# WRITING LIVES: RUTH BENEDICT'S JOURNEY FROM BIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES TO ANTHROPOLOGY

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Ruth Benedict's early biographical essays illuminate her anthropology and, especially, the humanism that guided her choice of subjects, her style of writing, and her goals in the profession. I examine the biographical essays, written in response to World War I, and then assess the contribution of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, written at the end of World War II. With the speech she made to the American Anthropological Association in 1947, Benedict completed the circle, proposing a new anthropology that would include the emotions, ethics, reasoning, and experiences of individuals. A response to the behaviorist social science of the times, Benedict's anthropology drew on the lessons she had learned as a biographer about the creativity that emerges under congenial conditions and the human capacity for reshaping conditions that are uncongenial.

## Introduction

During World War I, Ruth Benedict drafted three biographical studies, her response, she said, to the horror of war. Thirty years later, she published *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a response to World War II. Prompted by cataclysmic upheavals, these writings have more in common than first appears. The similarities in purpose and style between writing a life and writing a culture establish Benedict's importance for contemporary anthropology. The biographer's representation of the driving force of an individual trajectory informs the anthropologist's attempt to present the terms by which life is lived in diverse settings. The lesson Benedict teaches pertains

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to the discipline in the twenty-first century, as anthropologists dismantle the boundaries of "society" and dismiss the coherence of "culture."

Benedict's journey (1946, 1) began with her experiments in biography and culminated in a portrait of the "most alien enemy" the United States ever fought in an all-out war. In the intervening years, she pursued the question that had prompted her biographical inquiries: how can an individual, a culture, and, ultimately, humanity effectively and responsibly respond to a looming crisis or to relentlessly disastrous conditions? The question lay behind her anthropological inquiries, a source of her examination of varying cultural configurations. The anthropologist who was intrigued by the merits of a tightly integrated configuration, the driving force behind an enduring culture, grew out of the biographer who had been fascinated by the passionate conviction that propelled an individual life.

From first to last, Benedict wrote in order to make an impact. She was not satisfied until her writings reached a public and radically altered the perceptions of her audience. While the biographical essays of World War I do not predict what she would do in the subsequent endeavors of her life, they do provide a way of reconsidering the book she wrote during World War II—the highly successful and much disparaged *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Benedict (1946, 1) said it was an "assignment," but Japan in fact was an ideal case for her. In "experiencing vicariously" the delicate and militaristic culture, Benedict entered a new phase of her anthropology, the phase that would have brought her compelling concern to the level of humanity, had she lived beyond 1948.

I begin with a discussion of the biographical essays to explore Benedict's claim that the study of lives constitutes an effective response to a raging world war. She viewed biography, with its intimacy of writer, subject, and reader, as a genre with a particular capacity for transforming a reader's perceptions. Next, I turn to the last book she wrote, as a mature anthropologist and servant of the American government during World War II. The study of Japanese patterns of culture remains provocative, condemned for its compact portrait of a complex nation and, at the same time, recognized as crucial to subsequent scholarly and popular accounts of Japan. Pro or con, readers marvel at the persuasiveness of an anthropological study done at a geographical, cultural, and political distance and admit its indisputable staying power.

In conclusion, I move from an examination of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* to a consideration of Benedict's 1947 farewell speech to the American Anthropological Association, "Anthropology and Humanism." Together, these two pieces bring Benedict's anthropology full circle, back to the early writings, back to World War I, and back to an evolving interpretation of the value of anthropology.

## The Biographical Studies

In November 1914, Benedict jotted an entry in her journal. "My pet scheme," she wrote, "is to steep myself in the lives of restless and highly enslaved women of past generations and write a series of biographical papers from the standpoint of the 'new woman'" (Mead 1959, 132). She had married Stanley Benedict six months earlier, and throughout the summer she had dreaded the inevitable coming of war. Why at that moment, newly married and horrified at the swirling global disaster, did she decide to write biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, and Olive Schreiner?[1] She chose the three, she informed a prospective publisher, because they were "leaders and pioneers"—a phrase handwritten in over the crossed-out sentence "women who were all, perhaps, leaders of a future generation rather than their own" (Ruth Fulton Benedict Papers, henceforth RFBP). The draft of a foreword shows the connection between her choice of subjects and the war that was raging in Europe. "Today the great adventure is in womanhood. No other calling, except perhaps world-statesmanship, has in it so much of the untried, so much of the still undiscovered; none is called upon to face such wholesale reversal of conditions; none to surmount such bewilderment of the soul" (RFBP).

These sentences indicate the heart of her biographical studies. They reveal Benedict's fascination with those who venture into a place where rules are not scripted, norms not developed, and the patterns of culture tangled. The comparison of Wollstonecraft, Fuller, and Schreiner to world statesmen puts the emphasis where it belongs: on boldness, courage, and action. For Benedict, the women represented a daring she wished for herself, for her contemporaries, and for the statesmen who would construct a postwar world. She treated the three not as founders of a feminist movement but as "pioneers" in a quest for freedom and fulfillment that transcended gender. Given this approach, Wollstonecraft's feminist manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ([1792] 1988), receives scant attention. Benedict focused not on the writer but on the person whose spirit chafed against an era.

"Adventures in Womanhood," the proposed title for the triadic study, forefronts action. Not one to take titles lightly, Benedict relished the word adventure, with its connotations of youthful exploration and its echo of a children's story. She portrays a person whose spirited resistance to suffocating conventions preserved her "soul" and made her a model for future generations. Notes indicate that Benedict regarded Fuller and Schreiner through the same lens, the books they wrote less important than the adventures they lived. Without a geometry, the axioms untested, the three cut

new pathways, stretching their capacities to the utmost. These were lives boldly ventured, not carefully charted.

"She lived with all the alertness of her brain focused upon the abrupt experiences of her life: the knowledge she won, the price she paid, her books may hint to us, but it is her life through which we understand" (RFBP). These words propose an approach to biography that emphasizes *experiencing* and courage in the face of the unexpected. Activity is the key and the act of constructing a life more important than the products of a life. That was the lesson Wollstonecraft's life taught, a lesson that Benedict posed for her own generation in a time of war, when enslavement threatened a wide scope of humanity. In her drafts, the particulars of Wollstonecraft's living enlarge to depict any person who exploits the human potential to reshape the givens of life.

While she was working on the biographies, Benedict read the American philosopher William James. As always, she jotted engaging ideas into her notebook. Referring to James, she wrote,

> [A]nd in picking out from history our heroes, and communing with their kindred spirits, in imagining as strongly as poss. [*sic*] what differences their individualities brought about in this world while its surface was still plastic in their hands . . . each of us may best fortify and inspire which creative energy [*in original*] lie in his own soul. (RFBP)

This unreferenced sentence provides a key to her view of what biographical writing could accomplish: creating empathy between reader and subject so that the strength, individuality, and willfulness of the subject's adventure inspire a similar daring in the reader. With his practical American spirit, James considered heroic any person who asserted will in the face of adversity. As biographer, Benedict responded to this notion of the hero in the common man.

In 1927, Virginia Woolf wrote an essay describing the "new biography" in terms similar to those Benedict had ventured in her notes. Woolf praised the transformation in biography between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. No longer restricted to the great and famous, modern biography honors the lives of those to whom fame and fortune may not accrue (Woolf 1927, 149). The new approach to telling lives leaves behind the hagiographies of the nineteenth century and the birth-to-death accounts written by dutiful chroniclers. If the living is as significant as the status of the person, Woolf continued, a biography of Mrs. Smith can be as significant as one of Shakespeare. The new biographer acknowledges the glory in

conquering conditions and in staking a claim to dignity, whether the biographical subject is housemaid or poet. While Wollstonecraft, Fuller, and Schreiner hold a place in history different from that of Mrs. Smith, Benedict composed her biographical studies to prompt affiliation and not awe in readers.

In the 1927 essay, Virginia Woolf insisted on the art that constitutes the new biography. No longer recorder of events or uncritical admirer, the biographer selects, considers, and arranges details: "in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist" (Woolf 1927, 152). The art itself is new, referring to a modernism in which features may be fractured and highly abstracted—Picasso evoking Gertrude Stein through lines and cubes, for instance, or Virginia Woolf portraying her friend Vita Sackville West in the multicenturied life of Orlando (Woolf 1928). Woolf also had a workmanlike approach to biography-as-art, evident when she undertook the biography of her fellow Bloomsburyite Roger Fry (Woolf 1940). In embarking on that project, the biographer shunned the flamboyance of *Orlando* and worried over the connection between the facts of the life and the presentation of the man: Benedict's challenge in her "Adventures."

*Empirical Philosophy*

Woolf described a genre of life writing that downplayed chronology and emphasized significant moments. Faced with a messy box full of love letters, tailors' bills, and ticket stubs, Woolf sought for the clues these provided to Fry's character, much as Margaret Mead later did with Benedict's papers in *An Anthropologist at Work* (Mead 1959). Like Benedict, Mead shared the viewpoint of the modern biographer that a life could be better conveyed through testimonies of the subject than through a conventional framework. Mead, however, ensures continuity by inserting commentary; she is less the biographer in Woolf's—and in Benedict's—terms than she is the mediator between reader and subject. The *art* of biography described by Woolf in 1927 resonated more closely with contemporaneous visual portraitists than did Mead's compilation in *An Anthropologist at Work* (1959). A decade before Woolf described the genre, Benedict had struggled with the links between the facts and the portrayal of a life. The weight of detail obstructed the goal of evoking the person. Sensitive to biography's burden of proof, Benedict jotted in her notes that "biography is a shying horse before facts" (RFBP).

A surprising analogy, the shying horse ultimately jumps the traces, creating a moment of beauty in an artful gesture. The image of a shying horse also bespeaks the difficulty—almost the fear—of plunging into the available

data. Tailors' bills and ticket stubs remain stubbornly there, at once vital to and deflecting from the individuality a biographer must convey. Scattered in boxes and in archives, facts are meaningless until composed, yet the art must not obscure the *living*.

> What this really adds up to—fate, being exposed, what life means—I can't really say in the abstract. . . . Perhaps all I can try to do is illustrate it with examples. And that is precisely why I want to write a biography. In this case, interpretation has to take the path of repetition.

The sentences are not Benedict's but Hannah Arendt's, commenting on her decision in 1957 to write a biography of the nineteenth-century intellectual, Rahel Varnhagen (quoted in Weissberg 1997, 31). Arendt intended to create a portrait through the presentation of statements and incidents and to avoid probing behind the image her subject imparted. Nearly forty years after Benedict initiated her biographical project, Arendt delineated a similar purpose for biography: not simply to present character but also to propose a way of living. Arendt's phrase, the *vita activa*, or lived life, resonates with Benedict's "experiment in living." Both phrases wed biography to philosophy. Biography, too, argued an ethical stance, and this implied a relationship between writer, subject, and reader. The biographer must create a direct connection between subject and reader, facilitating full participation in another way of living.

Benedict used the phrase "empirical philosophy" to describe biography (RFBP). The phrase underlined her goal of using biography to transform the viewpoints of readers on the conduct of their own lives. The phrase also describes a method in which the biographer's immersion in facts is replicated for the reader in repeated illustrative examples. Furthermore, as Arendt claimed, such a method is the appropriate way of treating a subject, whose inner motivations cannot be known by an outsider. For the philosopher who tried biography, like the anthropologist who did as well, the genre provided a model for the understanding (*verstehen*) that effects a transformation in readers.

Years before she began the biographical studies, Benedict (then Ruth Fulton) stood entranced before the Opie portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft hanging in London's National Portrait Gallery. A memory that explains the choice of subject, the experience also reveals the ideal Benedict set herself when she started the work. She recalls being able to understand the whole of a person's life through the one moment in time a portraitist represents. She ended her five drafts of the Wollstonecraft essay with that memory:

> In the National Portrait Gallery hangs a picture of Mary Wollstonecraft, a picture of her as she was a few scant months before her death. I remember the child I was when I saw it first, haunted by the terror of youth before experience. . . . And the woman in the little frame arrested me, this woman with the auburn hair, and the sad, steady, light-brown eyes, and the gallant poise of the head. (Mead 1959, 519)

The last sentences affirm the goal of the biographical journey, to establish intimacy between lives of different measures.

Benedict called herself a child in the passage, although she made the trip to London just after college. As Benedict used the word, "child" refers to her instant and complete absorption in the life displayed. An ideal viewer or reader, the child willingly enters the world presented to her, unencumbered by a search for the how-do-you-know or by a suspicion of the artist's motives. Caught by the web of details and entranced by the pattern they make, the child trustfully suspends disbelief. "There is no moment of reasonable doubt" (RFBP).

There are, however, facts. Reality stuck to the biographer's venture, and Benedict did not confuse the form with a made-up story. Rather, her journal notes reveal her conviction that an artful presentation of facts can effect a suspension of disbelief. Like William James, whom she continued to read, Benedict considered that an individual confrontation with reality confirmed the capacity of all human beings to alter conditions.[2] By choosing biography, however, Benedict adopted a mode of presentation in which illuminations from a lived life—an experiment in living—replaced the axiomatic prose of the American philosophical tradition. Benedict tested the value of artfully composing fact in the biographical essays and tested her own ability to compose a portrait in which words would have the impact of the most striking visual rendering.

The biographical essays represented Benedict's effort to captivate a reader. Her goal was to provoke a transformation in understanding comparable to the best of philosophers and the most skillful of artists. Starting with a life study allowed her to grapple with problems of identification, interpretation, and illumination and to bring her discoveries to the discipline that would satisfy her purposes in writing.

## Patterns of Japanese Culture

The biographical project failed. Without the promise of publication, Benedict deemed the endeavor futile. "And more and more I know I want

publication," she wrote in her journal (Mead 1959, 135). The marriage collapsed: the chemical detective stories she wrote with Stanley Benedict did not bring wife and husband together. The war ended, and Benedict enrolled in anthropology courses at the New School for Social Research. What happened to biography?

The book she published in 1934, *Patterns of Culture*, presents an easy case for concluding that Benedict transferred the lessons of biography into her anthropology. Three case studies resemble the triadic structure of "Adventures in Womanhood," foreground to a fourth, implicit character. In *Patterns of Culture* (hereafter *Patterns*), the United States vies with the Zuni, Dobu Islanders, and Kwakiutl for attention. In "Adventures," the fourth character is a cohort of compatriots, facing the consequences of an unprecedented global conflict. The connection to biography is enforced by the notion *Patterns* bequeathed to the discipline, that culture is personality writ large.[3] At the same time, *Patterns* veers away from Benedict's approach to biography. The portraits are surrounded by three chapters that bring the voice of the social scientist forward, offering theories of the individual in culture equally significant to the discipline (see Sullivan 2009). The book she published in 1946, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (hereafter *Chrysanthemum*), demonstrates the profound impact of biographical inquiry on Benedict's anthropology.

Like "Adventures in Womanhood," *Chrysanthemum* constitutes a writer's response to war and in doing so tests the efficacy of *writing*. Thirty years after the drafts of her biographical essays, the anthropologist applied similar techniques to the study of a nation the United States had just defeated. The famous first sentence, with its characterization of Japan as the most alien enemy the United States ever had, introduces the equally well-known series of "but also's" that vividly evoke the distinct character of the culture, at once studiously reserved and scrupulously polite, daunting in battle and delicate in its aesthetics.

The subsequent twelve chapters extend the characterization through a series of explicit and implicit comparisons with American culture. The persistent alternation between "us" and "them" pulls the reader from one pole of the strange to another, from recognition to alienation and back. This sort of comparison perpetuates Benedict's rhetorical habit of exchanging the "wildly exotic" with the "all too familiar" (Geertz 1988, 106). In the 1946 book, however, the exotic and the familiar change place rapidly and repetitively, disturbing the reader's impulse to identify with certain customs and to reject others. The anthropologist works not only to teach her readers that "we" are as alien and bizarre as "they" but also to prove the logic of

Japanese culture. Submerging readers in "the intensely human commonplaces" of daily living, Benedict offers them the vicarious experience that precipitates a deeply felt appraisal of familiar values and customs (Benedict 1946, 11).

Repetition is overwhelmingly Benedict's mode of interpretation in *Chrysanthemum*. She presents an abundance of incidents, quotations, and observations that illuminate the principles of Japanese life, building an image of enduring coherence and integrity. Like Arendt in *Rahel Varnhagen*, Benedict holds back from probing behind the image offered by her subject, letting the facts speak for themselves—but not without plan: like a casuist, Benedict piles example on example, closing the case through the reiteration of detail. Carefully selected and arranged moments build a picture of Japan that appears self-evident, tautological, and unimpeachable.

The very persuasiveness of the portrait has led critics to condemn *Chrysanthemum* as a stereotypical, superficial, and simplistic rendering (see Kent 1996a). Benedict's artful compilation of anecdote, observation, and testimony obscures the method in her study, and suggestions that she knew nothing of Japan are fueled by the fact that she could not make a field trip during the war. Those who embrace this point of view fail to recognize the innovative aspects of Benedict's method, in which the minutiae of daily life, reiterated, compose a portrait that slights neither the complexities of history nor the intricate sources of cultural coherence (see Tannenbaum 2009).

Despite criticism from non-Japanese as well as Japanese scholars, *Chrysanthemum* endures. Widely read in Japan and in the rest of the world, the book played a crucial part in a postwar peace and in breaking down suspicion of a nation once perceived as alien (see Fukio 2004). *Chrysanthemum* also contributed to the postwar assessment of anthropology. Recognizing the value of the book for Benedict's agenda for anthropologists brings me back to the biographical essays. Unlike fiction, biography has received little attention in assessments of anthropological writing.

Benedict wrote *Chrysanthemum* in approximately three months, a remarkably short time. She had gathered the data for reports on Japan she prepared for the American government (see Tannenbaum 2009). The difference between the reports and the published book is telling, in both senses of that word. Delivered in a straightforward, prescriptive manner, the policy-driven discussions of the motives and principles of Japanese culture do anything but captivate a reader. The extraction of themes from twenty films, for instance, or a memo on Japanese morale for psychiatrists present blueprints for action and not templates for understanding. In moving from reports to a study geared toward a wide audience, Benedict

returned to a mode of writing that absorbed rather than directed the reader. Immersion or, in her phrase, *vicarious experience* became the mode of convincing readers that Japanese customs are as natural as their own. Thirty years after struggling with five drafts of an essay, Benedict leapt the traces in 1946, the analogy of a shying horse no longer apt. In lucid and assertive prose, Benedict presented to the world the distinct character of a nation that for centuries had closed its face to the world.

In *Chrysanthemum*, Benedict shunned the scholarly paraphernalia of an explicit methodology and limited her footnotes and citations. Throughout the book, she accumulates examples without attribution. A quotation from a European traveler follows a passage from a children's story, a diary entry is partnered with an imperial decree, a moral emerging from the juxtaposition.[4] Lack of attribution or reference for a conclusion can deceive the reader: sources there were aplenty, as Pauline Kent shows in her scrupulous documentation of the material that gave rise to the final portrait.[5] An ancient tale, an Imperial Rescript a scrap of conversation, and a strictly pruned flower combine to reveal the long history and intense purpose of a culture.

Benedict achieved the goal that eluded her in the biographical essays. During the intervening years she had learned the art of composing stubborn facts into a figure whose features mesmerize, whose motivating energy is apparent, and whose fateful trajectory prompts empathy. Her attempt in the biographical essays to convey lived experience culminated in *Chrysanthemum*, where the writing emphasizes the action (*vita activa*) of individuals-in-culture that constitutes the human condition (Arendt 1958). In *Chrysanthemum*, *shame* provides the key to the relationship between individual and culture.

The first nine chapters of the book describe the duties and obligations, loyalties and sanctions, gestures of respect, and intermittent outbursts that constitute the *vita activa* in Japan. These behaviors, carefully documented, eventually coalesce under the concept of *shame*. Familiar and colloquial, the concept summarized the culture in one striking reference, providing a lasting tag to the patterns of Japanese culture. Not what Benedict intended, the aptness of *shame* for condensing complex details turned the concept into a descriptor. Like the "Apollonian" that brands the Southwest Pueblos, *shame* sticks to Japan. As Benedict used it, the concept is not adjectival nor does it refer only to the personality of the culture. In *Chrysanthemum*, *shame* refers to the driving energy that maintained Japan through the ages (see Modell 1999).

In the winter of 1941, Benedict delivered a series of lectures at Bryn Mawr College. Published in 1970 in the *American Anthropologist* as

"Synergy: Some Notes of Ruth Benedict," the lectures set parameters for the wartime study of Japan. In them, Benedict attempted to deal equally with the nature of human dignity and the conditions for freedom in any culture (see Young 2005). "We need to ask whether or not these social restraints are such that they add or take away from the individual's ability to conduct his life as he desires," she told her audience (Benedict 1970, 322). She borrowed the word "synergy" from medicine and religion to develop a theory of self and society that distinguished cultures on the basis of the opportunities offered for conducting life creatively. In *high-synergy* cultures, all elements combine to create conditions for the exercise of individual capacities. "The inmost nature of the reality is congenial to powers which you possess," wrote William James, anticipating Benedict's application of *synergy* to cultures (Gunn 2000).

Japanese culture had lasted for centuries in a tightly integrated configuration, a seemingly perfect example of *high synergy*. In *Chrysanthemum*, Benedict delved into the sources and the implications of this synergy and selected *shame* to pinpoint the character of the configuration and the consequence for individual living. More explicitly than the descriptive concepts in *Patterns of Culture*, *shame* links the motivating energy of social arrangements to the behaviors and the temperament of individuals. *Shame* elucidates the behavior of the Japanese, from emperor to schoolboy. At the same time, the concept of *shame* crosses cultural boundaries, a feeling as familiar to non-Japanese as to Japanese readers. *Shame* is a human concept, and its use underlines the humanism of her Japanese study, elaborated in her farewell speech to the American Anthropological Association.

"But their extreme statements nevertheless point out correctly where the emphasis falls in Japan. It falls on the importance of shame rather than on the importance of guilt," she wrote in chapter 10, "The Dilemma of Virtue." She continued, "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin" (Benedict 1946, 222, 223). Here the Benedictian gesture of using a contrast to make a point obscures the evolution of the concept in her book. These sentences do not appear until page 222 of a 300-page book. *Shame* comes front stage late in the account, following the portrait of a remarkably consistent and well-integrated culture. Benedict does not begin with the notion of *shame*; she does not treat the concept as a framework (or lens) through which to read Japanese culture. Not a priori, *shame* emerges, appropriately examined in the next-to-last chapter of the book.

In *Chrysanthemum*, Benedict attends to the processes through which shame drives Japanese culture. She had come a distance from *Patterns of Culture*, and her development reflected conversations with Mead and

Gregory Bateson about the formation of culture-character (see Sullivan 2009). "The Dilemma of Virtue" also reflects her absorption in social psychology and wartime literature on socialization (Tannenbaum 2009). Benedict details the way in which *shame* is inculcated in the child through sanctions and norms. A misstep is punished, a moral tale repeated: the chapter describes parental training techniques and not the inner recesses of the Japanese psyche. Benedict resists the temptation to probe behind the scenes or to expose the hidden "channels of the soul" (Woolf 1927, 150) that no outsider can be privy to, whether biographer or anthropologist. Examples serve as explanation, and observed behaviors manifest the mechanisms that institute *shame* as the relationship between self and society in Japan.

*Chrysanthemum* attached *shame* to Japanese culture for decades to come. The reasons are as political as they are anthropological, for Benedict, like Mead, wrote to change policy and not just to contribute to a discipline (see Tiffany 2009). With equal commitment to anthropology's obligation, Benedict intended to transform the stance readers took in the world. Unlike Mead, she depended less on the contrast between cultures than on the exchange of cultural possibilities within. *Shame* effectively characterized Japanese culture because the emotion resonated closely with an interpretation of American culture. The affiliation between shame and guilt in *Chrysanthemum* facilitated the acceptance of *shame* as a guidepost for General Douglas MacArthur and the American army responsible for negotiating Japan's surrender.

Under the challenge of administering a conquered nation, American officers and officials seized on *shame* as a clue to baffling and incomprehensible behaviors. The emotion explained the excruciating sensitivity to the eyes of the world, the fierce humiliation when teased, and the scrupulous politeness in every gesture of a Japanese person. An effective occupation policy would do well to attend to even the slightest manifestation of *shame*: "In the reconstruction of Japan those leaders who have their country's future at heart could do well to pay particular attention to hazing and the custom of making boys do silly stunts in the post-adolescent schools and in the Army" (Benedict 1946, 278). The threat was great, *Chrysanthemum* warned, for *shame* determined the Japanese capacity to act aggressively or to collapse into lethargy and depression. An invasion of neighboring nations or a suicide equally demonstrated the power of shame. In the world of defeat, she told her readers, "People take the shame as seriously as ever, but it more and more often paralyzes their energies instead of starting a fight" (Benedict 1946, 164). Instances of shame, she added, are rightly avoided by the American army: "American administration of Japan under

General MacArthur has accepted this Japanese ability to sail a new course. It has not impeded that course by insisting on using techniques of humiliation" (Benedict 1946, 306).

Clifford Geertz (1988, 108) described Benedict's works as edificatory ethnography. Benedict certainly meant to instruct readers, and Geertz had the style of instruction right: edificatory. Her rhetoric is one of enlightenment, of opening the eyes of readers and altering their awareness. Readers included the Japanese, who, as Shannon (2004) notes, Benedict molded into anthropologists, along with her countrymen. Even the accounts of American administrative policy occur in examples rather than in prescriptive or hortatory prose: "It was the Emperor who called first upon General MacArthur, not MacArthur upon him, and this was an object lesson to the Japanese the force of which it is hard for Westerners to appreciate" (Benedict 1946, 309). "Edificatory ethnography" also points to a relationship that distinguished Benedict from Mead.

Benedict's anthropology depended on the achievement of empathy between reader and subject. She delineated her lessons with more authorial modesty than Mead but with the same purpose. While Mead confronted her readers with striking comparisons, Benedict drew her readers through oscillating contrasts to a conclusion. In Mead's (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the appeal of the "other" is unmistakable (see Tiffany 2009). The paradoxes and "but also's" in *Chrysanthemum* oblige readers to find their own terms for evaluating cultural styles.

At the end of World War II, as at the end of World War I, Benedict wrote for a world witnessing the "wholesale reversal of conditions" and a climactic upheaval in international politics (RFBP). By 1946, she had achieved confidence in the efficacy of writing for influencing the course of events. The impulse to instruct did not vanish, although the focus did. Her early examination of three women who resisted the constraints of the time evolved as an inquiry into the conditions under which any individual might thrive. Benedict had not forgotten the human costs of suppression, nor did she relinquish the idea of individual freedom as the only lesson worth teaching (see Young 2005). She wrote the lesson in sharply drawn cases, an accumulation of details that delineated the conditions under which a person is able to live a full, productive, and creative life, stretching individual capacities to the limit. The synergy lectures, combined with the study of Japan, pushed Benedict in the direction of a robust anthropological humanism, to give the discipline a new method and a new purpose. That was the brunt of her farewell speech to the professional association when she stepped down from its presidency in 1947.

## Anthropology and Humanism: A Conclusion

Benedict began her speech to the American Anthropological Association in a familiar way. Anthropology, she informed her audience, has no connection with the humanities. Just as the designation of "most alien enemy" presaged a narrative in which alien becomes familiar, the assertion of no humanities presages a speech in which humanities becomes the heart and soul of anthropology. She catches her audience off guard by drawing them into one interpretation—anthropology is a science, a social science—only to move them into an entirely different interpretation: anthropology shares subject matter, methods, and goals with philosophy, literature, and literary criticism. She asserted,

> To my mind the very nature of the problems posed and discussed in the humanities is closer, chapter by chapter, to those in anthropology than are the investigations carried on in most of the social sciences. (Mead 1959, 460)

Despite putting man at the center of studies of society, she continued, anthropologists exclude "human emotion, ethics, rational insight and purpose" from their works (Mead 1959, 461). In anthropological writings, too often man is simply a mechanical cog in the social system. To move the person beyond this spiritless position as a research object, Benedict told her audience, anthropologists must follow the great humanists.

After the war, Benedict returned to her position at Columbia, where she threw herself into the U.S. Navy–funded Cultures at a Distance Project. She retained her interest in *shame* cultures, influencing the approaches of that project, but it is her references to George Santayana and to Shakespeare in the 1947 presidential farewell speech that represent her vision of the future of anthropology. Citing Santayana as an exemplary philosopher, she illuminated the kind of anthropology she initiated in *Chrysanthemum*. In the speech, she quoted from the philosopher's *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*: "This natural harmony between the spirit and its conditions is the only actual one; it is the source of every idea and the sole justification of any hope" (quoted in Mead 1959, 466). The language echoes phrases from thirty years earlier, when Benedict read William James on the flourishing of human capacities under "congenial" conditions and admired Mary Wollstonecraft for refusing to submit to hostile conditions.

Japan stretched her capacities, and the book is an experiment whose geometry is incomplete. *Chrysanthemum* is an experiment in understanding the ramifications for individuals of a culture whose motivating purpose

led to defeat in war and an ashamed apathy in its population. The account of patterns of Japanese culture is not, however, pessimistic. Influenced by American pragmatism, Benedict placed hope in the exercise of human creativity. Her 1947 speech intensifies the humanism of *Chrysanthemum*, a study that acknowledged the capacities of individuals to rebalance a pattern that events had tragically unbalanced. Extending the moral of the study of Japanese patterns of culture, Benedict's speech affirms the enduring possibility of reversing defeat.

The retiring president proposed a new method for anthropology. Rejecting the heavy social science looming on the horizon at the end of the 1940s, Benedict recommended the great Shakespearean critics as models of method. Critical immersion in texts, she suggested, provides the paradigm for the interpretation of fieldwork data. The anthropologist will succeed only "if he tries to understand the interrelations of discrete bits; if he surrenders himself to his data and uses all the insights of which he is capable" (Mead 1959, 468). Resonant with her phrase *empirical philosophy*, the method Benedict proposed in 1947 gave facts full weight as clues to character. The final element of her proposed method also recalled her first writings, in an emphasis on rhetoric that draws a reader into vicarious experiencing—the only basis for understanding.

The final step is *writing*, the composition of discrete bits into a persuasive portrait. For Benedict, as for Mead, method ended not with inquiry but rather with presentation. In the 1947 speech, Benedict exhorted her colleagues to trust the efficacy of writing for fulfilling the goal of the discipline: altering the perspectives of its audience, from statesman to common man. For Benedict, the achievement of empathy in writing meant the absorption of method into portrait, not the stark presentation of modes of inquiry that postwar anthropology displayed. While she condemned the growing influence of social scientific writing, she did not turn to the novelistic as solution. With biography and philosophy framing her approach, Benedict held to the importance of the ticket stubs, imperial rescripts, and schoolboy tales that compose a culture. Like Mead, she did not fear the art in anthropology. Like Mead, too, she meshed art with the scrupulous observation of details that yield insight into an "alien" life and give that life purpose.

Benedict's farewell speech to the American Anthropological Association communicated a practiced understanding of the discipline. Her emphasis on art, literary criticism, and philosophy pointed to the central role of human beings in anthropology and to her conviction that humanism was the only appropriate framework for an examination of diverse cultures.

Had Benedict lived to follow her own advice, she might well have returned to the study of individual lives as a strategy for inserting human emotion and ethics into anthropology. In the farewell speech, she spoke ardently of the necessity of reconsidering the value of life histories in anthropology:

> The unique value of life histories lies in the fraction of the material which shows what repercussions the experiences of a man's life—either shared or idiosyncratic—have upon him as a human being molded in that environment. (Mead 1959, 469)

Her notion of writing lives had changed, from presenting the particulars of an individual experience to the more general proposition of discovering the conditions under which any self achieves fulfillment. Life histories served an exemplary function in anthropological writing, illustrating possibilities for the *vita activa*. The trajectories of lives exhibited the potential for creativity, for reversing defeat, and for combining the dynamics of social cohesion with the opportunities for individual freedom (see Young 2005). By 1947, Benedict had a clear sense of the purpose of anthropology: to detect and render persuasive the terms under which human beings can achieve harmony between the demands of "individuality" and the environments of "living."

Had she lived, would her writings have also become more hortatory than edificatory? Geertz compares Benedict with the great and furious social critic Jonathan Swift, in the "relentlessness" and "severity" of her prose (Geertz 1988, 105). I argue that it is less her prose style that unites her with Swift than her conviction that writing could alter social conditions by changing the minds of readers. Where Swift is fierce and sarcastic, Benedict wields a subtler and, paradoxically, a more direct weapon in the attack. As she matured in the discipline, Benedict increasingly left parable behind and rested her case on the arrangement of empirical evidence. She seized her readers' attention not with extravagant parody but with straightforward examples and resolute prose. She took on her readers, too, with faith that she could draw them through the "living" she presented into a new perspective on the conditions that formed their own worlds.

Had Benedict lived, her movement into a new anthropology would likely have followed the course she initiated in *Chrysanthemum* and outlined in the speech to her professional association. Too seeped in the significance of facts to relinquish those building blocks to revelation, she would have continued her quest to ground a humanistic anthropology in "reality." She would have continued to depict the lives of diverse others in terms of

the distinct purposes each embraced, trusting that to be the guarantee of tolerance and harmony on a global level. She might have addressed the world as passionately as she addressed the anthropological association and her American readers, but she would have communicated the lesson through *verstehen* and the artful interpretation of data, not by exhorting her audience to agree.

Benedict's notion of humanism drew on a lifetime of inquiry that consistently kept human capacity, fulfillment, and creativity at the center of studies of society and culture. "Humanism" was not abstract or theoretical but a concept that directly addressed the betterment of human lives. The anthropology that Benedict advocated in 1947 remains of critical relevance today, when a Manichaean worldview reigns and understanding is a limited resource.

## NOTES

I presented the first version of this article at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in November 2003 in a session on biography. Comments during that presentation suggested important ways of expanding the ideas in the paper. I delivered a revised version at the ASAO meetings in February 2004 and, acknowledging responses there, drafted a fuller version for the ASAO meetings in February 2005. Comments and criticisms along the way have made the article stronger and better, and I thank all those who participated in the several panels. In particular, I thank Albrecht Funk, Susan Gray, Gerald Sullivan, and Sharon W. Tiffany for cogent critical remarks. Finally, I thank once again the Special Collections of the Vassar College Library for permission to use material from the Ruth Fulton Benedict Papers.

1. Benedict sent a draft of the first essay, "Our Contemporary: Mary Wollstonecraft," to Houghton Mifflin along with a letter describing the projected book. Her papers contain abundant notes on Margaret Fuller. The only hint about Olive Schreiner occurs in the letter of inquiry to the publisher, when she wrote of the need to select "a still living woman."

2. Inasmuch as Benedict did not cite titles in her reading notes, an exact attribution to James is difficult. Much of his work, however, evinces this confidence in man's spirit, will to believe, and capacity to alter his setting.

3. Caffrey makes the connection in another way as well, by applying the concepts "Dionysian" and "Apollonian" to Benedict's descriptions of Wollstonecraft and Fuller (Caffrey 1989, 90).

4. Even Geertz (1988), restoring *Chrysanthemum* to its proper place in the canon, did not discuss her sources; throughout the chapter, he sidestepped questions of how Benedict knew what she knew about Japanese culture.

5. There are seven, closely spaced pages of sources (Kent 1996b).

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