Close Reading and Thin Description

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Our problem is how to study and describe great complexity.
Albert E. Scheflen, *Communicational Structure: Analysis of a Psychotherapy Transaction*

Clifford Geertz, in his 1973 essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," writes, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has himself spun" (1973b: 5). Specifically textual forms of analysis, Geertz argues, are best suited for untangling these webs. Geertz compares the practice of ethnography to "trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (ibid.: 10). Although ethnography focuses on behavior, not on language specifically, Geertz suggests that anthropologists use methods developed in literary studies to decode dense, opaque, and unreliable texts. Such textual metaphors appear throughout Geertz's essay "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," in which he provides an exemplary instance of thick description. He exhaustively analyzes everyday practices of gaming and betting in order to construct an account of status hierarchies and masculinity in Bali. Geertz claims that the culture of a people is "an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read

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over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1973a: 452). Furthermore, he compares this practice to "more familiar exercises in close reading" (ibid.: 453).

It is not surprising that Geertz's account of thick description was taken up with great enthusiasm by literary critics, who saw in it a reflection of their own concerns and techniques. As Stephen Greenblatt describes in "The Touch of the Real," "Geertz's account of the project of social science rebounded with force upon literary critics like me in the mid-1970s": his project "made sense of what I was already doing" (1997: 14). The positive-feedback loop that Greenblatt describes between literary studies and interpretive anthropology is no longer a given; these days, the image of Geertz reading over the shoulders of his informants has a somewhat unfamiliar, even an unlikely, air. The assumed familiarity and centrality of close reading as a method recalls a different era (now remembered as the linguistic turn), when what Greenblatt describes as the tools in his "disciplinary kit" (ibid.) had greater obvious value. Geertz's writing of the early 1970s can be understood in the context of a broad shift toward semiotics, self-reflexivity, subjectivity, narrative, and aesthetics across the social sciences. That movement has now arguably run its course, both in the sense of transforming interpretive practice and normative epistemology across the disciplines and in the sense of appearing, to many observers, to have "run out of steam."[1] Movements like new realism, new empiricism, and cognitivism have pushed back against the antifoundationalist claims and textual orientation of poststructuralism. If the legend of the 1970s and 1980s was Jacques Derrida's (1976: 158) claim that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (there is nothing outside the text), we might take as representative of a more recent past Bruno Latour's (2005: 117) call to go "from metaphysics to ontology" in order to "show what the real world is really like."[2]

1. I draw this phrase from the title of Bruno Latour's article "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004). Although Latour's argument is directed against critical hermeneutics and not the linguistic turn per se, I see it as relevant because of his call for a renewed realism.

2. Latour's name might be understood as representative of a turn toward materiality, ontology, and practice in science and technology studies (STS) and beyond; this new set of concerns is legible across a broad range of practices and fields of inquiry including the biological turn in feminism, object-oriented ontology (OOO), new realism of the body (disability studies), the history of material texts, critiques of social construction theory, and work on the materiality of digital media. Andrew Pickering's *The Cybernetic Brain* (2010) brings together many of these concerns in an argument about the broad significance of cybernetics in the postwar period that is relevant to my own work on the 1960s and 1970s. Pickering argues that cybernetics represents an alternative tradition alongside the linguistic turn in the late twentieth century and that cybernetic thought was marked by a concern with performance and ontology rather than with representation and epistemology.

The materialist and realist character of research over the past couple of decades is visible not only in the social sciences but also in literary studies. Some literary critics have responded to the declining fortunes of textuality by renewing their commitment to the discipline.[3] Alongside such responses, however, critics have also responded by displacing the text from the center of literary studies. Literary critics have long drawn on methods from history, sociology, and anthropology to expand reading practices developed within the discipline. But in recent work, critics are turning to more distant fields such as the natural sciences, economics, quantitative and digital methods, and cognitive psychology. The field of material text studies has increasingly considered books as objects, setting aside traditional forms of semiotic analysis. In addition, in recent debates on method, critics have elaborated arguments for modes of reading that seem polemically aimed against the disciplinary core of the field (as in Franco Moretti's account of "distant reading" [2000: 57]). It seems that those dense webs of significance are not as significant as they used to be.

In this context, Geertz's embrace of "thick description" can seem like a gift to literary critics, as well as a dispatch from an alien world. In elaborating this method, Geertz drew on a distinction between thin and thick description originally made by ordinary language philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the late 1960s. For Ryle, thin description was an unadorned, first-order account of behavior, one that could be recorded just as well by a camera as by a human agent. Thick description, by contrast, added many layers of human significance, including attributions of intention, emotion, cognition, and depth, as well as cultural context and display—all those affective and aesthetic qualities that literary critics look for in texts. In borrowing thick description from Ryle and tying it closely to the practice of ethnography, Geertz made semiotics central to the social sciences and suggested literary analysis as a model for reading culture. Critics who have taken up Geertz's concept of thick description over the past several decades have tended to overlook the importance—for both Geertz and Ryle—of thin description. The association of thin description with the legacies of behaviorism and functionalism has meant that it has not been taken up by humanities scholars, who reject the

3. I argue in this essay for the continuing value of textuality and close reading in the context of expanding interdisciplinary practice. At the same time, I suggest that retrenchment around disciplinary commitments to the literary is not an effective response to the crisis in the humanities. Humanist arguments that depend on assumptions about the singularity of literature or the ethical value of close reading assume rather than argue for values that are losing their legitimacy in the current climate. By following such lines of argument, literary critics will continue to claim the high ground of humanistic inquiry, while the funding migrates elsewhere.

concept of observable behavior altogether. Although some scholars in economics, sociology, and anthropology have recently argued for the value of thin description, there is, with only a few exceptions, far less interest on the part of literary critics and cultural historians.[4] In the following essay I argue for the significance of thin description to literary studies. The field of literary studies is weakened by its refusal to engage with empirical methods; by focusing exclusively on meaning, intention, language, and culture, critics have not attended fully to the behavioral components of experience and representation.

Thick description is a method for analyzing behavior that employs techniques originally developed for analyzing literature. In making an argument for thin description, I elaborate a method for reading texts that employs techniques developed originally to analyze behavior. Drawing on Ryle's work as well as on postwar research in the humanistic social sciences, in particular the detailed accounts of social interaction developed in microsociology, I suggest that these projects offer a model of reading that jettisons many traditional features of the literary.[5] In a disciplinary culture in which the value of the text and aesthetics cannot be taken for granted, I argue that literary studies might forge an expanded defense of reading by considering practices of exhaustive, thin description undertaken in proximate disciplines. I consider forms of analysis that describe patterns of behavior and visible activity but that do not traffic in speculation about interiority, meaning, or depth. Through its exhaustive, fine-grained attention to phenomena, thin description offers a model for close reading after the decline of the linguistic turn.

Twitches and Winks

Ryle's essays "Thinking and Reflecting" (1971a) and "The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is 'Le Penseur' Doing?" (1971b) are concerned with the relation between observable behavior and the activity of thought. Across these two essays Ryle

4. For examples of arguments for thin description in a range of disciplines, see McCloskey 2008; Brekhus, Galliher, and Gubrium 2005. Recent work in sociology that argues for the continuing importance of exhaustive microsociological description perhaps comes closest in its arguments to mine here. See for instance Hirschauer 2006; Savage 2009. One exception to the strong preference for thick description in literary studies is Douglas Bruster's *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture*. Bruster critiques New Historicism for its overreliance on thick description; he argues that thin description—which he compares to "deep focus" cinematography—can make better sense of the relation between literature and its contexts by allowing readers to "keep multiple planes of a culture in view" (2003: xvii).

5. I made a brief argument for the importance of microsociology and the observational social sciences to literary studies in Love 2010. This article extends that argument by looking in more detail at thin description and some exemplary practices of microanalysis.

attempts to build a thick description of thinking, which, thinly described, might simply be understood as a person muttering to himself under his breath; he ultimately argues that we need a more capacious definition of the activity of thought. Ryle returns repeatedly to the example of Auguste Rodin's *Le Penseur* (*The Thinker*), which except for its title might be seen simply as an image of a man sitting on a rock resting his head on his hand. Ryle's interest in the dilemma of the unspectacular spectacle of thinking can be understood as part of his attack on what in *The Concept of Mind* he identifies as the "Official Doctrine" (1949: 11–24), the Cartesian view of the self that sees the mind as an immaterial force behind the actions of the body. Ryle's refusal of what he called "'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine' " (15–16 in *Concept of Mind*) was at the heart of his critique of psychology and philosophy, and it has led some to see him as a behaviorist. However, Ryle was as opposed to the reductionist error as he was to the duplicationist error. For Ryle, the attribution of an ultimate cause outside of or behind behavior—whether to a ghostly, hidden mind or to a hardwired biological system—was a category mistake.

At the end of *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle takes up the charge of behaviorism directly: "The general trend of this book will undoubtedly, and harmlessly be stigmatised as 'behaviourist' " (1949: 327). In his account of this attempt to forge a scientific, verifiable psychology, Ryle focuses on the problem posed by thinking in this context, arguing that accounts of consciousness, unlike overt behavior, cannot be "based upon repeatable and publicly checkable observations and experiments" (ibid.). In response to this fundamental research problem, early behaviorists refuse to speculate about the unverifiable inner states behind activities of response and output—although, as Ryle argues, behaviorists themselves remained "in two minds about whether to assert that the data of consciousness and introspection were myths, or to assert merely that they were insusceptible of scientific examination" (ibid.). Nonetheless, despite this uncertainty, and despite the fact that purely mechanistic accounts of behavior tended to reproduce the problems of Cartesian attributions of consciousness, Ryle thinks that the overall effect of behaviorism on psychology was salutary. He writes:

> The important thing is that the practice of describing specifically human doings according to the recommended methodology quickly made it apparent to psychologists how shadowy were the supposed "inner-life" occurrences which the Behaviourists were at first reproached for ignoring or denying. Psychological theories which made no mention of the deliverances of "inner perception" were at first likened to "Hamlet" without the Prince of Denmark. But the extruded hero soon came to seem so bloodless

> and spineless a being that even the opponents of these theories began to feel shy of imposing heavy theoretical burdens upon his spectral shoulders. (Ibid.: 328)

Although behaviorism in its mechanistic approach to human existence is guilty of a category error, it can be usefully deployed to correct a graver error: insisting on the bloodless reality of consciousness. While early behaviorists tended to purge the character of Hamlet as a shadowy unknown, literary critics have taken his part, overcoming any scruples about "imposing heavy theoretical burdens upon his spectral shoulders."

Geertz, in his reading of Ryle, focuses less on his account of the activity of thinking and more on the question of how to interpret visible behavior. In particular, Geertz builds his account of thick description as a model for ethnography out of a passage in "The Thinking of Thoughts" about winking. Geertz is interested, that is to say, less in the invisible activity of thinking than in drawing out what is not self-evident in observed behavior. According to Ryle, a thick description of a wink might see it as a form of communication, collusion, mimicry, or some other kind of meaningful interaction; a thin description would merely account for the physical act of the contraction of the eyelid. He writes:

> Two boys fairly swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes. In the first boy this is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice. At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike. From a cinematograph-film of the two faces there might be no telling which contraction, if either, was a wink, or which, if either, was a wink, or which, if either, was a mere twitch. Yet there remains the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink. For to wink is to try to signal to someone in particular, without the cognisance of others, a definite message according to an already understood code. It has very complex success-versus-failure conditions. The wink is a failure if its intended recipient does not see it; or sees it but does not know or forgets the code; or misconstrues it; or disobeys or disbelieves it; or if anyone else spots it. A mere twitch, on the other hand, is neither a failure nor a success; it has no intended recipient; it is not meant to be unwitnessed by anybody; it carries no message. It may be a symptom but it is not a signal. The winker could not *not* know that he was winking; but the victim of the twitch might be quite unaware of his twitch. The winker can tell what he was trying to do; the twitcher will deny that he was trying to do anything. (Ryle 1971b: 480)

Ryle's example of the two boys emphasizes the "unphotographable difference" between a twitch and a wink (thick description) as well as the photographable lack of difference between the two (thin description). Both the camera and the "cinematograph-film" play an important role in this passage in establishing what Ryle means by thin description (later in the essay, he alludes to the gramophone and the tape recorder as well). Thin description means, in effect, taking up the position of the device; by turning oneself into a camera, one could—at least ideally—pay equal attention to every aspect of a scene that is available to the senses and record it faithfully. Ryle's emphasis on the technicity of the observer is marked, and it links his account of thin description to practices of observation and description in postwar social science. Martha Davis, in her article "Film Projectors as Microscopes," identifies this period as "the golden era of 'naturalistic observation' of films and tapes" (2001–2: 46). She describes the way that new technologies—for instance the use of slow-motion analyzing techniques and improved sound-film synchronization—transformed analytic methods in the 1950s and 1960s.

While Ryle, like Geertz, is primarily interested in the "unphotographable" aspects that separate the wink from the twitch, he does not stint attention to its photographable elements as a result. Ryle constructs a hypothetical scene in which a mere twitch is thickened with several layers of intention and suggestion: he considers the case of a boy who, seeing a collusive wink, decides to parody it but must first rehearse his parody of a collusive wink to get his meaning across. Although Ryle takes great pains to elaborate the complexity of this performance, he nonetheless argues "still there is only one thing he is trying to do, and still there is only the one contraction of the eyelids that, at a given moment, the cinematograph film records." He goes on, "The thinnest description of what the rehearsing parodist is doing is, roughly, the same as for the involuntary eyelid twitch; but its thick description is a many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by that thinnest description" (Ryle 1971b: 482). For Ryle, an account of a wink—and especially of a rehearsal of a parody of a collusive wink—is incomplete without an account of the layers of meaning that separate it from a twitch. But an account of a wink that dispenses with the twitch is also radically incomplete. What the camera captures cannot be expunged from the scene without voiding it entirely; this slice of behavior is inseparable from the other facets of interaction and communication.

In the closing paragraph of the essay, Ryle underlines the significance of "mere behavior" in relation to the activity of thinking, conjuring an imaginary scene of Euclid at work on a proof:

> None the less it may still be true that the only thing that, under its thinnest description, Euclid is here and now doing is muttering to himself a few geometrical words and phrases, or scrawling on paper or in the sand a few rough and fragmentary lines. This is far, very far from being all that he is doing; but it may very well be the only thing that he is doing. A statesman signing his surname to a peace-treaty is doing much more than inscribe the seven letters of his surname, but he is not doing many or any more things. He is bringing a war to a close by inscribing the seven letters of his surname. (Ibid.: 496)

Ryle's attention in these late essays is to the question of human doing and its relation to thinking. Although he disdains the reductionist account that would suggest that all that Euclid is doing is scratching in the sand, Ryle also suggests that, when Euclid is muttering to himself or when a statesman is signing a peace treaty, he is not doing "many or any more things." This moment recalls Ryle's account of the ambiguity of early behaviorism: did researchers believe that there was nothing going on except basic stimulus-response, or did they believe that there was "something else" there but that it was not subject to proof and was therefore to be ruled out? Ryle hesitates between saying that Euclid may only be muttering to himself (we can never know for sure) and that the statesman is only writing down seven letters (the reductionist account is a true account, though not the only possible one). Whatever the case, Ryle asserts that the many-layered sandwich of human activity does not hold together without its bottom slice.

In "Thick Description" Geertz draws attention to the layers of intention and meaning that turn mere behavior into culture. He argues that we tend to understand ethnography as more observational than it actually is; because of the legacy of empiricism in the social sciences, and because anthropologists study visible behavior, the activity of ethnography is taken to be a matter of mere recording. Geertz contradicts that view, writing that, in fact, "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (1973b: 9). Critiquing the concept of objectivity, and pointing to the cultural work that goes into even the slightest gesture, Geertz argues that the simplest "recording" of behavior depends on interpretive protocols and the subjective analyses of the observer. He writes: "Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating explications. Winks upon winks upon winks" (ibid.).

Geertz's insistence on winks rather than blinks is key to explaining the influence of his account of thick description across the humanities. He returns to this claim later in the essay, citing "an Indian story" about "an Englishman who, hav-

ing been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked . . . what did the turtle rest on?" (ibid.: 28–29). The answer—another turtle—provides Geertz a memorable account of the "condition of things": "it is turtles all the way down" (ibid.: 29). This legend drives home Geertz's critique of an unquestioning empiricism, and it has served as a rallying cry in the attack on foundations. However, the phrase does not do justice to Geertz's account of thick description or to the debt that he owes to Ryle. Formulas such as "winks upon winks upon winks" and "it is turtles all the way down" suggest that there is no bottom slice, or at least not one that can be distinguished from the upper layers of the sandwich. Geertz's attack was aimed at traditional empiricism, the habit of thought that tendentiously identified the bottom slice as the "factual basis" of reality. But Geertz also saw the bottom slice the way Ryle did, as a stripped-down account that could be separated out analytically, if not practically, for observation and study.

Geertz's insistence on interpretation against observation in "Thick Description" should be understood as a polemic against prevailing norms in the social sciences. It is significant that he makes this argument in the context of a reflection on the practice of ethnography. Given that ethnography is a practice of observation, Geertz does not need to mount an argument for it: Geertz *assumes* thin description and *argues for* thick description. It is perhaps not surprising that, as the essay has traveled outside of anthropology, Geertz's investment in thin description as an integral component of thick description has dropped out. Paul Rabinow emphasizes this feature of Geertz's work in his essay "Representations Are Social Facts." He argues that Geertz's aim was to "reinvent an anthropological science with the help of textual mediations." According to Rabinow, the "core activity" for Geertz "is still social description of the other, however modified by new conceptions of discourse, author, or text" (1986: 242). In literary and cultural studies, where fieldwork is not essential to the work scholars do, "Thick Description" is taken up as a wholesale critique of empiricism, whereas Geertz's aim was to build a better empiricism.[6]

Geertz anticipates such a reception at the end of "Thick Description" when he considers the possibility that interpretive practice will lose contact with the "hard surfaces of life":

6. Geertz's target in "Thick Description" and "Deep Play" is not empiricism but functionalism and positivism. He articulated a model of interpretation opposed not to practices of observation and description but rather to the anatomizing gaze that splays culture in order to reveal its working parts and to a scientific method that sidelines meaning.

> The danger that cultural analysis, in search of all-too-deep-lying turtles, will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life—with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained—and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest, is an ever-present one. The only defense against it, and against, thus, turning cultural analysis into a kind of sociological aestheticism, is to train such analysis on such realities . . . in the first place. (1973b: 30)

While Geertz is concerned to undermine the "bedrock" assumptions of traditional empiricism, he does not suggest that endlessly elaborated accounts of deep-lying turtles can or should ignore the "biological and physical necessities" on which culture depends. That he reanimates this metaphor suggests that he too values the bottom layer of the sandwich. Geertz mildly critiques Ryle for his failure to engage that bottom layer; for him, Ryle's description of cultural activity is "a bit artificial," since it is elaborated via one of the "little stories Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves" (ibid.: 7). By contrast, ethnographic practice brings the researcher into contact with the hard surfaces of behavior. In the last paragraph of the essay, Geertz writes, "To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action . . . is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them" (ibid.: 30).

The anti-aestheticism of these closing comments suggests why Geertz's essay as a whole is an awkward fit with literary studies. Given that the field is grounded not in the observation of human behavior but in the reading of texts, a purely interpretive version of thick description is more obviously useful than one that makes central the observational practice of thin description. The confounding effect of Geertz's investment in social realities for literary critics is evident in Greenblatt's account of the vitalizing effect of his work: "The effect was like touching one wire to another: literary criticism made contact with reality." He goes on: "Or, rather, as Geertz quickly observed, it made contact, as always, with pieces of writing" (Greenblatt 1997: 21). Not so fast: Geertz emphasizes the centrality of textuality to ethnography as an interpretive practice, but he does not suggest that reality is only writing. While arguably literary criticism only ever makes contact with pieces of writing, the same is not true of ethnography; for Geertz, anthropology invariably reckons with the presence of the other and the problem of social behavior. Greenblatt partially acknowledges this aspect of Geertz's work: he clarifies that Geertz is not saying that "there is nothing outside the text" (Greenblatt 1997: 16); what Greenblatt avowedly desires from interpretive ethnography is "the touch of

the real." But the real that Greenblatt desires is defined in relation to the literary and the textual: he is in search of traces of the real with the "uncanny vividness" (ibid.: 21) of literary representations. Thick description is useful in accessing such accounts and making the most of them. Greenblatt's interpretive utopia is one in which "the literary and the nonliterary seem to be each other's thick description" (ibid.: 22). Thin description has no role in such a world.

While a fully textual version of thick description is obviously useful for literary criticism—you might say that it *is* literary criticism—the utility of Geertz's harder version of thick description—one that *includes* thin description—is less obvious. How might Ryle's stripped-down account of Euclid scrawling lines in the sand—of writing as behavior—serve as a model for literary scholarship? Although such an account seems to have little relevance to traditional literary studies, this account resonates with some more recent work in the field. While "all-too-deep-lying turtles" were for decades the stock in trade of literary criticism, recent approaches in the field have moved away from core practices of textual interpretation. Moretti's concept of "distant reading" as well as approaches in book history and humanities computing sidestep hermeneutics and familiar modes of contextualization associated with thick description and various historicisms. Treating the book as a material object, a commodity, or a social fact, these methods put books back in contact with hard surfaces of life including trade, industry, craft traditions, marketplaces, publics, geography, and discourse networks.

My turn to microsociological practices of observation and description aligns my work with the concept of "surface reading" recently developed by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009). Best and Marcus define *surface reading* capaciously; the term designates a set of interconnected developments defined in contrast to depth hermeneutics or symptomatic reading; they do not issue a programmatic call to adopt a single method but rather describe a loose federation of approaches in contemporary literary studies. Particularly salient in the context of my argument here is their account of surface reading as a way of attending to the "literal meaning" of texts.[7] While it abjures the metaphorical depths of texts—hidden

7. In addition to these two modes of descriptive reading, Best and Marcus identify two other forms of surface reading that are treated briefly in this essay: material text scholarship and large-scale pattern recognition that shares features with distant reading (although they do not mention Moretti). But they also include under this rubric new formalism, ethical or affective styles of reading (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative reading, for example), and reading as "critical description" (based on the understanding that "texts mediate themselves" and contain their own metalanguage) (Best and Marcus 2009: 9–13). This account of surface reading—of reading for what is there rather than for what is not—draws on Marcus's concept of "just reading" elaborated in Marcus 2007.

meanings, symbolic content, and repressed historical or psychic content—surface reading remains attentive (or even hyperattentive) to the text itself. Surface reading makes reading central, but it focuses on aspects of texts often seen as too obvious to be of interest. In this sense, it is descriptive: it defers virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the text is *like*. It also attends to what, in the text, is descriptive—it highlights its capacity to index and make visible forms of material and social reality.[8]

The metaphorics of surface reading are textual: the text is figured as a palimpsest or perhaps, recalling Freud, a magic writing pad; however, Best and Marcus suggest that one might read without raising the topmost sheet. It is possible to translate the concept into Geertz's terms: what can we learn by looking very carefully at the topmost turtle? But moving between the terms of surface reading and Ryle's account of interpretation requires a radical reorientation: the surface or top layer of text is analogous to the bottom slice of the sandwich, the mere behavior that is the basis for the production of meaning, intention, and culture. Such metaphors pose inherent difficulties, particularly in the context of a discussion of representation—what methods would emerge if we were to actually cater sandwiches, go looking for buried turtles, or describe the literal surface of texts?[9] Even if we can accept such metaphorical leaps, there are further difficulties posed by attempting to translate between metaphors: one is obliged not only to flip Ryle's sandwich but also to translate between different orders of experience. The link between human activity performed in time and space and the representation of such behavior in printed typeface is, on the face of it, tenuous. Risking this awkwardness, I return to postwar practices of microanalysis designed for the analysis of behavior and suggest that they might serve as a model for literary critics. By foregrounding observation and description, I suggest that we can better account for all the things that texts are—the way they appear, how they behave, what they communicate. In addition, such an approach illuminates the merely descriptive features of literary texts and the complex links between texts and social worlds.

8. Debates about the descriptive and indexical function of literature are central to the history of criticism about the representative and social function of realism. For a classic essay that discusses the descriptive function of texts, see Georg Lukács's "Narrate or Describe?" (1970). Lukács offers a critique of the descriptive function of literature since he sees it as allied with processes of commodification in modernity. For a more positive assessment of literature's ability to account for social reality, see Latour 2005.

9. Attending to the literal surface of texts has been developed as a method within material text studies and arguably in digital media studies as well.

The Natural History of an Interview

In "Thick Description," Geertz writes that ethnographic description is "microscopic": the anthropologist approaches the general work of analysis "from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters" (1973b: 21). Geertz differentiates this "homely" approach from the focus on "grand realities" in the work of "historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists" (ibid.). He does not mention literary critics; presumably their attention is already turned toward minor human situations. For Greenblatt (1997: 18), it is primarily literary critics' capacity to focus their attention on very small matters—what he calls, borrowing from the language of optics, "foveation"—that Geertz was after in his turn to literary studies. The term *close reading* attempts to capture this reduction of scale, persistence, and temporally extended attention to the very small, and it is in fact the hallmark of literary study. However, Geertz had other points of reference for such habits of attention: in the microsociological techniques of observation and exhaustive description developed in the period in the observational social sciences. Despite their distance from literary studies, I refer to these practices as an instance of close reading, but one that values thin description as well as thick description as an interpretive practice. This combination of close reading and thin description can be illuminated with reference to an exemplary practice of collaborative observation and description from the postwar period.

The Natural History of an Interview (NHI) is a project that began at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California, in 1955–56. The psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann initiated the project; at the time, she was losing her hearing and wanted to conduct a scientific study of the visual mechanisms of empathy. In a series of meetings from 1955 to 1961, a network of linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, animal behaviorists, and others collaborated to exhaustively describe and code some brief sequences of filmed behavior (as well as some audiotapes) provided by Gregory Bateson out of his research in psychotherapy. The film they analyzed featured scenes of interaction between a woman ("Doris") and her son ("Billy"). The transcription, microanalysis, and interpretation of what amounted to about ten to fifteen minutes of film took place during 150 hours of meetings. The ultimate result, compiled by a team of researchers that included Bateson, anthropologist Ray L. Birdwhistell, linguists Norman McQuown and Charles Hockett, and psychiatrist Henry Brosin, was a seven-hundred-page document that sought to fully describe the linguistic, nonverbal, and interactional components of this strip of activity. That document

was published on microfilm in 1971 by the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago.[10]

Cybernetics was an important context for the project. Both Bateson and Brosin were centrally involved in the Macy Conferences,[11] and Birdwhistell was a guest; the proceedings on group processes are particularly relevant to the work undertaken by the NHI researchers. The focus on dynamic systems, an ecological understanding of group situations, the feedback dance of interaction, and the performative aspects of communication suggests the links between cybernetics and microanalytic work on interaction in everyday situations. But the NHI can also be situated in the context of a number of other large-scale interdisciplinary projects during the period that sought to determine the boundaries of the human. Geertz's own training in graduate school—in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard—reflected this emphasis on collaborations across the humanities and social sciences. But one might also point to examples such as the Values Project (also at Harvard), the founding of the Human Relations Area Files at Yale, and the New Nations project at Chicago (Geertz was a key member of the group).

In the 1950s through the 1970s, forms of microanalysis, aided by new recording technologies, were practiced across fields including sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, animal ethology, kinesics, interaction studies, communications, and ecology. In an article on "microethnography," Jürgen Streeck and Siri Mehus define the term as "the work of humanist researchers who study how human realities are produced, activities are conducted, and sense is made, by inspecting video recordings of actual events frame by frame" (2005: 382). This research was distinguished by several key features: an interest in social interaction at a small scale; an emphasis on observable behavior; systems thinking, ecology, and attention to dynamic context; morphology (painstaking attention to the micro level of behavior and appearance, comparison, and theorizing based on empirical observation); a "natural history" approach of observation of behavior in vivo; and a reluctance to speculate about the interior life of one's research subjects.

Researchers described their surprise at the benefits of rigorous, microscopic,

10. The text is available in a limited number of print copies (in four parts); see McQuown 1971. The most complete account of the NHI, from which I have drawn several details, can be found in Leeds-Hurwitz 1987. For related projects of interest, see Pittenger, Hockett, and Danehy 1960; Scheflen 1973.

11. The Macy Conferences were a series of meetings on cybernetics, psychology, and systems theory that took place from 1946 to 1953. The 1951 meeting, held in New York City, focused on small group interaction (along with communication and game theory). See Schaffner 1955–1960.

repeated, and slow analysis of recorded behavior; in particular, they achieved a greater awareness of the mechanisms and communicative function of fleeting, apparently inconsequential actions. Brosin, in one of his contributions to *The Natural History of an Interview*, "Implications for Psychiatry," recalls the "enriching and gratifying" experience of "intensive repeated viewing and listening to a limited and carefully selected segment of behavior (1 second to 50 minutes)." Such attention could yield "increasing awareness of minimal cues," "the growing recognition that we also are biological organizations capable of sending very diverse messages to ourselves and to others," and the possibility of "objectify[ing] affects-research." The researcher, through attention to "the patterning inherent in the clinical data," can observe "that all events in a human interaction are interrelated," and "the clinician acquires new evidence that very small samples of interaction between persons may be the source of considerable information about the patients" (Brosin 1971, pt. 1: 64–69). Not only is such knowledge helpful in creating new training techniques for analysts, Brosin argues; it also has significant effects on the researcher, who experiences a form of "shock" "because of the intimacy which such viewing and listening not only allows but forces on him" (ibid.: 70).

Randall Collins describes the work of "micro researchers" in the period as "radically empirical work on everyday situations" (1992: 79). With its commitment to practices of observation and description, the NHI could be seen not only as empiricist but also as an embodiment of the "noninterventionist" ethos and minimalism that Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992: 120) identify as essential to the modern history of objectivity.[12] Like other projects of total description in the period, the NHI did not aspire ultimately to a pure ideal of objectivity. Although this research was empiricist, it was not positivist.[13] The NHI belongs to a period between the decline of behaviorism and the rise of cognitive science, and the researchers who participated in the project distanced themselves from laboratory science. The scholars involved in the NHI focused on behavior in the

12. Daston and Galison argue that scientific instruments came to be understood as the ideal observers in the history of mechanical objectivity. Their account of how such instruments were understood—"patient, indefatigable, ever alert" (Daston and Galison 1992: 119)—might as easily describe the practices of microanalytic researchers, whose intensive labor is doubled by that of recording devices such as the camera and the tape recorder.

13. See also Richard Handler's (2009: 291) comments on practices of observation in the context of Erving Goffman's work, discussed below: "Observation, in short, is hardly the dryly empirical visual-rational practice of positivist science (or, perhaps, of the post-structuralist caricature of science). Rather, it is a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory moral activity."

context of dynamic systems of communication and interaction and on naturalistic observation of people in everyday situations.

Considering the "widespread movement toward behavioral science which emerged around 1960," Albert E. Scheflen notes that this behavioral systems approach "was not merely a revival of behaviorism and neobehaviorism." Writing in 1973, he notes, "Behavior has come to be observed in its own right; that is, we study its structure and do not merely make inferences about neurophysiological or cognitive process" (Scheflen 1973: 7). While microsociologists and interactionists inherited an emphasis on observable action and a refusal to speculate about psychic interiority from behaviorism, they were not interested in conditioning or universal reflexes. Bateson consistently argued against the narrow vision of the "experimentalists" (while admitting that elements of their program could assist observational research). In addition, their definition of behavior drew more on animal ethology as practiced by figures like Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen than it did on mainstream American behaviorist psychology. Rather than follow the laboratory model of testing stimulus response, they practiced the immersive observational practices of European animal ethologists who went out into the field to record a wide range of behavior without indexing it to a single falsifiable hypothesis.[14] It is interesting to note, along with the editors of *Conversation Analysis and Psychotherapy*, that "psychotherapy and psychiatric interviews provided the very first materials of the study of naturally occurring tape recorded or filmed interaction" (Peräkylä et al. 2008: 7). In this sense, early naturalistic observation of behavior did not eschew questions of subjectivity or psychic life but approached these aspects of existence from the outside, through the observation and analysis of gesture, body posture, touch, facial movements, patterns of speech, and so on.

Like other researchers in the postwar period, participants in the NHI consistently noted the impact of new technologies on their methods. Birdwhistell refers to these advances in detail in his work on nonverbal communication (recalling, for instance, the difference that a slow-motion analyzer made in his ability to describe behavior). In the introduction to *Kinesics and Context*, he remembers the technical and methodological triumphs of the NHI. He writes: "During the course of investigation, techniques were developed that reduced recording and analysis time (when working with conversants speaking American English) from about 100 hours per second to less than one hour per second. Because of the rich-

14. For an account of the differences between US behaviorist research and the emphasis on natural history in European ethology, see Burkhardt 2005.

ness of a 10-second stretch (isolated for study, but always returned to context for comparative analysis), these methods, which gave us data at the rate of one hour of investigation per second of behavior, seemed efficient enough to use in larger research" (Birdwhistell 1970: xi–xii).

To many readers, Birdwhistell's enthusiasm will seem utterly out of place; they will be struck by the lack of viability of "natural history" as a practical research project and will associate it all too easily with the quixotic and time-consuming practices of humanists. According to one retrospective account, *The Natural History of an Interview* signaled a methodological dead end: "Instead of showing how to do research that would produce theoretically interesting results that others could emulate, it showed how difficult such microanalytical work was, how few the theoretical payoffs of painstakingly detailed transcription were" (Murray 1998: 35). It is on the basis of such a damning association with the humanities that some traditional sociologists have denounced (or simply ignored) the tradition of microsociology as unsystematic, subjective, and irrelevant to the major concerns that are the appropriate purview of the social sciences. The emphasis of these researchers fell on exhaustive description of local scenes rather than on the production of theoretical constructs that could travel. However, such precise accounts of particular instances offer a strong ground for the work of generalization. This combination of painstaking description of observed behaviors with semiotic and structural analysis makes them a significant model for literary critics—and a remarkable example of collaborative reading across disciplines.

In a contribution that begins *The Natural History of an Interview*, "Communication," Bateson considers the technological and methodological challenges of the project. He describes the use of film and remembers the painstaking process of synchronizing audio and visual material, a challenge linked to the difficulty of accounting for the relation between verbal and nonverbal behavior and to the broader problem of accounting for context. Bateson writes, "This placing of every signal in the context of all other signals is an essential discipline of our work" (1971, pt. 1: 19). He goes on:

> A great part of the work that Birdwhistell, Hockett, and McQuown have had to do has involved a grueling process of synchronization. The audible stream for which Hockett and McQuown are specialists was recorded on tape and on film with an unsatisfactory sound track. The analysts had to work frame by frame through the film to establish the point in the audible sequence at which, for example, Doris turned her head or let her shoe fall away from her heel. I described our data loosely above as the aggregate

> of signals recorded on the film. More accurately, I should have said that our data are the individual signals or messages, each in its immediate and extended context. (Ibid.: 19–20)

In order to do this work, the researchers shuttled continually back and forth between observation of the most minute details and placement of these details in both "immediate and extended context." This process, like close reading, is potentially interminable—and it does take time.

That, in its final form, *The Natural History of an Interview* did not see the light of day (or not much of it) and that it is not widely known outside the now small field of interaction studies do not make it an obvious methodological model. Birdwhistell's work in particular has inspired doubts on the part even of researchers sympathetic to the general project of the microanalysis of nonverbal behavior. In a reading of the history of visual culture work on the body, Brenda Farnell, herself proficient in the complex dance transcription system Labanotation, remarks on the impractical nature of kinesics: "Unfortunately, without the theoretical means to specify how bodily movements could be made finite for analytic purposes, and minus the concepts of 'action' and 'sign system' that would provide suitable units of movement and a concept of structured system, Birdwhistell's analyses tended to dissolve into microanalytical minutia from which he seemed unable to emerge" (2011: 146). For many later scholars, Birdwhistell and other practitioners of extreme microanalysis exhibit an attention to detail that is at once overinvested and undertheorized and which simply could not be carried out on a large scale. The fate of microanalysis in the context of emerging digital technologies is uncertain. Davis noted over ten years ago that "computers have given microanalysis a legitimacy and cachet that it never quite had in the '60s" (2001–2: 48); in the intervening years the possibilities for automated analysis have grown exponentially. However, Davis also remarks that she finds the "original work" the "best and most creative . . . because only great fervor, years of labor over a few specimens, and a belief in the possibilities against all odds leads to discoveries that . . . have an impact" (ibid.).

This project from the "golden age" of microanalysis might seem a rather odd choice as a model for reading methods in the present. With the practical difficulties it poses, the specific nature of the objects of analysis (interactional dynamics in everyday situations), and the exhaustive description and coding of highly uneventful samples of experience, it could end up being what it sounds like, which is to say, really boring. The anxiety that exhaustive descriptive could be exhausting—time-consuming and tiresome—underwrites a lot of negative responses to these

projects; the manifest "failure" of the NHI suggests that microanalysis does not have a future. However, I want to insist that practices of microanalysis in the social sciences offer a model for reading that could be generative in the humanities. *The Natural History of an Interview* makes clear that many of the things that literary critics value in reading—slowness, attention to detail, comparison, contextualization, and self-reflexivity—are not solely the domain of literary critics and that they can be and have been practiced with rigor and attention in other disciplinary contexts and with different kinds of objects.

Geertz, reflecting on the long-standing problem of the relation of the particular and the general in the preface to his essay collection *Local Knowledge*, writes, "But if Everything In General is out of reach, and likely to stay there, not everything in particular is" (2000 [1983]: x). He situates his treatments of concrete, local instances of culture within a context of widening acceptance of "case-based knowledge" (ibid.) in scientific contexts. Geertz's attention across his career to "unshapely and incongruent, even unique particulars" (ibid.) finds a parallel in the empiricist dream of the microanalysts who sought to do justice to the infinite particularity of human behavior and interaction. Literature might also be considered a science of the concrete, and, despite intermittent attempts at systematization, literary critics tend to champion the particular instance over the general law. However, the division between the humanities and the social sciences has made it difficult to recognize a shared commitment to particularity. Data and details, thin and thick description, come together in the microanalytic tradition, which provides a model of slow, detailed reading. It has been easy for literary critics to ignore such methods; such an attempt to achieve fidelity in the representation of the social world looks objectifying, naive, or insufficiently critical within the most familiar frameworks of humanistic interpretation. But I want to suggest that the dismissal of empiricism has blocked humanities scholars from using a range of potentially useful tools: morphology, ecology, observation, natural history, and description. Such practices should not be confined to the social sciences but rather should have their place in an expanded account of reading.

Textual Behavior

I turn now to consider Erving Goffman's use of microanalytic techniques in his reading of literary and narrative texts. Although he is considered one of the founding figures of microsociology, Goffman's links to both ethnography and empiricism are rather tenuous, since he rarely engaged in traditional fieldwork and drew on both fictional literary texts and fabricated anecdotes for his evidence.

Although he was never involved in large-scale collaborative projects such as the NHI, Goffman had close ties with several of these researchers, particularly Birdwhistell, who was a colleague at both the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania. Before finishing his undergraduate degree, Goffman worked at the National Film Board of Canada (in Ottawa), which had been established by the documentary filmmaker John Grierson, and one might say that a documentary aesthetics—not unlike that of Frederick Wiseman—informs his writing. At the University of Chicago, where he earned his PhD, Goffman was trained in a strongly ethnographic sociology; he also absorbed the interactionist tradition as inaugurated by George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley; and he was influenced by Émile Durkheim's account of social ritual. Goffman did not engage in traditional ethnography but instead turned his considerable powers of observation on small-scale scenes of social interaction. His scholarship can be situated between, on the one hand, the maximalist empiricism of microanalysis, with its dream that, with enough time, every form of human activity could be accounted for, and, on the other, late twentieth-century doubt about whether reality can be represented at all. Because of his peculiar position, Goffman suggests how the techniques of microanalysis and thin description might be combined with more familiar forms of textual analysis.

Goffman's distinctive style, his cold, dispassionate eye, and his acidic social commentary have earned him comparisons to a range of novelists, from Gustave Flaubert to Franz Kafka. Many of Goffman's key sociological insights are based on evidence drawn from novels, short stories, biographies, memoirs, lightly fictionalized case histories, human interest stories, and counterfactuals. His interest in literature, his unorthodox methodology, and his career-long refusal to address large-scale social structures made him a somewhat exceptional figure in sociology. He tended to produce sketches rather than masterworks, and even his methodological masterpiece, *Frame Analysis*, published in 1974, is structured as a series of fugue-like treatments of a potentially infinite series of frames (or analytic contexts). Goffman's analysis of texts and the social world is attuned to mistakes, embarrassments, and errors; he is alive both to wrinkles in the social order and to the corrosive effects of representation on the perceived solidity of the social world.[15] For this reason, despite his eventual centrality to sociology (Goffman served as the president of the American Sociological Association late in his

15. For a particularly vertiginous example of Goffman's attention to the mise en abyme of representation, see the end of the introduction to *Frame Analysis* (1974: 16–20), where he engages in a Borgesian reflection on the function of prefaces.

career), he has been understood by some as a poststructuralist fellow traveler, a postmodern ironist at odds with his discipline.[16]

Yet such a characterization does not capture what is empirical about Goffman's method. Goffman's empiricism can perhaps best be accounted for by emphasizing his affinities with the techniques of microanalysis. He analyzes social reality by focusing on observable elements of behavior: gesture, spacing, timing, dress, posture, eye contact, and so on. The key formulation of his method can be found in the introduction to *Frame Analysis*, where he identifies the key question to be answered in sociological inquiry: "What is it that's going on here?" (Goffman 1974: 8). To get answers, he reduces social scenes into what he calls "strips" of behavior, or "arbitrary slice[s] or cut[s] from the stream of ongoing activity" (ibid.: 10). Any strip of behavior can be analyzed in this way, whether it is fictional or nonfictional, authentic or faked, printed or staged, rehearsed or for real. While such questions of frame are crucial, they are meant to facilitate rather than interrupt the work of analysis; the point in cutting reality into strips is not to undermine it but to make it available for study. While Goffman engages questions of method explicitly and self-consciously, he points out the danger of focusing on method to the exclusion of research. In a moment that recalls Geertz's concern at the end of "Thick Description" about cultural analysis getting lost in search of "all-too-deep-lying turtles," Goffman writes: "Methodological self-consciousness that is full, immediate, and persistent sets aside all study and analysis except that of the reflexive problem itself, thereby displacing fields of inquiry instead of contributing to them" (1974: 12).

Goffman approaches texts in the same way that he approaches scenes of interaction. He notes that "any raw batch of occurrences" can be subject to behavioral analysis—no matter its "status in reality" (ibid.: 10), and many of Goffman's batches are taken from literature. Rather than attend to the literary qualities of these texts, Goffman mines them for evidence of behavior, treating them as detailed records of social interactions rather than as self-contained textual worlds. For many literary critics, the layer of behavior accounted for by "mere description" is hardly relevant in the analysis of texts. However, Goffman turns his attention to the often ignored "bottom slice" of the text. To return to the spatial metaphor of surface reading, Goffman's attention to the "bottom layer" of the sandwich might also be described as an attention to the surface layer of texts. He does not dig deep,

16. Goffman is understood much more regularly as a representative of the microsociological tradition, in both its positive (attention to detail, bottom-up view of the social world, descriptively rich) and its negative (unsystematic, not rigorous, not theoretical) qualities. For an exemplary poststructuralist reading of Goffman, see Clough 1992.

asking, for instance, "What is it that is *really* going on here?" or looking for deep motivation or psychological conflict.

Goffman approaches texts under the sign of behavior, treating their operations as a form of complex action, to be accounted for alongside other forms of symbolic activity. His use of Nathanael West's modernist classic *Miss Lonelyhearts*, published in 1933, as the epigraph to his 1963 book *Stigma: On the Management of Spoiled Identity* represents a particularly interesting example of his use of literature. The story of a newspaperman who, under a female pseudonym, dispenses advice for the lovelorn and miserable, the short novel includes several "examples," penned by West, of the letters that he receives. Goffman opens with one of these documents, a letter from a girl without a nose, whose plea makes abundantly clear the social costs of bodily difference:

> Dear Miss Lonelyhearts—
>
> I am sixteen years old now and I dont know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block makeing fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose—although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.
>
> I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she crys terrible when she looks at me.
>
> What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?
>
> Sincerely yours,
> Desperate
> (Quoted in Goffman 1963: n.p.)

This account of one of the hypervisible stigmas that Goffman classes as an "abomination of the body" (ibid.: 4) provides an apt opening for *Stigma*. Several key themes emerge in Desperate's abject confession, including public humiliation, self-derogation, and the coping strategies of individuals and their intimates. West, like Goffman, includes in his text fictional versions of documents that are usually

read for their truth-value. West sketches portraits of "real" human misery soaked in irony, and he offers a cool and distant handling of emotionally and politically charged material. One notes, for instance, his masterful use of linguistic and characterizing details in the letter, evident especially in the misspellings, solecisms, and phrases ("I am a good dancer") that make clear the girl's thorough internalization of a culture of youth, beauty, and fun that rejects her.

Goffman does not return to *Miss Lonelyhearts* in *Stigma*, although he mentions several other examples of facial impairment. His key source for these examples is a book of social psychology published in 1953, *Facial Deformities and Plastic Surgery*, by Frances Cooke Macgregor (and a team of researchers). The case histories Macgregor cites detail the profound transformations in people's emotional and social welfare after surgical intervention. West's letters to Miss Lonelyhearts sound like first-person versions of these narratives. The case of Elaine Gorin, which Goffman does not cite, describes the rehabilitation of a thirty-nine-year-old nurse with "attractive red hair and brown eyes"; it recalls Desperate's letter in several particulars.

> Although she had accepted her deformity because there was "no use crying over spilt milk," she felt uncomfortable when others brought it up. She liked beauty and was envious of people who were pretty. She tried to be neat, clean, and fastidious about her appearance, but she felt that her deformity prevented her from looking attractive. In order to "avoid being conspicuous," she restricted her make-up to a minimum of lipstick. She remembered overhearing one woman say to another in the subway, "Look at that ugly face," and wondered "why nature had played such a freakish trick" on her. . . . Her social relationships were unsatisfactory, and she felt her greatest problem to be a lack of opportunity for marriage. In her opinion, either the deformity or personality difficulties were responsible. (Her relatives, however, blamed the deformity alone; in their view, she had "so much to offer a man" otherwise.) (Macgregor et al. 1953: 39–40)

The Gorin case is based in fact; it contains the record of a history of surgical and psychiatric interventions and their effects. Its presentation shares several features with the fictional example from *Miss Lonelyhearts.* The dynamics of acceptance, minimization, resistance, and compensation are quite similar, as is the reported public behavior of shunning and derogation. Furthermore, as in the letter, the inclusion of reported speech establishes linguistically the standards of a "normal" social background (she had "so much to offer a man") against which the patient will be measured and fail. Comparing excerpts from these two sources from *Stigma*'s footnotes suggests that for Goffman's purposes there is little difference

between literary and nonfictional texts. While there is arguably more affective richness in Desperate's cry for help, that fragment of expression is destined for the flattening medium of the newspaper and the ironizing frame of West's novel.

There are many resonances between Desperate's letter and the Gorin case. However, it is interesting to note that Goffman does not give this case or any other from *Facial Deformities and Plastic Surgery* the emphasis that Desperate receives through its inclusion as an epigraph, which suggests Goffman's investment in the irony and rhetorical force of West's text. In the rest of *Stigma*, he cites brief excerpts from Macgregor's casebook (as well as from other sources). To determine "what it is that is going on" in a given situation, he cuts texts ruthlessly, employing a method that Emanuel Schegloff refers to as "sociology by epitome" (1998: 101–2; cited in Handler 2009: 288). In these cuts, Goffman excises biographical and psychological richness, leaving only slight traces of motivation and affect. What remains instead are the interactional and behavioral elements of stigmatization; Goffman describes visible gestures and actions, mere strips of behavior. In this sense, the affective richness of Desperate's plea turns out to be a red herring, pointing toward a psychological elaboration that never takes place.

Goffman cites one of Macgregor's cases in a discussion of the moral career of the stigmatized person. The moment is exemplary in its reduction of a case to a single gesture; treating stigma as behavior, Goffman tracks identification through embodied action rather than through psychic processes. He writes,

> In some cases, the only contact the individual will have with his own is a fleeting one, but sufficient nonetheless to show him that others like himself exist:
>
> > When Tommy came to the clinic the first time, there were two other little boys there, each with a congenital absence of an ear. When Tommy saw them, his own right hand went slowly to his own defective ear, and he turned with wide eyes to his father and said, "There's another boy with an ear like mine." (Goffman 1963: 36; Goffman quotes from Macgregor et al. 1953: 19–20)

Goffman's invocation of this interactional scene from *Facial Deformities and Plastic Surgery* is typical in its recourse to a microscopic scale of analysis. Emphasizing activity rather than diagnosis, Goffman points to the commonality in the boys in the clinic not by dwelling on the positive content of their difference—"congenital absence of an ear"—but by pointing to a moment of embodied (rather than cognitive or affective) recognition: identification is enacted when a boy looks

across the room and raises his hand to his ear. While the full case as described in *Facial Deformities and Plastic Surgery* offers a much more "complete" portrait of Tommy, Goffman reduces the situation to its gestural elements, abstracting the stigmatized trait and turning it into nothing more than the occasion (or "hook" [Goffman 1963: 10]) for a fleeting identification. Employing a documentary, scenic aesthetic, Goffman represents action, minimizing explanation. While his treatment is flattening, the moments he traces are extraordinarily complex. In drawing attention to the ambivalence of identification for stigmatized persons, for instance, he notes, "What may end up as a freemasonry may begin with a shudder" (ibid.: 37). Goffman has very little to say about freemasonry; he allows the shudder to speak for itself.[17]

Goffman's attention to behavior and enactment rather than to psychology and identity is consistent throughout *Stigma*. He tends to avoid even the matte interiority invoked by Desperate's question, "Ought I commit suicide?" opting instead to represent more concrete reactions to the dilemmas of the stigmatized. Such reactions are rarely legible as forms of resistance or rebellion. Instead, they look like management strategies, designed to smooth over social discomfort, grease the wheels of leisure and commerce, or simply ensure survival. In discussing such strategies, Goffman cites Macgregor again, from the discussion of a businessman who pauses before introducing himself to allow others to perceive his facial difference.

> Other means of helping the others to be tactful toward him are also recommended, such as, in the case of facial disfigurements, pausing on the threshold of an encounter so the participants-to-be will have a chance to compose their response.
>
> > A 37-year-old male whose face is grossly disfigured but who carries on a real estate business stated, "When I have an appointment with a new contact, I try to manage to be standing at a distance and facing the door, so the person entering will have more time to see me and get

17. Goffman almost entirely ignores the positive content of social identities; instead, he images more durable forms of identity as an effect of typecasting—stigmatizing experiences that, when repeated often enough, produce ontological effects. He writes, "The lifelong attributes of a particular individual may cause him to be type-cast; he may have to play the stigmatized role in almost all of his social situations, making it natural to refer to him, as I have done, as a stigmatized person" (Goffman 1963: 138). Basing identity on "frequency" (ibid.) both emphasizes the undetermined quality of personal identity and suggests the potential for alliances between stigmatized persons and "normals" who as a result of "minor differentness find they understand the structure of the situation in which the fully stigmatized are placed—often attributing this sympathy to the profundity of their human nature instead of to the isomorphism of human situations" (ibid.: 127).

> adjusted to my appearance before we start talking." (Goffman 1963: 118; Goffman quotes from Macgregor et al. 1953: 85)

In tracing these strategies at a micro level, and focusing on the interactional components of behavior, Goffman makes few assumptions about the interiority of the stigmatized person. Instead, the businessman is a player on the scene, a placeholder rather than a person; stigma is a property of the scene, not of the people in it.

This ecological understanding of the dynamics of stigmatization runs throughout *Stigma*. The sticky psychology of stigma never gets a chance to attach to fully realized persons or cases. This effect of Goffman's observational, documentary treatment of stigma is concretized in the quick-change artistry of plastic surgery. Again, citing *Facial Deformities and Plastic Surgery* in a footnote, Goffman briefly summarizes some of the "success stories" narrated in Macgregor's text in full-blown social-psychological detail:

> For example, it seems that persons who suddenly find themselves relieved of a stigma, as in successful plastic surgery, may quickly be seen, by themselves and others, to have altered their personality, an alteration in the direction of the acceptable, just as those who have suddenly acquired a defect may relatively quickly experience a change in apparent personality. These perceived changes seem to be a result of the individual's being placed in a new relationship to the contingencies of acceptance in face-to-face interaction, with consequent employment of new strategies of adaptation. (Goffman 1963: 132)

This situational, behavioral approach—and the formal strategies of compression and excision that Goffman employs—allows him to deontologize stigma. Rather than read interiority from a stigmatized trait, or look for the stigmatized subject behind the blows and counterblows that he traces, Goffman sees stigma as a social situation. This view leads him to conclude that "the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives" (ibid.: 138) and that "the role of normal and the role of stigmatized are parts of the same complex, cuts from the same standard cloth" (ibid.: 130).

Goffman approaches texts just as he would approach a live social situation, with the question "What is it that is going on here?" To literary critics, this might look like reading for content—trying to hotwire a text by making it touch social reality, when the only thing a text can ever touch is other texts. To try to find out what it is that is going on in a text is to ignore the key constraints and affordances of the literary: irony, fictionality, layering of perspective, genre, plotting, and so

on. These are the qualities that separate literature from other genres including the case history, documentary, the manual, the textbook and so on. While psychoanalytic and narrative approaches have developed methods to read these dry genres as literature, Goffman's treatment of his source texts pushes in the opposite direction. By extracting scenes of behavior from a miscellaneous archive, Goffman reads a range of texts, up to and including "great literature," as documentary. Cutting text up into strips of activity, he makes a wide range of situations available for analysis and study. Because he stops at the threshold of the person, refusing to speculate about affect, motivation, and character, the products of Goffman's method are perspectives, not persons; situations, not traits; behavior that belongs to no one.

.....

Geertz's account of the Balinese cockfight turns on a paradox in aesthetic theory: how does the critic account for what is "disquietful" in the artwork, for those aesthetic qualities that are not literally there in its materials? He wonders how qualities like wit, exuberance, or fluidity inhere in "blocks of stone" or "strings of sound" (Geertz 1973a: 444). Working the analogy of aesthetic contemplation, Geertz addresses the disquietful aspects of the Balinese cockfight—its status both as pure display and as an instance of the cultural production of meaning. Geertz attempts to account for what is excessive in cultural practices and behavior; in tracing the significance of the cockfight, aesthetics offers him a way of accounting for the strange fact that "the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits" (ibid.: 449). As in "Thick Description" and his comparison of ethnography to trying to read "a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries," Geertz insists on what is not there, rather than on what is.

In his attempt to formulate an interpretive theory of culture, Geertz draws on an image of literature as marked by absence, opacity, and impossibility; the activity of reading, as practiced by literary critics, is seen as only interpretive—neither descriptive nor observational. He is not alone in his understanding of what literature is and can do; this view of reading as deciphering is widely accepted among literary critics themselves. In challenging this view, I would not suggest that thin description is a replacement for thick description or that literary critics, in attending to behavior, should ignore the elements of intention, affect, and experience that have been central to the history of literary analysis. However, the focus on what is "disquietful" in literary texts has made it difficult to value activities such as observation and description that are an important part of reading; the focus on

interpretation has blocked from view those aspects of the artwork that might count as "mere behavior" and the practices of reading that are too readily dismissed as "merely descriptive." In Ryle's terms, literary critics have attempted to enjoy the sandwich without its bottom slice, to savor the ghostly presence of the Prince of Denmark without the play. And, as Ryle points out in *The Concept of Mind*, literature itself has always been characterized by its meticulous attention to "mere behavior": "Novelists, dramatists and biographers had always been satisfied to exhibit people's motives, thoughts, perturbations and habits by describing their doings, sayings, and imaginings, their grimaces, gestures and tones of voice. In concentrating on what Jane Austen concentrated on, psychologists began to find that these were, after all, the stuff and not the mere trappings of their subjects" (1949: 328). If literary critics, in hoping to build a better sandwich, have gone without the bottom slice, novelists have always insisted on visible behavior—"grimaces, gestures and tones of voice." Latour makes a similar point in *Reassembling the Social* when he holds fiction writers up as a model of attention to the stuff of reality: "Those in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies—who pride themselves on 'writing fictional narratives'—should be inspired in being at least as disciplined, as enslaved by reality, as obsessed by textual quality, as good writers can be" (2005: 126).

Bateson also turns to the example of literature in his contributions to *The Natural History of an Interview*. The essay "Communication" begins with an epigraph, a sonnet cited in full from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The sonnet, translated by M. E. Herter, opens with this verse:

> O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht gibt.
> Sie wusstens nicht und habens jeden Falls
> —sein Wandeln, seine Haltung, seinen Hals,
> bis in des stillen Blickes Licht—geliebt.
>
> O this is the creature that does not exist.
> They did not know that and in any case
> —its motion, and its bearing, and its neck,
> even to the light of its still gaze—they loved it.
> (Quoted in Bateson 1971, pt. 1: 3)

The appearance of Rilke's paean to the imagination at the outside of a massive work of empirical research on behavior, communication, and interaction raises some obvious questions. The researchers who collaborated on *The Natural History of an Interview* were observing not imaginary animals but rather the evi-

dence of lived experience, made available by technical capture. Citing Rilke in this context—at the opening of an exhaustive account of motion and bearing—Bateson suggests that the division between scientific and aesthetic activity is not absolute—and that one might undertake rigorously empirical analyses of objects that do not exist.

To read literature as if it were social behavior demands what Geertz in "Blurred Genres" calls a "thoroughgoing conceptual wrench, a particularly outlandish bit of 'seeing-as' " (1983: 30). Surveying the increasing conceptual and metaphorical traffic between the humanities and the social sciences, Geertz comments specifically on the use of the text analogy among social scientists. That the analogy is strained is not a drawback in his view: "The text analogy has some unapparent advantages still insufficiently exploited, and the surface dissimilarity of the here-we-are-and-there-we-are of social interaction to the solid composure of lines on a page is what gives it—or can when the disaccordance is rightly aligned—its interpretive force" (ibid.: 31). Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's work, Geertz suggests that proper accordance depends on attention to processes of inscription, to the ways in which fleeting behavior can be fixed into meaning.

> The great virtue of the extension of the notion of the text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on . . . how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events—history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior—implies for sociological interpretation. To see social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense "readable" is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is and shift it toward modes of thought rather more familiar to the translator, the exegete, or the iconographer than to the test giver, the factor analyst, or the pollster. (Ibid.)

Geertz's account of the textual analogy acknowledges the disjunction between the ongoing stream of events and the fixity of lines on a page. In spite of this formal difference, the freezing of behavior into culture clears the way for interpretation and brings together data gathering and textual analysis. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford defines textualization as "the process through which unwritten behavior, speech, beliefs, oral tradition, and ritual come to be marked as a corpus, a potentially meaningful ensemble separated out from an immediate discursive or performative situation" (1988: 38). While arguing that textualization is the key to interpretive anthropology, Clifford also points to its limits, its tendency to "banish" the "situational aspects of ethnographic interpretation . . .

from the final representative text" (ibid.: 40). Addressing the key analogical move of "Deep Play," he writes, "We are seldom made aware of the fact that an essential part of the cockfight's construction as a text is dialogical—the author's talking face to face with particular Balinese rather than reading culture 'over the[ir] shoulders' " (ibid.: 41).[18]

In this essay, I have tried to sketch out practices that would reverse the process of textualization that Geertz describes. By unbinding the fixed corpus of the text, it would be possible to move from "the solid composure of lines on a page" back to "the here-we-are-and-there-we-are of social interaction." Detextualization need not exclude interpretation, but it could also make room for other practices such as description, observation, and natural history, as well as testing, polling, and coding. Such practices have had little traction in humanities scholarship, which has tended to dismiss empirical methods as naive and objectifying. However, an expanded definition of reading might return the text to the context of communication as a whole and to make visible the fact that history includes what happened, thought includes thinking, and culture includes behavior. Taking up the descriptive methods of the postwar microanalysis makes it possible to challenge narrow hermeneutic definitions of reading. Instead, such practices might help us reframe reading as a social science, one that along with more traditional social scientific methods can contribute to the project of showing "what the real world is really like."

18. Clifford's primary concern in his reading of Geertz is the question of ethnographic authority. He proposes restoring the liveness and contingency of discourse in order to emphasize the construction of the ethnographic text and the "face-to-face interactions" of social actors. Both Clifford and Geertz are driven by a concern with ethical dimensions of ethnography in a situation of stark geopolitical inequality. While observation has been partly discredited because of this critique, the problem of objectifying the other is less pressing in the work of Goffman and many of his contemporaries in interaction studies, who turned their observing gaze on the activities of social actors in familiar and proximate social milieus. (In this sense, I would argue that Goffman's ethics depends not on the reciprocity of face-to-face interaction but rather on a certain disregard of the person.) This problematic has been inverted in the field of STS, where researchers often find themselves "studying 'up,' " in Latour's words (2005: 97)—which may account at least in part for the development of new forms of descriptive empiricism in STS. For a canonical critique of the objectifying techniques of anthropology within a colonial context, see Fabian 1983. For a historical and progressive account of the "paradigm shift" from "an observationist view of 'the body' as biological or cultural object, which perhaps emits 'behavior,' to a conception of the body as a somatic and sensory resource for dynamically embodied action in cultural space/time," see Farnell 2011: 137.

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