

PREFACE

by Stanley Diamond

This volume is a somewhat transformed result of the first public reading by anthropologists (both formally and informally defined) who are poets, in May 1983 at the New School for Social Research. Most of the people involved in the original event are represented in these pages, and the format of that reading has been largely followed here. We were supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation; Lita Osmundsen recognized the significance of what was happening, and helped us immeasurably.

We have added an historical reprise – which introduces the issue – on poets of the previous generation who have also been anthropologists, along with critical statements about their poems. Therefore, this work attempts to be comprehensive with reference to the connection between anthropologists and poets; and anthropology and poetry.

But one must never lose sight of the obvious fact that anthropology is not poetry, and anthropologists are not *per se* poets. This is unfortunate (everyone should be a poet) – and in anthropological perspective, it would be otherwise. That is to say, if anthropologists were Zulus, or Eskimo, or Seneca, or Pawnee – the language of everyday life, fundamentally metaphorical, rhythmic, connotative, and at the same time concrete, would make it possible for everyone to speak poetry, as many anthropologists have the imagination and experience to understand. In such a society, the primitive reverse of the Republic, poetry is at the center of social existence. But in our society, denuded of culture, symbols collapsed to signs (the significations of production and reproduction), impoverished in everyday language, further burdened by notions of essentialist truth that can only be ex-

pressed in denotative, ultimately mathematical terms – the writing of poetry has turned into a particular, personal, and exhausting effort, which must fight every moment against the gravity of civilized language. Writing poetry today, in the absence of an oral tradition, is like trying to fly without wings. But it happens. In our culture, an achieved poem stands out against the ground of language – but it is not in language. Hence it is a conceit of our time that a distinction is made between major and minor poets. As T.S. Eliot noted, an achieved poem is an achieved poem, and the difference between the major and the minor is no more than a question of quantity. That remark does not give us license to assume that every versifier is a poet. For the breach between major and minor is of course overshadowed in our society by the breach between the poet and the so-called ordinary person. Writing poetry is not necessarily achieving poetry. And the frustrations that must be felt by those who strain unsuccessfully against the language that they have been taught, and try to express what is not current in this society, should be understood – the victim, who is legion, should be praised, but not misnamed. Perhaps the challenge that might be taken up here is not the desperate writing of unachieved poetry but rather the critique of the fragmented and hegemonic society which drives out culture, and drives out poetry.

Nathaniel Tarn made the point several years ago at our conference when he stated that he was participating with mixed feelings. He felt that we were giving aid and comfort to people who would then inevitably mistake the relationship between poetry and anthropology as the identity of anthropology and

poetry. I wondered at the sense, not to speak of the propriety of Tarn's remarks, but he was right; I had underestimated the depth of the frustrations involved in the failed effort to become what is so difficult to become in this society. And from this frustration, although Tarn did not mention it, can develop outlandish projects. Recently a kind of movement is underway to change anthropology by means of poetry, by turning anthropology into poetry, which has a certain virtue if it is meant that there are ways of understanding other than expository or analytic prose. But poetry of course is no substitute for anything. It is itself, always has been, and always will be itself. It is a compressed form of the common experience and the common language of humanity, compressed to incandescence, and necessarily growing out of authentic experience – whether tragic, comic or quotidian – of which people in our society are largely deprived. In the absence of strong traditions, in the face of commodified information and vicarious experience, and in the shadow of every conceivable mediation, poetry – though flourishing among the few – has become a dead issue for the majority.

But this lack of grounding does not lead us to accept that poetry is some kind of substitute for physics, geology, archaeology, linguistics, the analytic study of state formation, the documentation of the daily round of peasant life, and so on, in the practice of anthropology. Nor does one engage in poetry in the way that one cultivates the earth or constructs a machine; although no one who understands the creation of a poem is going to deny the exhausting soul-work that goes into it. But poetry no more substitutes for the

material substance of existence than does magic create the Trobrianders' canoe, although it is perhaps essential for its completion, its meaning, and the voyage which is about to be undertaken. Nor does poetry tell us how a carburetor works, or how a cosmic black hole actually operates.

Plato after all, with sublime rationality, suspected poets, and the argument is powerful. For poets do not create material objects, nor do they create the earth or the sky. But what he missed was that the poet is the voice of the primitive community, and the primitive voice of the modern community, – in the latter case whether acknowledged or not. In the end, there are only two possibilities. One either goes with Plato; the poet is simply an imitator, and a heretic at that, for God (the demi-urge) is the creator, and the wisest men (best born, best trained) understand this. Or, on the other hand, we create our own sense of the sacred through the character of our human connections and the transcendence of our biological beings. That is, through the constitution of the symbol.

The question of God becomes a mere abstraction, if removed from the possibilities of ordinary existence – that removal is what Plato demanded. But the poet must concentrate on ordinary existence, the only route to the sacred – in quite the way that Blake looked at and through a knothole in a tree until he felt he had gone mad. Therefore, the connection does exist between the practice of everyday anthropology and the occasion for writing achieved poems. I leave the further exploration of the nature of this connection to the poets and critics here represented, myself included.