DEFAMILIARIZATIONS

Having It Both Ways with Erving Goffman

JOHN PLOTZ

1. Awkward

HISTORIANS of social science from Anthony Giddens forward have ably chronicled Erving Goffman's legacy.[1] Goffman's resonant book titles alone hint at the Dickensian acuity of his social close-reading: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), *Interaction Ritual* (1967), *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974), and *Forms of Talk* (1981). I envy newcomers the opportunity to read pieces like "On Cooling the Mark Out" (1952) and "Where the Action Is" (1967) with fresh eyes. Goffman, born in 1922 in Alberta, Canada, to Ukrainian parents, attended the University of Manitoba and the University of Toronto before receiving a PhD in sociology from Chicago. His fieldwork was in the Shetlands, and *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961) and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) were both written after a period of ethnographic immersion at St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, DC. It may help first-time readers to know that as an adolescent he had a "special aptitude for noticing details of people's interpersonal conduct"; also that "his Chicago classmates nicknamed him 'the little dagger' because of his talent for the pointed personal comment. Sometimes, they felt, he never knew when to stop."[2]

For the purposes of this article, I start with one straightforward idea that, four decades ago, literary scholars singled out as a valuable resource for our own field: Goffman's account of embarrassment. By his reading,

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embarrassment arises as a result of social failure. But the failure uses embarrassment to demonstrate that one is not defined by that failure alone—bystanders should recognize that one may be able manage the situation better in the future. Since Goffman (to the delight of his admirers and disgust of his critics) loved anecdotes, here is a relevant vignette from my own life. As I was finishing up this piece I went into a local café and bought a pound of ground coffee and a bowl of oatmeal. Server One offered me a discount on the oatmeal, but Server Two overruled him; when I pled the case he overruled me too, peremptorily. Server One tried to use smiles and a profusion of *Have a nice day*'s to "manage" the obvious tension between me and Two. But the encounter remained unresolved (Two looked impatiently off to the right as he rang up my full-priced oatmeal), and I sat down, still embarrassed.

The point of recounting this trivial situation is not so much that I continued to be upset about "losing face" over a $2.15 molehill that had somehow become situationally mountainous. Rather, what seems worth stressing is that my very act of recounting the encounter—begun with spoon in hand less than five minutes after "*l'affaire d'avoine*"—is also situation management, a way to purge my humiliation. Sure, I had a writing assignment (*you better finish that Goffman piece!*) but I also had a short-term failed encounter to resolve. What is not resolved in one situation makes its way into another: in this case, onto the page. Even my choice above to pivot to French (*l'affaire d'avoine*) seems noteworthy less for its witty (or "witty") reference to the Dreyfus affair as for its transparent effort to insert borrowed cultural prestige into the situation to make it less embarrassing: what better way to distance oneself from a banal domestic humiliation than to estrange it *à la française*?

The crucial point that brings a Goffmanian analysis of this sort into the realm of the aesthetic is that every social encounter has *both* a situation *and* an afterlife. The implications of that entanglement were first unpacked by Christopher Ricks, whose 1974 *Keats and Embarrassment* begins by quoting extensively from Goffman's "Embarrassment and Social Organization" (1956). Ricks is interested in the implications of Goffman's account of embarrassment's utility when one is caught, untenably, having to play two incompatible roles in a social situation. Crucial to his account of Keats's poetry is Goffman's idea that "By showing embarrassment when he can be neither of two people, the individual leaves open the possibility that in the future he may effectively be either."[3]

Ricks discerns that for Goffman embarrassment is an index of the ways in which manifest social failures may shed light on aspects of

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one's character that are presently veiled or inactive but that nonetheless have the potential to emerge elsewhere. The embarrassed person's "role in the current interaction may be sacrificed, and even the encounter itself, but he demonstrates that, while he cannot present a sustainable and coherent self on this occasion, he is at least disturbed by the fact and may prove worthy at another time."[4] Ricks's oblique approach to Keats opens up an important connection between Goffman's work and still-relevant concerns for scholars of literature. On one hand, artworks (Keats's poems, for instance) are the product of a particular well-bounded social situation (what Goffman calls a "strip").[5] On the other, any artwork imagined as outlasting its present moment is also an attempt to move *beyond* that strip.

Embarrassment is a crucial category for Goffman, Ricks discerns, precisely because any individual caught in a particular moment envisions living beyond that event. Therefore, an important way to understand the art produced out of any given moment is as the autograph of just such survival. Artworks register present embarrassment, yes; but they also take the sting out of the present with the balm of the future. The poem is the autograph of the present and also the promise that it will not always be thus.[6]

Among sociologists, Goffman is an acknowledged expert of "moments"—hence the link often drawn between Goffman and the microscopically acute "ethnomethodology" of Harold Garfinkel, which picks apart mere seconds of social interaction for their larger social meaning. As even this brief account of embarrassment as potentially productive of place-escaping work should suggest, however, Goffman also has something important to say about what the process is whereby particular actions, including the making of artworks, survive the moment of their birth. Ricks profits from Goffman's interest both in the individual's capacity to "manage" a particular, bounded situation and in the capacity to navigate from that particular strip to some other situation, in which rules and constraints operate quite differently.[7]

2. Neither out Far Nor in Deep

Ricks's first word is by no means the last. Goffman's work has offered quite varied benefits to its admirers. Most recently, Heather Love has turned to Goffman as a proponent of "flat" description. Her important recent work understands Goffman as uninterested in the sorts of

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meaning that lurk *below* the surface of everyday life. Instead, she sees him as a straightforward describer of social occurrences per se:

> Like Latour, Goffman took great interest in literature as a mode of accounting for social life, and cited literary texts (novels, autobiographies, memoirs, literary case studies) extensively in his work. Despite his engagement with literary materials—and the textured, ironic quality of his prose—Goffman does not see literature as a storehouse of human potential, experience, or feeling. His accounts of the rituals and gestures of everyday interaction are full of details, but not rich or warm. Noting Goffman's lack of attention to both structure and individual psychology, Anthony Giddens describes his work as "flat" and "empty."[8]

Love sees Goffman's "accounts of the interaction order . . . [as] relentlessly thin and cold" and emphasizes "his lack of interest in questions of interpretation and symbolic meaning."[9] As Love sees it, "Goffman's minimal account of his actors recalls Latour's injunction to treat people like things."[10] Love's "thin" reading of social situations aligns well with Goffman's warning against the quaint or "charming" wish to protect some part of life from sociological analysis—and with Goffman's oft-quoted resolve to study "not men and their moments. Rather, moments and their men."[11]

Although it may seem that Ricks's account of Goffman as anatomist of embarrassment and Love's account of him as expert chronicler of impersonal "moments" are incompatible, Fredric Jameson long ago pointed out that Goffman's work offers both a structural account of extra-individual social life and also a subtle anatomy of the ways that individuals feel and act within that structure, as they strive to make sense of its strictures. Jameson does go on to criticize the latter aspect of Goffman's work as a kind of nostalgic (Sartrean) humanism. However, there is a way to put to scholarly use the immanent tension within Goffman's work. The tension, that is, between impersonal social laws operating from above in their totality, and those same laws as they are *experienced* by the individual, who has to navigate from one social situation to another and who proves capable of producing a range of aesthetically noteworthy responses to that lifelong navigation.

3. When You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take It

Love and Ricks both get Goffman right. The strength of Goffman's work actually resides in its consistent commingling of what Love sees (relentlessly flat accounts of human actions as surface events) and Ricks's interest in Goffman as anatomist of embarrassment—that is, the problems

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generated by "role distance" and an individual's efforts to save face when socially deviant.[12] Greg Smith's recent book has a bald summation of this tension: "Goffman considers action from the standpoints of the individual and the society."[13] But Fredric Jameson put it more incisively: even in Goffman's late *Frame Analysis* (1974), he notes a "persistence, in the midst of the newly depersonalized language of framings and situations, of just that older, still anthropomorphic vocabulary of 'roles' and theatrical performances which formed the conceptual horizon of Goffman's first and still Sartrean *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*."[14]

To Jameson this continued use of the language of "role" and of "performance" even within his late "frame analysis" is a problem because it suggests Goffman does not grasp "the revelation of the reality of the collective beneath the appearance of individual experience, the disclosure of the individual subject as a field of multiple forces, not a substance but a locus, a nexus, of sheer relationships."[15] However, what Jameson sees as a weakness is actually a strength of Goffman's analysis. Jameson is right about (but wrong to criticize) Goffman's investment *both* in appraising the collective operations of the social situation within which humans move *and* in the complex consciousness that has to be on hand to navigate those roles, to react to one's surroundings and also to react to one's own deployment of various kinds of dramatic actions in order to navigate those settings. Both ways is the only way to have it.

The astute argument Goffman offers in his penultimate book, *Gender Advertisements* (1976), would, if space allowed, be worth unpacking here. Although the book initially seems to be about how the "culture industry" produces schematic and prescriptive accounts of how gender roles ought to be played in a society (à la the Frankfurt School or Roland Barthes's *Fashion System*), Goffman pivots to make the point that individuals living in that society are themselves busy at work "advertising their gender." He thus offers an account of ways that situation-specific imperatives arise and are implemented, in an always deferred and complicated way that relies on knowing agential activity (culture, *c'est nous*).

As Goffman himself notes (in *Behavior in Public Places*), his analysis of situations like the unease of a hostess at a party goes beyond "situational determinism."[16] Ricks's focus on the ways that embarrassment is predicated on the gap between one's desiderated social role and what one is able to manage in a given situation has an echo in Goffman's concept of "role distance." The challenge—but also the opportunity—in making use of Goffman entails figuring out the nature of the interaction between a social situation and those who are caught up in it. That interaction has

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the capacity to produce lingering aftereffects: such as, if we believe Ricks, Keats's embarrassed poetry.

4. Leftover Oatmeal

Jameson may criticize Goffman's career-long attention to the complex emotional strategies whereby individuals manage their "biographical identity" in public: in a coffee shop where one's cheeks may burn with embarrassment, but embarrassment can be transmuted into an anecdote to retail for later gain. But I admire just that aspect of his work. Goffman's potential gift to literary studies, from his early investment in performance to his final readings of frame analysis and the work of producing gender in public, is his subtle account of the ways in which management carries over from situation to situation. If Goffman's account were reductively behaviorist, then "identity management" would simply refer to one "strip" (that is, one distinct social situation) after another: each case producing anew its momentary imperatives.

In such a reading, however, there would be no conceptual room for the very topic that Goffman repeatedly returned to: embarrassment. Embarrassment is a feeling rather than an affect, and it arises from the individual's *conscious* work reconciling different obligations as well as the realization that some sets of role responsibilities cannot be managed simultaneously.[17] The embarrassment of the oatmeal-discount-that-was-not-one shaped the very paragraph you are reading. Yet it would be absurd to say that the moment of embarrassment *produced* this paragraph. That double observation—that without being directly produced by the moment of embarrassment, this piece of writing is unmistakably part of my effort to ease the sting—suggests the benefits of Goffmanian analysis to scholarship that strives to understand how texts work within and also *beyond* their immediate contexts (which is to say, to virtually all literary scholarship). It offers a way of understanding the capacity to live with that double perspective, to grasp moments as momentary—and also as durable in their aftereffects on the individuals involved in them.

Goffman allows one to have the moment of textual production (indeed, of artistic creation generally) both ways. His work allows us to understand an aesthetic object as locally produced yet also as an action. Each artwork is motivated, shaped, and (as Hannah Arendt puts it) *conditioned* by its moment of inception—yet also intended to endure beyond that moment and hence also analyzable along other axes than the one initially afforded by its social "strip." The multidimensionality of Goffman's

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analytical approach allows us to return with renewed appreciation to Jameson's insight (offered as criticism, but an insight nonetheless) that Goffman remains to the end of his career committed, on one hand, to an analysis based on social immediacy and, on the other, to a more complex account of persons as conscious of their local situations yet also capable of complex management that carries the contours of thought and action beyond that locale.

5. Also Present

This revealing doubleness in Goffman's approach—that it can train scholars to be attentive to moments and simultaneously to the conscious role-playing that makes "role distance" possible—opens up space for a final set of questions about the most active legacy of his work in the twenty-first century. In a world coming to be defined by technologically mediated "telepresence" and social forms of "virtuality" ranging from Skype to multiplayer gaming, many new questions naturally arise about Goffman's persistent focus on face-to-face interaction that are seemingly necessary preconditions for what he calls "presence," "co-presence," "collocated situations," and "face." Given that Goffman's work was defined at least initially by the premise that "face-to-face interaction [i]s a naturally bounded analytically coherent field—a sub-area of sociology,"[18] Goffman's accounts of focused and unfocused interaction and social strips may seem doomed to lose their salience in our own socially mediated age, emblematized by the sight of mutually indifferent pairs of "collocated" teenagers together in a coffee shop, gazing down at their respective cell phones.

Two simple responses to our world of hypermediation are presently ascendant. On one hand, Steven Johnson and Jared Lanier embrace that space of omnipresent virtuality. On the other, books such as Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* champion a nostalgic backlash that insists on the warmth of older forms of physical co-presence, bemoaning the loss of face-to-face interaction entailed when we retreat to a device-mediated omnipresent telepresence. Goffman may seem to offer little more than a set of celebratory footnotes to the latter account: *remember how great face-to-faceness was, back when it existed?* In fact, Goffman's account of presence and the complicated social embarrassments of face-to-faceness has renewed relevance in today's complex webs of co-present interactions. Ling has recently made the case that Goffman's analysis of "unfocused" interactions provides room to explore digital-era states of liminal attentiveness. For example, he credits Goffman with coming up with the idea of "civil inattention" to

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describe a way of behaving around someone engaged in a phone conversation. And he points out that Goffman long ago noted how "front stage conversation will 'go limp'" when one of the participants answers a phone call.[19] To "go limp" means in this context to be present in body but to signal in various ways that one's "real presence" is elsewhere.

Making sense of such new forms of presence is one of the greatest challenges that scholars of new media face right now, and the most promising way to do so may entail beginning from the Goffmanian account of writing as/after embarrassment outlined above. Any such analysis will have the same dual aspect Jameson picked out: a flat account of moments and, alongside that, an account of those whose experience of such moments demands not just present performance but also some more enduring form of management. Being here always entails the recognition that in the future one will be elsewhere: making something now always entails the awareness that it may go on to an afterlife elsewhere. If that insight from Goffman made its way into our future accounts of what it means to be in one another's virtual presence, that will certainly be a reason to stop crying over spilt oatmeal.

Notes

1. See Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*; Geertz, "Blurred Genres"; Smith, *Erving Goffman;* and, most recently, Vargas Maseda, *Deciphering Goffman.*
2. Smith, *Erving Goffman*, 13.
3. Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, quoted by Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment,* 2.
4. Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, quoted by Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment,* 20.
5. Goffman's concept of frame, as Smith puts it, "is a 'schemata of interpretation' that 'allows its user to locate, perceive, identify and label' a strip of activity," an account of how "human experience is socially organized" (*Erving Goffman*, 57).
6. As I have argued elsewhere (Plotz, "The Return of the Blob"), Goffman himself is aware of the ways in which his account of role-playing as part of ordinary life complicates the relationship between what it means to make art and what it means simply to play an ordinary role in life, when one is aware of the distance between one's dramaturgical activity and whatever self may lie behind that activity. It is a topic that Goffman returns to repeatedly, exploring various ways in which "life" and "art" may seem to imitate or to constitute

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one another. For example, in *Frame Analysis* he writes: "Everyday life, real enough in itself, often seems to be a laminated adumbration of a pattern or model that is itself a typification of quite uncertain realm status. . . . Life may not be an imitation of art, but ordinary conduct, in a sense, is an imitation of the proprieties, a gesture of the exemplary forms, and the primary realization of these ideals belongs more to make-believe than to reality" (*Frame Analysis*, 564).

7. In fact, his work stands in interesting tension in this regard to Hannah Arendt's contemporaneous uneasiness with the artist's capacity to "reify" a human situation—by turning a moment of action into a solid object, a merely material record of what had a greater human dimension in its occurrence (*The Human Condition*).
8. Love, "Close but Not Deep," 378.
9. Love, "Close but Not Deep," 379–80.
10. Love, "Close but Not Deep," 379.
11. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 3.
12. Vargas Maseda argues that Goffman's concept of "role distance" was influenced by Simmel's work on "The Dramatic Actor and Reality" (1912), in which "dramaturgical representation" comes to seem paradigmatic of social role-playing generally. By Vargas Maseda's account, this highlights the "literary dimension of Goffman's writings" and "how Goffman's sociological essay occupies an intermediate place between the literary and the canonical form" (*Deciphering Goffman*, 73).
13. Smith, *Erving Goffman*, 48.
14. Jameson, "On Goffman's Frame Analysis," 132.
15. Jameson, "On Goffman's Frame Analysis," 131.
16. "Although an individual may conduct himself in a particular way solely because of the felt pressure of propriety, this merely tells us about one possible motive for conforming" (Goffman, *Behavior,* 12).
17. This argument, presented here in an overly compressed form, entails an implicit critique of the behaviorist aspect of recent affect theory, its insinuation that what we take as conscious actions are better understood as behaviors to which consciousness is only appended retrospectively and nugatorily. See Ruth Leys's *The Ascent of Affect* for an important recent discussion of the dangers in claiming too large a gap between emotion and affect, and the relationship that gap has to such conceptual errors regarding attribution of agency.
18. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, ix.
19. Ling, "The 'Unboothed Phone,'" 288.

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