including the island's most famous writer of such dynastic chronicles (*babad*). A local man was enlisted to read the relevant part of the manuscript, which was in *kawi*, while the writer translated it (*ngartiang*) into high Balinese. My concern here though is not with what was read, but with its purpose. It had nothing to do with being 'another ingredient of ritual celebrations', nor with any 'play of affinities, analogies, and contradictions across social forms, performance genres, and ritual registers'. That is not to say that there was no much of interest to local intellectuals. However, according to the meeting which arranged it, the prince, the reader and translator, and the members of the audience I spoke to afterwards, the purpose was to determine the relevance of what was written to arguments about who should look after, and so had rights over the land of, the temple.

From my work subsequently with a group of interested villagers, who commented on the reading in detail for me, two points among others arose. First, there was a question whether the history, being written in *kawi*, was opaque (*makulit*) and so required *ngartiang* into Balinese to see if it needed to be explicated (*melut*). On their view, much depended on the skill of the translator and how trustworthy he was: on his rendering they thought that there was little that was unclear. (To establish this obviously required checking carefully for signs, or textual evidence, that it might have been *makulit*.) A bigger problem arose, second, in that it was one thing to read and translate a passage. It was quite another to determine the relevance of that passage to the circumstances in question. The committee had failed to make this clear before the reading. The outcome (*pikolih*) of the reading was therefore uncertain, and so destined to be abortive (*gabeng*). There was no agreed basis (*taledan*) from which to judge what was said.

Foolish anthropologist that I was, I had pressed the commentators to get on with the details of the text and translation. They balked at this and insisted on spending a whole evening discussing the prolegomenon. Conventionally this is called an ‘apology’ (*pangaksama*, see Zurbuchen 1987: 99-100). As I learned, a *pangaksama* is – or rather should be – much more. On such occasions, which also include inviting deities to speak and theatre performances, those responsible for the event are expected to state its purpose, the limits (*wates*) of the relevance or consequences of what is about to happen, and apologize in advance to those whose interests are likely to be affected. Readings and performances do something, or fail to. To attempt to generalize their significance to the participants is as vacuous as it is to argue Bali ‘demonstrates little interpretive remove from texts that would make them partly alienated objects of exegetical reflection’ (Boon 1990: 84, cited above).

So long as they’re happy

The form in which Balinese most often encountered texts was in theatre. Theatre involves a double act of interpretation. The performers interpret a work; the spectators interpret the performance. Neither actors nor spectators treated audiences as passive. In most kinds of theatre the dialogue and scenes were largely extemporized and tailored to the audience’s response. The hardest role was that of the first person on stage. They had to gauge the particular audience, while the rest of the cast listened carefully to what was going on to judge how best to play the piece. Some villages had reputations for liking slapstick, others bawdiness, others political commentary extrapolated from the story, others wanted careful exegesis.

From working with actors over the years however, there are certain points that they often alluded to. One of these also came up repeatedly when I worked on recordings of plays with members of the audiences, whether male or female. Again it shows my tendency to preinterpret. I would keep on asking what was the *arti* of what was said (or done), only to be told there was no *arti*. When I rephrased the question to ask what the purpose was, the usual answer was: *mangda panonton seneng*, so that the audience would be happy. I take the following extracts from a commentary by ex-actors and their friends on the play excerpted above.

Once again, the commentators stressed what happens before the event. Anticipation and the uncertainty about who will be performing

affect the occasion and the spectators' interest. One old actor summed it up: 'If you are not hungry, you do not enjoy your food. If it is something you have never tasted before, you are excited and afraid.' Shortly after the play began, a well-known television actor, I Midep, appeared on stage. The parentheses are my additions.

Ex-actor: The reason that as soon as the play began people knew that they would enjoy themselves – isn't that so? – is because I Midep is known for playing a servant (a humorous role).

Self: Uh. Huh.

Ex-actor: What's more, when he plays a servant, he is also very funny.

Plays were far from just occasions for jokes though. The ability to induce sad feelings (*nyedihang*) in the spectators was also greatly appreciated. The best plays are *magenep*, they contain a mixture of different elements: jokes, tragedy, historical detail, advice, political criticism. They must above all be performed well; and Balinese standards of critical judgement were ferocious. I have seen troupes famous throughout the island evidently apprehensive on seeing experienced actors in the audience. To say this is all Menippean satire tells us little about the forms it takes and how it is appreciated.

Making people laugh and cry has further importance though.

Ex-actor: (If) you often listen to the meaning (*arti*), if you watch (carefully), you need to look for what it reflects.

Friend: Yes, so that it sort of fits, a little like being given advice

Ex-actor: That is where you have to keep on searching for instruction.

Friend: That's it.

Ex-actor: In theatre, if you are happy, you watch.

Self: Yes.

Ex-actor: That's how it is.

Friend: Yes, you have to sift it through again and again, what is suitable for you to use. What is bad you throw away immediately.

This makes the point, I trust, that the audience is not presumed to be passive. It also hardly points to exegetical indifference.

A few sentences later on the commentators came to the importance of being happy again.

Ex-actor: There (in the play) it's like - what do you call it? – if the audience's thoughts are happy, don't they understand (*ngaresep*) quickly?

If you are enjoying the play, you pay attention. You are also able to understand much more quickly. What I know of theatre in Bali worked, as did much else, by recognizing and treating people as potentially active participants in thinking about, working on and understanding what was going on. What is interesting the passages above is the realization that the commentators considered the state of being of the participants to be relevant to the success of the occasion. Feeling happy was centrally implicated in understanding. If you were sad, miserable, in pain, you were likely to be distracted, uninterested, unengaged. Rather than wheel out yet again the tired clichés about how ritualized Balinese are, it might be more instructive to follow through what Balinese themselves say, namely that *suka*, happiness, enjoyment and *duka*, suffering, pain are crucial aspects of human action and its consequences, not least exegesis and understanding.

The hyperreal

To take Balinese commentaries on their own practices seriously would entail setting aside many of our deeply beloved assumptions, methods and purposes of inquiry. It would leave a large number of old, and not-so-old buffers in anthropology departments and museums bereft, if they could not opine happily on the meaning of symbols, rituals, pots and unBritish sexual activities, often among peoples who disappeared long ago or who are now more interested in television, computers and income from tourism. Interpretation is, in many ways, the core constitutive practice, without which anthropology's survival may be far less assured than that of its erstwhile subjects. If action is to be understood in terms of its purpose, as Balinese suggest, then perpetuating our practices and its practitioners looks like many anthropologists' primary concern. Likewise, who is supposed to acclaim the hermeneutics' analyses of Bali? It is not the Balinese – nor theirs' the reward. (These 'interpretations' are, incidentally, not mine but those of Balinese friends. I incline to agree with them.)

Am I then proposing a radical hermeneutics that, if nothing else, might give a facelift to anthropology's sagging jowls?²⁷ If, as I suspect,

²⁷ I am emphatically not suggesting hermeneutics as remedial therapy. This is the view that our problems of understanding stem from a lack of adequate theoretical frameworks, intersubjective empathy or even linguistic competence, which, if remedied, would

anthropology was a ‘discipline’ made possible by the conjunction of a naturalist epistemology (people and institutions as objects to be studied scientifically) and colonialism (the unreciprocal entitlement of Europeans to intrude upon and write about these objects), then no amount of transplants will help. The ideal of some meeting of free and equal sovereign minds is a delusion, which ignores the degree to which the interlocutors are differently situated. Balinese enter any such hermeneutic exchange on vastly unequal terms, economically, politically, experientially, epistemologically. Not least, we pay our research assistants and ‘informants’ for their attention, skills and loyalty. Many anthropologists pay lip service to these problems. In their practice, precious few ever realize it.

What makes it so hard for anthropologists, whose work is notionally to engage in precisely this lengthy, uncertain dialogue of unforeseeable outcome, to avoid a *trahison des clercs*?²⁸ In the panoply of the human sciences, our appointed job is to remove the cultural lime scale encrusting rationality, to polish away the blips on the cosmic mirror of philosophy, disinfect a few of the running sores on modernity and serve as a foil to postmodernisms. Sanitizing Balinese and others, making them safe for democracy, is what brings the accolades, the respectability and the bucks. We have been firmly contextualized. And, as it takes torture to make a good torturer, we contextualize and textualize those we work with. Whom

suddenly render the Balinese understandable and transparent to our knowing minds. Less inadequacy on the part of outside ‘expert’ commentators is as devoutly to be wished as it is unlikely to come about. It would provide far less excuse for the prevailing cultural myopia (aka ethnocentrism) and would make the scale of the problems of understanding more obvious. Understanding itself however is a peculiarly flabby, frequently tautological, term that refers to no discriminable kind of thinking. It is therefore singularly appropriate to woolly hermeneutics. (If the structure of understanding resembles concentrated gelatine, then doing Interpretive Anthropology waters it down into a lurid-coloured jelly.) Equally, the idea of another culture being, in any sense, ‘clear’ or ‘transparent’ indicates the prior determinations both of the kinds of ‘object’ presumed to be knowable (or rather the process of re-rendering them, as collective representations, symbols, images, so they become knowable, understandable) and of the theory of knowledge invoked.

Practices, being situational, changing, contested, often relatively un verbalized or culturally marked, are not easily squeezed into convenient objects of knowledge or of understanding. Therefore they are ignored. In short, I suggest that, far from the problems of society or culture being more or less wrapped up or even having any workable ontology, we are still largely at sea. So Laclau could write of ‘the impossibility of society’ (1990b). Reflection on practices are less the solution than a first step away from the massive prevailing hypostatizing and essentializing which has dominated thinking in the human sciences.

²⁸ ‘Betrayal by the educated’. In other words, precisely the people who should be helping, fail to.

the hermeneuts wish to destroy they first textualize. It all requires less effort than the alternatives and the results do not threaten our peers or ourselves. A Balinese who could speak would be as unwelcome as Wittgenstein's lion.

Contextualizing articulates what we write about with a world of other, existing texts. As we saw with interpretive analyses of Bali, hermeneuts confine themselves 'not only to what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*'. Oddly enough this was Baudrillard's definition of the hyperreal (1983a: 146). Once you make the step of recognizing, as the hermeneuts of Bali do, that the text in whatever form is the primary reality, the corollary is that you are presuming 'the *absence* of a basic reality'. The further implication is that the image created may bear 'no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum' (Baudrillard 1983a: 11), so setting the conditions for the replication of hyperreality. It is of the same order as the dancer with whom I began.²⁹

The difficulty of even some of the clearer postmodernist and post-structuralist writings is that, elegant and persuasive as they may sound, quite how do they translate (sic) into hard argument? To answer a question with a question: how did Bali become identified with ritual? One of the answers is through death. Cremations, especially those that involved the immolation of widows, have fascinated Europeans for centuries before they ever tamed the Balinese beast. Who actually witnessed these, and what if anything they saw through the throng and the smoke, is much less clear than the I-was-standing-right-there-on-the-cremation-pyre accounts suggest. Nonetheless these accounts have been replicated endlessly as testimony to the savage ritual essence of Bali (Connor 1996). And who reproduces these yet again as striking images to support their interpretation of the ritualized Balinese? It is none other than our two hermeneuts (Boon 1977: 176-224; Geertz 1980: 98-120, 231-235).

It would be sad to leave Bali in the maw of Geertz, Boon and their nemesis, Baudrillard, condemned to eternal hyperreality. Despite the two million tourists a year, the Indonesian government (not unaided) making their culture a commoditizable object and the kind attentions of all the Baliologists, Balinese somehow manage to carry on much of the time

²⁹ 'The collapse of the real into hyperrealism' comes about by 'the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography' (Baudrillard 1993: 71). For Bali we have both in superabundance, and reinterpretation too.

resisting the pure textuality that Boon (1982, 1990), and the silence and the spectacle that Geertz (1980) and Baudrillard (e.g. 1983b: 9-11, 19-24), join in unholy alliance to foist on them. Between the texts, silences and spectacles, for the moment at least many of them carry on living and even sometimes thriving. What they do is encompassed simply neither by hyperreality, nor even reality (a noose I leave to philosophers to hang themselves). For want of a better word, I shall call it hyporeality. By the expression I am referring to that domain of underdetermined facts which are subject to continued analysts⁷ – and in a quite different way sometimes Balinese – attempts to subdue and determine, and which usually elude them. It consists not least of that myriad of actions, speech, ruminations and their absences, which make up so much of human living. *Pace de Certeau* (1984) we have great difficulty explaining or interpreting the ordinary. A reason, I suggest, is that our theoretical practices are overwhelmingly concerned with singling out – according to predilection – the structural, the foundational, the essential, the determinative, the limiting case, the puzzling, the unlikely, the dramatic; but very rarely the ordinary. It is what Balinese call *biasa* and regard as beyond explanation. Actions *in situ* and their unintended consequences remain sufficiently contingent as to make a mockery of theorizing, even if it is not the fashion of these times. Most of what humans do remains – and I suspect will always remain to the half-honest scholar – delightfully intransigent to explanation if not to overinterpretation.