A passage to anthropology

Between experience and theory

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Chapter 4

The anthropological imagination
On the making of sense

The passage from the manifest to the hypothetical is made by way of imagination. In the process, language is stretched to match manifest yet unprecedented experiences. The empirical is condensed and made ready for travel. By its attempt to incorporate cultural remainders in a global scheme of comprehension, anthropology takes Donald Davidson's notion of radical interpretation to its full effect (e.g. Davidson 1984: 128). Radical interpretation of alien sentences and lifeways hinges upon the ability to set up particular truth-conditions for these manifestations in a separate language; only then can we claim to know what they mean. This is what anthropological theory amounts to: a set of hypothetical truth-conditions for the variety of cultural expressions.

This is not a matter of simple translation from one language or idiom to another; it is a process of transformation, which is governed by its own rules of clarity and ecomomy of expression. In a discussion of Davidson's tenet, Hilary Putnam propounds the view that an idea of 'one' language of interpretation is untenable or at least at odds with the notion of conceptual relativity: the meanings of conceptual alternatives will be reproduced at the meta-linguistic level (Putnam 1990: 104). The shift from a linguistic to a cultural idiom transforms the problem, but Putnam's point is worth keeping in mind. The manifest conceptual relativity in the world, i.e., the fact that people live by different epistemologies, is likely to reproduce itself in theory. The examples are legion; medicine 'means' different things to different peoples, as does motherhood, sorcery, cattle, love and the rest. Consequently, anthropology has made various theories to accommodate the differences. But note here that theories of that kind – or such

hypothetical relativities – concern only meaning in a narrow linguistic sense and presuppose a distinct meaning of holism. This is not the sole objective of anthropology; there is a wider sense of purpose than establishing meaning within a particular (cultural) reference scheme. Semantic understanding is only a first step towards the anthropological making of sense, which is based in a thorough knowledge of manifold meanings, but which transcends them all in its concern with questions of how meanings are premissed and produced at all. This is where we may still seek for 'a' language of interpretation, in which meaning is emergent rather than given by a pre-established theoretical scheme.

Emergence points to a latent change of meaning; the making of sense implies that the language of anthropological theory cannot be stable. In contrast to earlier Objectivist propositions we can no longer entertain the comforting view that science is really progressing toward *the* correct description of reality (cf. Johnson 1987: 197). Knowledge expands with language; the confrontations with worlds and experiences beyond western notions of rationality and logocentrism make an extensive use of metaphors inescapable in anthropology; they are seen as prime instruments for conceptual change; as will be recalled, metaphors are forerunners of insight that cannot as yet be incorporated in preconceived categories. As '*every* observation report has some component which could be described as "inferential" ' (Putnam 1981: 183), we cannot possibly adhere to a belief in a transparent language of observation. The desire for fixed standards fades in the view of language being able to incorporate 'the unlikely' only by way of the linguistic remainder: metaphor.

Metaphor hinges on the use of language, rather than the meaning of language, as we have seen. By way of a literal use of words, metaphor makes us see *as* rather than see *that*. 'Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight' (Davidson 1984: 263). Metaphor is not a wastebin for the not understood. Rather, it is a prime element in our structuring of experience; it is a pervasive mode of understanding by way of projecting particular patterns or connections onto the unprecedented (Johnson 1987: xiv *et passim*). The frightening indeterminacy of experience is transformed to a temporary making of sense.

Consequently, all theory-building is in some sense metaphorical; but I want to carry the argument further than to state

this simple descriptive point. The implications are much more profound, because 'the metaphoric sentence expresses a proposition; but the *seeing as* response that it inspires is not a propositional attitude' (Cavell 1986: 495). Briefly, in Davidson's terms, 'words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture' (Davidson 1984: 263). Even theories in some important sense have to get beyond their own words.

The 'dreamwork' of metaphor, evoked by Davidson, implicitly points to a feature of condensation and displacement inherent also in Freud's analysis of dreamwork (Cavell 1986). Condensation and displacement, or in the words used before, reduction and dislocation, are prominent features of establishing the hypothetical in anthropology. In the process, anthropology makes use of imagination as a capacity for understanding unprecedented experience; it is part and parcel of any rationality that we might claim. Even innovation is a rule-governed behaviour; 'the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere' (Ricoeur 1991: 25). The theoretical phrasings that we arrive at must connect to the anthropological tradition.

My aim in this chapter is to discuss the nature of the anthropological imagination, and to show that however much anthropological knowledge rests upon the investment of individual anthropologists' imaginative powers, this does not subvert the empirical foundation.[1] Rather, it makes room for novel connections that come out of experience.

In keeping with the topic of this chapter I shall start with a parable in the shape of one of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, which actually has very little to do with fairies. It is 'The Story of a Mother'.[2]

THE STORY OF A MOTHER

A mother sat by her little child: she was very sorrowful, and feared that it would die. Its little face was pale, and its eyes were closed. The child drew its breath with difficulty, and sometimes so deeply as if it were sighing; and then the mother looked more sorrowfully than before on the little creature.

Then there was a knock at the door, and a poor old man came in, wrapped up in something that looked like a great horse-cloth, for that keeps warm; and he required it for it was

> cold winter. Without, everything was covered with ice and snow, and the wind blew so sharply that it cut one's face.

Here the harsh northern scene is set; the frosty weather, the wind, the horse-cloth. And no sooner had the mother put some beer in a pot on the stove to warm for the stranger, confessed her worry to him, and fallen asleep for a minute, than Death, because that was the old man, escaped with her dear child.

When she awoke to the empty cradle, the mother set out to pursue the stranger and rescue the child. She met all kinds of difficuties, but the major obstacle is met by the shores of a lake:

> The Lake was not frozen enough to carry her, nor sufficiently open to allow her to wade through, and yet she must cross it if she was to find her child. Then she laid herself down to drink the Lake; and that was impossible for any one to do. But the sorrowing mother thought that perhaps a miracle might be wrought.
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> 'No, that can never succeed,' said the Lake. 'Let us rather see how we can agree. I'm fond of collecting pearls, and your eyes are the two clearest I have ever seen: if you will weep them out into me I will carry you over into the great green-house, where Death lives and cultivates flowers and trees; each one of these is a human life.'
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> 'Oh, what would I not give to get my child!' said the afflicted mother; and she wept yet more, and her eyes fell into the depths of the lake, and became two costly pearls. But the lake lifted her up, as if she sat in a swing, and she was wafted to the oppposite shore.

The problem now, of course, is that she cannot see what is there, and is even more dependent upon others to direct her. Among other things she has to pay her beautiful hair to the old woman gardener of Death for her to show the way to the greenhouse. She senses the life all around her, and believes herself capable of identifying her own child by its heart-beat. In fact she is unable to distinguish the various plants or human lives from one another. Only Death can tell them apart, and he has not yet arrived.

Death finally comes, and expresses his surprise at seeing the Mother there. On his way he had collected her pearly eyes from the bottom of the lake. He gives them back to her, 'clearer now than before', so that she may see the variety of possible destinies.

She realizes that however much she loved her child she could not have known what was in store for it. She then resigns her quest, and lets Death take away her child to the unknown land.

This story belongs to my own most dreadful childhood readings. Like so many other of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, this one is not really meant for children. Most of his stories were written for grown-ups as allegories of life and with various edifying purposes. I, too, want to use his sad story of the mother as a parable of what I want to say about the anthropological imagination.

The Mother, of course, is Anthropology, who seems to have lost its innocent child: the empirical object. It was stolen by the dreaded Death of Postmodernism, sometimes invoked as the end not only of anthropology but of science in general. The monster carried away the child to the hothouse of a thousand exotic flowers, representing the fragmented world.

In the attempt to reclaim its object, Anthropology was even prepared to weep out its own eyes at a certain stage, that is, to abandon the idea of empirical observation. In the world that she eventually sensed, however, Anthropology became acutely aware that the variety of flowers could not be known without empirical observation. Deception was likely to follow, were she only to judge the flowers by their heartbeat. It seemed as if there were no standards for scholarly judgement, no canons of professional success or failure, yet also no choice of returning to innocence. Small wonder that fright ensued.

The aim of this chapter is not to reclaim the child-object of Anthropology, but to comfort the Mother and contribute to her confidence in her own vision of the world, 'clearer now than before'. Confronted with the gap between this side of the world and the other, Objectivism provides no lifeboat. The ocean that separates and, indeed, connects selves and others can be traversed only by way of the anthropological imagination.

SOME SOCIOLOGICAL PREDECESSORS

Addressing the theme of anthropological imagination naturally brings the work of C. Wright Mills to mind. His book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) was once (rightly) thought to be highly provocative, and it is interesting briefly to retrace his main points.

In Wright Mills' terms, the sociological imagination is a particular quality of mind that 'enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (Mills 1959: 5). The sociological imagination, and the social science that embodies it, enable us 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (ibid.: 6). The message is clear: the task and the promise of the sociological imagination is to make intelligible the interrelatedness of what Wright Mills calls 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure' (ibid.: 8).

With the book, Wright Mills wanted to alert social scientists to the new significance of the social sciences for the cultural tasks of the time, prophesying that the sociological imagination was to become the major common denominator in the intellectual and social life of the time to come, replacing the domination of the natural sciences.

Retrospectively, his programme was at least partly successful. The relationship between the individual and the structural has been on the agenda ever since in the social sciences. I would be prepared to argue that the present anthropological concern about the relationship between the local and the global is a late variant of the same idea. In many ways this particular issue is little more than a rephrasing of the by now commonsensical requirement of seeing ethnography in its historical context. Anthropology cannot take scale for granted, however, and the 'local' and the 'global' cannot be studied as ontological entities, interfacing somewhere in space. Scale has to be questioned along with any ethnographic description. The dualism between local and global is, I would contend, not only theoretically impotent but also epistemologically untenable. There is no way to separate these two dimensions experientially.

The central tenet of Wright Mills was the *craft* of sociology; the kind of imagination called for implied an establishment of empirical links between various contexts, and was a methodological means of unearthing the hidden connections. With no intent of discovering hidden meanings that are already 'in' the object, and with no assumption of a transparent language of pure observation, anthropology today has a different sense of purpose. The empirical of whatever scale provides the basis for hypothetical reflections that may expand the field of significance for anthro-

pology. This also implies that we have to reconsider the nature of the anthropological imagination in other than methodological terms. Our concern is not primarily with the craft of anthropology but with its epistemology.

This, again, means that the scope of this chapter is different from Paul Atkinson's recent volume on *The Ethnographic Imagination*, concentrating on one aspect of the intellectual craftmanship in sociology, namely, how sociological texts and arguments are constructed (Atkinson 1990: 3). In Atkinson's view, ethnography is a particular genre within sociology, and imagination is invoked as a pathway to the textual construction of reality. As such, it echoes another sociological predecessor, namely, the work of Berger and Luckman (1967) on the interpersonal construction of social reality. With their focus on craftsmanship and the idea of hidden connections, all of these works remain within rather narrow Enlightenment concerns and fail to explore the Romantic view of creative imagination as 'a creation which reveals, or as a revelation which at the same time defines and completes what it makes manifest' (Taylor 1989: 419).

For Kant, the Enlightenment was 'a way out' of immaturity. It was the immaturity of Reason, correlated with a weakness of will, that made people readily give in to authorities, sometimes against better judgement. Because of this immaturity of Reason, people also lacked the courage to alter their situation. In this version, Enlightenment was to be understood both as an individual and a collective project towards freedom. The work of Wright Mills clearly belongs to this tradition.

There is no for or against Enlightenment in this; after all, the Enlightenment position may be re-read as a particular scholarly attitude, an ethos 'in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them' (Foucault 1984: 50). In the experiment lies a Romanticist strategy, which in principle straddles the gap between reason and imagination. The identification of what we cannot yet know, given present knowledge conditions, rests on an imaginative investment that is rarely acknowledged, however.

A CENTRAL MYTH

Generally, the historical changes attributed to the Enlightenment gave rise to a central myth of our time, i.e., the myth of the great divide in our intellectual history between 'before' and 'after' Enlightenment, later projected onto space as a radical distinction between 'them' and 'us'. Before, or with them, people were intellectually confused; they could not tell the difference between fact and value, truth and convention, nature and custom (see e.g. Shweder 1991: 2). The Enlightenment made such distinctions possible, and the road to progress was open. After, or with us, rational knowledge projects were set in motion, exploring the facts of nature and leaving behind the conventional wisdom of the premodern people. The goal of science was to liberate these people from superstition as well as from false authorities. In short, reason had to be liberated from imagination.

For Descartes, writing in the seventeenth century, the process of becoming modern implied a separation of intellect from imagination, even if both of these faculties were important elements in the construction of knowledge.

> Where knowledge of things is concerned, only two factors need to be considered: ourselves, the knowing subjects, and the things which are the objects of knowledge. As for ourselves, there are only four faculties which we can use for this purpose, *viz.* intellect, imagination, sense-perception and memory. It is of course only the intellect that is capable of perceiving the truth, but it has to be assisted by imagination, sense-perception and memory if we are not to omit anything which lies within our power.
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> (Descartes 1988: 12).

The supremacy of the intellect in perceiving the truth was based also in a firm distinction of mind from body, rationality from intuition, and science from rhetoric. As demonstrated by Ernest Gellner, Reason in the Cartesian sense was closely connected to individualism, and contrasted with culture (Gellner 1992). Reason was a kind of thinking that was purified from the collective errors of culture. Deep into the postmodern condition, we have realized that there are other stories to be told about these matters. We have cleared the vision – if not the object. The anthropological project is, as we have noted before, not a matter of clarifying

what is already there, but of making new sense. In this way also, anthropology parts company from Cartesianism, in which the visionary power was to be taken literally; since sight was deemed the noblest among the senses, inventions such as the telescope were of utmost importance: 'Carrying our vision much further than our forebears could normally extend their imagination, these telescopes seem to have opened the way for us to attain a knowledge of nature much greater and more perfect than they possessed' (Descartes 1988: 57). But evidently this is so, if by knowledge we refer only to registration by way of the senses, and understanding by way of intellect. We note in passing that vision supplants imagination in this view. The scopic regime of modernity as located by Descartes in the telescope was further cemented in the intellectual world by the increasing circulation of printed works.[3]

Visionary metaphors are prominent in communicating understanding between persons or cultures; we *see* what other people mean. Visualism is on the wane, of course, yet the metaphors remain and thus inadvertently keep fusing energy into an outmoded dichotomy between realism, in which images aim at a faithful reflection of the world, and rhetoric, in which images evaluate the world as they portray it (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 158). Rhetoric is the bed-fellow of imagination; it is the ability to draw hypothetical connections that are in some way persuasive. Any theory is made within a particular context of persuasion (Atkinson 1990: 2). This is diacritical within anthropology, as based in an ethnography that 'surely extends beyond the range of the empirical eye; its inquisitive spirit calls upon us to ground subjective, culturally configured action in society and history – and vice versa – wherever the task may take us' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 11). That spirit takes us right into the idea of human imagination as a collective, social phenomenon (Le Goff 1988: 5), and it will not allow an a priori separation of rationality from superstition. If superstition has social effect, it belongs to the empirical, and people's reactions cannot be deemed irrational.

To give an example: during my fieldwork in Iceland in the 1980s I kept stumbling upon references to 'the hidden people' (*huldufólkiD*, a people of elf-like features). They had played a prominent part in folk tale and legend during the centuries, and they were known to me and to my interlocutors as such. It was

part of the rhetoric of collective imagination, or of the poetics of history, and as such we all knew it to be patently unreal. The unreality would be emphasized in conversation: direct questions would invariably yield answers in terms of past belief. Only an increasing intimacy with the people who had allowed me into their world finally made me realize that 'the past' was still very much with us. Once, when the hidden people were again half-jokingly mentioned over coffee as the cause of disappearing ustensils, I simply asked my friends when they had last encountered these people directly. Some internal debate on local chronologies and events yielded the answers of 'ten years ago', and I was given an elaborate account of where and how. Further conversation yielded more details, and there was no question whatsoever that *huldufólk* had an experiential reality within living memory. As an ethnographer I had no choice but to take the information as an empirical fact. The hidden people had a historical reality in the Icelandic world, and who was I to relegate local history to superstition, or to label my highly knowledgable friends premodern irrationals, bent on imagination for lack of reason. No way. Having unearthed the hidden people in the present, my task was to understand their manifest presence in theoretical terms. Without questioning local faculties of reasoning, the anthropologist has to cultivate her own powers of imagination in order to incorporate conceptual alternatives into a coherent vision of the world.

The making of sense in anthropology is based on an exploration of the potentiality of the present. Imagination becomes an active force in the construction of theories, that are in many ways no more and no less than metaphors intimating a particular world.

THE CENTRED SELF

Sense is not an inherent quality of social facts; it is attributed on the basis of experience. Empirical studies and recent epistemological reconsiderations have pointed to a fundamental moral, as phrased by Mark Johnson: 'any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp our world' (Johnson 1987: xiii).

The embodied attention to the world points to a centrality of the self, which has been curiously absent in the age of individual-

ism. The absence is rooted in the Copernican revolution that initially decentred the world. Humans were displaced from the centre of the universe, and the road towards a mechanical view of the cosmos was open. Copernicus demonstrated how the Sun and not the Earth was the cosmological centre; the result was a mechanical model that alienated human experience from learned cosmology (cf. Merchant 1980). Later on, Darwin contributed the idea that the human species was but a temporary result of interaction between fortuitous environmental pressure and random mutation. The world had no purpose; life was not of itself edifying. The image of what it meant to be human changed vastly as a matter of course. The self was displaced from cosmos to mind.[4]

In the early twentieth century, when the tradition of professional anthropology as based in fieldwork was invented, the decentred nature of human beings was further substantiated by Freud. He discovered, or claimed, that the ego is not master in its own house, and he likens his discovery to the previous realization that the Earth is not the centre of the universe (Rorty 1991b: 143–144). The person is as fragmented as the solar system. There is no single reason governing the 'self', even if some kind of reason was often engaged in a virulent battle against unreasonable passions or brute bodily cravings. According to the Gospel of Sigmund, the self is ruled by an internal dialogue between conscious and uncounscious conversational partners. I believe that at some level this model provided the rationale for seeking the meaning of 'other worlds' in unconscious collective representations rather than in practice. Meaning became transferred to the implicit; nothing was to be taken at face value.

While one could possibly claim that 'Freud democratized genius by giving everyone a creative unconscious' (Rieff, quoted in Rorty 1991b: 149), it can also be claimed that democratization in this sense diluted the idea of responsibility that was still embodied in the enlightened view of reason, permanently engaged in fighting irrational brutes. With the alleged fact of fragmentation went a sense of irresponsibility that made people lose sight of the good as a directive force; morality was displaced. From then on, people *reacted*; they did not *respond* to circumstance.

There is a need to recentre the human world if we are to overcome the pessimist view in anthropology – and elsewhere. The mechanical view of cosmos and the idea of the fragmented self reached a peak with the many claims to postmodernism that

are, and for that reason, but a continuation of the modern view of the world. A radical break with the decentred self takes us squarely past the demand for a therapy that aims only at self-fulfilment. In the particular cultural turn that promotes individual therapy as instrumental advice against meaninglessness, the reintegration of the self has turned into parody. 'A total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfilment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment' (Taylor 1989: 507).

The integrity of experience has to be acknowledged. For all the conversation that may go on in the heads of individuals they are still responsible for their actions as whole persons. Responsibility presupposes a subject. The denouncement of the individual subject as a 'curious entity from which many of us have grown to latterly distance ourselves' (Taussig 1992: 1) seems to me to be a short cut, past the real challenge to anthropology. The badly needed revision of the modern view of the rational and disengaged self does not entail selling out any idea of the subject. It means revising the notion of the subject, of course, and reclaiming an understanding of self-realization that presupposes 'that some things are important beyond the self; that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance of fulfilling life needs' (Taylor 1989: 507).

If it is true 'that knowing is giving onself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above' (Taussig 1992: 10), knowing the world presupposes a subject that is willing to go beyond its own internal conversation between intellects. Whether our knowledge project in a particular world is of a practical or a theoretical nature, we can only engage in it by way of ourselves. We respond to the world as subjects, who are responsible. This, I believe, is to carry the reflexive mode of anthropology to its logical conclusion. The anthropologists' inward-bound reflection has been both necessary and fertile, but there is now more to be gained by reverting the process. Self-reflexivity may be redirected out into the world once 'they' have been recognized as of 'us'; the heightened sensitivity and awareness of the relationship between anthropology as radical other and the world itself opens for a new kind of insight into reality.

Somewhat paradoxically the recentring of the self makes a new

outward-bound expansion of knowledge possible because it allows us to project our imaginative powers out into the world.

BEYOND REASON

To fruitfully approach the methodological problem awaiting us, we need first to recognize that the apparently insurmountable problem of reuniting the dualisms created in the wake of Enlightenment is itself constituted within the specific discourse that separated them in the first place. This implies that we do not necessarily have a serious epistemological obstacle, but simply a problem of terminology. The words that we are currently using are in many ways outmoded. If the belief in reason is nothing but superstition, both terms lose sense. On this account, too, there is an acute need for acitivating the anthropological imagination, so that the words may not only catch up with, but possibly also redirect present concerns.

My aim is not to find another 'way out' of the impasse created by immature Reason and weakness of will. Instead, I would like to explore the alleged weakness as a stronghold of genuine insight in human life. As we know from so many field-worlds, people's actions are not governed solely by will or rational calculation. Attempts have been made to demonstrate that they are just governed by different rationalities. But why adhere to such notions, when people manifestly are engaged in what philosophers call 'incontinent actions', i.e., actions that go against better judgement, as it were (Davidson 1980: 21ff.). Incontinent actions imply weakness of will; as such they have been repressed and relegated to the non-scholarly universe of anecdote and joke. Their real significance as conveyors of unprecedented insight in the workings of culture and scholarship has been overlooked. From fieldwork we know that the experience of not being able even to understand oneself is crucial to the understanding of the limitations of western reason. Reason invariably gets stuck; that is, when we need imagination and emotion to break the tie (cf. de Sousa 1990: 16). Neither the label of irrationality nor the invocation of a different kind of rationality is of any help here.

Actions done intentionally but 'against one's better judgement', are done for a reason, and are therefore rational, yet there were better reasons for doing something else, and the actions are therefore also irrational. The relative saliency of the two opposed

arguments or possible actions is determined by a motivational force that disconnects the 'better' judgement from the course of action, and that cannot be referred to Pure Reason in the Enlightenment sense.

This is where Romanticism enters as an important supplement to the Enlightenment heritage in anthropology. Romanticism and creative imagination have more often been associated with artistic creativity and fantasy than with scientific discovery and discursive novelty in a broader sense. In anthropology it gave rise to new, and rather blurred, genres of ethnographic writing, legitimized by postmodern ideas of social constructionism and the 'writing of culture'. The perplexing idea of constructionism made all anthropological writing seem as if made in water.

The redemption of imagination as an important means to knowledge is not to abide with constructionism, however. The notion of 'social construction' – of this and that and the other – is at best a preamble to further investigation. Claiming that gender, race, society or whatever is a social construction has far too often been converted into a conclusion (Taussig 1993: xvi). A conclusion, moreover, that does not transcend the obvious. Constructionism begs the question of the very process of social construction, which is a key issue in anthropology. Or, as Taussig has it: 'With good reason postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice yet, so it seems to me, not enough surprise has been expressed as to how we nevertheless get on with living, pretending – thanks to the mimetic faculty – that we live facts not fictions' (Taussig 1993: xv).

One way of expressing and exploring this surprise is to unfold the notion of the anthropological imagination in Romantic terms while not necessarily discarding the Enlightenment ethos. The act of reasoning itself implies imagining within a social and cultural context. Understanding is an *event*. We 'intimate' unprecedented incidents or other worlds by means of imaginative projections from previous experience. As related above, a theory of imagination is an important ingredient in any theory of rationality. Once we have abandoned the demand for a disembodied rationality, imagination need no longer be excluded from our vision of the processes of understanding. While so far, a logic of creativity seems to have been a contradiction in terms, we can now see that even novel connections come out of past experience. Imagination provides the metonymical and metaphorical links between pre-

vious experience and unprecedented events and wordings. The logic of imaginative creativity is not distinct from the logic of reasoning; they are aspects of the same capacity for intimation, which is part of our being 'cultural'. Imagination is both constitutive and creative. It is a process, central to any event of understanding.

And this is the point: to acknowledge and to advocate an anthropological imagination is not to replace the scholarly standard of ethnographic presentation with a demand for creative writing. It is to explore the human potential for novelty in the real world. Anthropological knowledge is a creation that reveals. In so far as it is also a revelation that defines and completes what it makes manifest, we need new criteria for the acceptability of the anthropological revelations. The notion of interpretation as correlation with objects in themselves is no longer prominent. As pointed out by Hilary Putnam, this notion of interpretation is not the only notion available to us, however. We can still seek to correlate discourse with discourse, or constitute a meaningful commentary on one discourse in another (Putnam 1990: 122). Whatever practices of interpretation we have in anthropology, and however much they are context-sensitive and interest-relative, there is still such a thing as 'getting it right'. We can live with degrees of professional success and failure, but we cannot survive without implicit scales for making such judgements.

The conceptual relativism inherent in anthropological practice should not be mistaken for an ontological relativism.[5] It is this confusion that has marred any debate about universalism and relativism in anthropology. The conceptual relativity inherent in solid ethnography and amounting to a locally meaningful whole is no impediment to the achievement of a more general understanding or of the context of understanding itself. Anthropology must reject the idea of incommensurability, and admit to some criteria of rational acceptability of particular interpretations. We have to accept standards for scholarly 'emplotment', to invoke Ricoeur's notion of the mechanism that serves to make one story out of multiple incidents (Ricoeur 1991: 21). In the language of anthropological theory, the truth conditions must be made explicit. The intellectual craftsmanship of anthropology is not a matter of linking contexts of different scales, but of convincing the world that new kinds of shared knowledge are imaginable.

By way of concluding this edifying tale, I would like to return

to the story of Mother Anthropology standing by the lake between this world and the other. I have been wanting to say that in order to traverse the gap, Anthropology has neither to drink the lake nor sacrifice her eyes. The miracle of being able to empty the lake and thus to level the world will not happen; local differences will remain. But by blinding ourselves we can make nothing of them.

If there is anything common to humanity, it is that we are imaginable to one another (Shweder 1991: 18). To perceive and understand different worlds of whatever scale, we must extend our imaginative powers as far as possible, and make more events of understanding happen. Exploring the imaginative character of anthropological reason may be both unsettling and liberating (cf. Johnson 1993: 1), just like anticipation may turn out to be disabling as well as potentiating (cf. Strathern 1992: 178ff.). We have no choice, however, but to explore the prophetic condition of anthropology: it is in this perspective that the anthropological imagination makes sense.