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A PARTISAN VIEW
Sarcasm, Satire, and Irony as Voices in Erving Goffman’s Asylums

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ETHNOGRAPHY ABOUNDS. Define ethnography as the description of a scene, setting, group, or organization, and one finds that, like Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain, amazed at being able to speak prose, we write ethnography without awareness. Yet, only certain ethnographic texts are privileged. The academic guilds have a special slot for “ethnographic scholarship,” and some works are so classified.

Within this classification reside styles of discourse (Van Maanen 1988; Geertz 1988); the possible voices are diverse, though perhaps not as diverse as within “non-fiction” or “realistic fiction.” If not all ethnography can be classified as a “realist tale,” all ethnography is “realistic” in another sense—the implicit claim is that what has been depicted “actually” happened, even recognizing that the story could be told in several ways, varying with the persona of the author, character of the audience, and attitudes toward the focus, or that in some cases the claims may reflect a composite reality.

One predominant characteristic of ethnography, and of scientific discourse generally, is its serious and sedate mien (Fine 1988). This diverges from modes of description that accord emotions (humor, passion, pathos, or tragedy) a respected place. Scientific writing “should be” emotion-free. Emotion, if included, resides in segregated prefaces, acknowledgements, or methodological appendices. Yet, despite the normative expectations, emotion does creep into ethnographic description. It should not be surprising that a discourse heavily dependent on the authorial presence (e.g. Clifford 1988) will incorporate
the feelings of the author. Emotion presumes that the author's self is positioned in the text, and, so, we find echoes of fear, sadness, and exaltation.

In this article, we focus on a small corner of emotion-laden writing: the use of humor in ethnographic description. As is widely known, humor contributes to rhetorical effectiveness (e.g., Gruner 1979); yet, this technique is infrequently employed in social scientific writing. To demonstrate potential uses of humor, and particularly a few subtypes—sarcasm, satire, and irony, we examine a single book: Erving Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Our goal is to demonstrate the possibilities of humorous ethnographic writing, rather than to demonstrate the frequency of such writing. While sarcasm, satire, and irony are recognized categories of humor, they are by no means an exhaustive list. They are, however, three forms used vigorously by Goffman.

By virtue of its production, *Asylums* (1961) is a book; it is also a set of four essays, related, but with different tones and with little explicit connection. All are based upon Erving Goffman's ethnographic research at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. *Asylums* is regarded as a classic work in medical sociology, deviance, and symbolic interactionism, and it has reoriented policy by helping to demolish the justification for large state mental institutions (Goldstein 1979, 399; Price and Smith 1983, 413). Some of our homeless must thank and blame Goffman for their circumstances and for the circumstances they have avoided.

In this account, we focus on three humorous techniques: sarcasm, satire, and irony—forms that overlap more than slightly. For purposes of this essay we argue inexacty that each characterizes one of Goffman's three humorous essays ("The Moral Career of the Mental Patient" is serious and more "scholarly" than its mates). "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions" (pp. 1-124) is characterized by sarcasm; "The Underlife of a Public Institution: A Study of Ways of Making Out in a Mental Hospital" (pp. 125-70) is largely satiric; and "The Medical Model and Mental Hospitalization: Some Notes on the Vicissitudes of the Tinkering Trades" (pp. 321-86) should be seen as ironic. Goffman does not use any one mode exclusively in any essay, but a certain tone predominates each one. We make no claim for what might or might not have been intended by Goffman in his act of writing.

Humor is a technique for persuading an audience, even when relying on the presentation of ethnographic data. Humor admits a challenging authorial stance, while avoiding explicit political commitment and a need to state one's own solution. That persuasion is a concern of Goffman's is evident in his prefatory comments about focusing on patients, as opposed to other denizens of a mental hospital. Goffman writes:

> The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members, in this case, doctors, nurses, attendants, and relatives. To describe the patient's situation faithfully is necessarily to present a partisan view. (For this last bias I partly excuse myself that the imbalance is at least on the right side of the scale, since almost all professional literature on mental patients is written from the point of view of the psychiatrist, and he, socially speaking, is on the other side.) . . . Finally, unlike some patients, I came to the hospital with no great respect for the discipline of psychiatry nor for agencies content with its current practices. (Goffman 1961, x; emphasis added)

The underlined phrases suggest a double meaning. On one level Goffman claims the perspective of the mental patient has not been considered sufficiently, but simultaneously he charges that they are morally preferable to their keepers. Recall the meanings of "partisan" (as defined in *Webster's*): "1: one that takes the part of another: SUPPORTER 2a: a member of a body of detached light troops making forays and harassing an enemy b: a member of a guerilla band operating within enemy lines" (1965: 614). Perhaps Goffman relished definition 2b. Goffman's role as an assistant to the athletic director (at St. Elizabeth's) and as a grant recipient (from the National Institute from Mental Health) suggest the significance of "partisan."
GOFFMAN'S ETHNOGRAPHY

For a productive *empirical* sociologist, Erving Goffman did remarkably little research, and the quality of the research that he did conduct is open to question, given contemporary can­
nons of ethnographic research. Goffman conducted two long-
term qualitative research projects during his thirty years of
scholarly engagement. Both studies were completed early in his
career, and we know Goffman for his secondary data analysis,
cribbing the examples of others.

Between December 1949 and May 1951 Goffman spent
twelve months on one of the Shetland Islands, north of Scotland,
in which he claimed the role of "an American college student
interested in gaining firsthand experience in the economics of
island farming" (1953, 2). During 1954-1957 Goffman "did
some brief studies of ward behavior in the National Institutes of
Health Clinical Center" (p. ix) and in 1955-1956 he conducted a
year's field work at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, then the nation's
largest mental institution with over 7,000 patients. Goffman
describes his role:

My immediate object in doing fieldwork at St. Elizabeths was to try to
learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is
subjectively experienced by him. I started out in the role of an assistant
to the athletic director, when pressed avowing to be a student of
recreation and community life, and I passed the day with patients,
avoiding sociable contact with the staff and the carrying of a key. I did
not sleep in the wards, and the top hospital management knew what
my aims were. (p. ix)

There is a studied vagueness in this passage, Goffman's only
description of his method. What did Goffman do after he was
assistant to the athletic director, how did he avoid sociable
contact with the staff and how did their attitudes shape the
research, and what did the top hospital management think his
aims were (did they know his attitudes toward psychiatry)?

Beyond these technical questions there arise three issues
about the connection between Goffman's written reports and his
goals: 1) the lack of systematic description of the social institu-
tion being studied, 2) the lack of perspective on how participants
view their worlds, and 3) the effects of Goffman's theoretical
goals on his collection of data.

1. One reading these essays gains little *systematic* knowl­
edge about how St. Elizabeth's Hospital operates. For instance,
one does not learn about the physical layout of the hospital, its
appearance, how many and what kinds of personnel are em­
ployed (or incarcerated), what the typical day is like for the pa­tients or the staff, or which forms of therapy are used (cf. Strauss
et al., 1964). Rather, one is exposed to a tone of life and some
descriptive examples of what happens (or might happen), but
little that allows outsiders to picture the routine patterns of
behavior. In this sense *Asylums* veers from the assumptions of
"traditional" ethnography in which the presentation of the "whole
picture" of a culture is fundamental.

2. To Goffman, the goal is to discover how the world is
"subjectively experienced" by the patient. To the reader, the
book represents anything but. The essays represent how a
"sane" Goffman would himself experience a large mental hos­
pital if he was incarcerated against his will. Readers learn
precious little about how patients experience their own world or,
at the least, how they report this experience. Only rarely does
one gain a sense that these are people whose behavior was
seen as sufficiently strange ("dysfunctional") that they belonged
at St. Elizabeth's. The assumption is that these individuals use
Goffman's own experiential categories. He rarely role-plays
figures with "mental illnesses" himself, but has these figures
role-play sociologists:

... In actual practice almost all of the secondary adjustments I have
reported were carried on by the patient with an air of intelligent down­
to-earth determination, sufficient, once the full context was known, to
make an outsider feel at home, in a community much more similar to
others he has known than different from them. (p. 303)

St. Elizabeth's is filled with Goffman manques. Part of the limits
to the study's phenomenological validity stems from the fact that
the patients and staff were unaware of Goffman's goals, and so he was forced to rely upon behavioral traces, rather than focused responses. The "lived experience" of the patients was as opaque to him as his was to them.

3. Free from a need to depict a scene or personal responses to that scene, Goffman's ethnography is grounded in theoretical concepts of social organization and interaction: total institution, moral career, underlife, and secondary adjustments. In order to make his theoretical points (and perhaps because his "hidden" role did not permit detailed data collection), Goffman rarely presents field notes (one in "Characteristics of Total Institutions", pp. 71-72). He often relies on what we might term "as-if ethnography." Rather than detailing an occasion on which a set of events took place, he relies upon typifications of what "might" or often happens. Consider:

In mental hospitals, there always seem to be some patients who dramatically act against their own obvious self-interest: they drink water they have themselves first polluted; they overstuff on Thanksgiving and Christmas, so that on these days there are bound to be a few ruptured ulcers and clogged esophagi; they rush headfirst against the wall; they tear out their own sutures after a minor operation . . . . (p. 82)

One wonders whether Goffman actually witnessed those things that "always seem to happen." Precisely because these data caution us about accepting the normalized absurdity of the place, exact depiction seems particularly critical. This casual data presentation—data given "en passant"—helps Goffman rhetorically in asserting a theoretical point, free of the messy particulars of a situation, but also leads a reader to wonder precisely what is referenced and whether the data truly support the argument.

In sum, despite Goffman's status as one of the most important American sociologists of the twentieth century, he is not among the century's best ethnographers. His ethnography is casual, not methodologically thorough, and perhaps not to be trusted in providing a precise picture of this social institution. Ultimately Goffman wishes to provide a perspective, not a photograph. For a "fair" reading of life in an institution, other ethnographies must be relied upon. In the theory and in the presentation of the theory we find the glories of Goffman the "ethnographer."

GOFFMAN'S STYLE

Goffman's literary style has been robustly critiqued by sociologists and other savants. Goffman's ability to communicate is one of his most distinctive traits, when contrasted with much academic writing. As Manning remarks, Goffman's "conceptual approach, his use of metaphor and a literary method all contribute to the resonance of his work and to its essential ambiguity" (1976, 13). The apotheosis of Goffman as man-of-letters reached its zenith in Marshall Berman's glowing tribute to Relations in Public, on February 27, 1972. Berman claimed that Goffman was one of the greatest contemporary writers. He further suggested that, in his ability to communicate vividly the horror, anguish, and absurdity of modern life, Goffman is our generation's Kafka (Berman 1972). Berman is not alone in emphasizing that style plays off the substance of the Goffman's sermons. In contrast to reviews of most sociology (Reed 1989), it is commonplace for reviewers to comment on the quality of the writing. Some critics suggest that "his writing has always been more readable than his analysis memorable" (Ditton 1976, 331) and that "The fascination with Goffman rests . . . upon the peculiar way he goes about his work rather than on the mere naked content of what he is saying" (Lofland 1980, 24).

Underlying this is the belief that, as Berman suggests, style connects to content. Such a view has become increasingly accepted within literary criticism and anthropology (e.g., Clifford 1988; Geertz 1988) and even sociology (Van Maanen 1988; Gusfield 1976). Authors, even those tethered to the academic world, adapt personae in their writings, and these voices carry force beyond the words alone (Campbell 1975: 391; Bazerma 1981: 378). The style is both the person and the substance.
John Lofland and Peter Manning, writing in Jason Ditton's (1980) edited collection, *A View from Goffman*, refer to Kenneth Burke's concept "perspective by incongruity":

A method for gauging situations by verbal "atom cracking." That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category. . . . The metaphorical extension of perspective by incongruity involves casuistic stretching, since it interprets new situations by removing words from their "constitutional setting." . . . It is designed to "remoralize" by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy. (Burke 1964, 94-95)

The goal of this exercise is to make the familiar problematic, to violate expectations of readers, to capture a feeling of verisimilitude through use of metaphor, and to view the world with the eyes of a stranger (Lofland 1980, 26-27; Macintyre 1969, 447; Manning 1976, 19). As Davis (1971, 309) suggests, theories that are defined as "interesting" involve denying assumptions of their audience. Perspective by incongruity typically involves a humorous or ironic stance, and provokes a risible response by the audience; in Burke's term it relies on "a methodology of the pun" (Burke 1964, 95).

**THE COMEDIC GOFFMAN**

Although the fact that Goffman (and *Asylums*) is funny has not been discussed in detail, it has been noted in passing. Rosenberg (1975, 21) speaks of "the characteristically Goffmanian punch line"; Pfautz (1962, 556), reviewing *Asylums*, notes "Goffman's happy penchant for colorfully conceptualizing . . . salient latent structures and processes," and Dawe (1973, 248) refers to Goffman as a "sociological jester."

His writings are laden with humor, but humor of a particular sort—a dark wit (Berman 1972) of sarcasm, satire, and irony. These voices are central to our treatment of *Asylums*, as we shed light (or heat) on the effects of humor of Goffman's persona and argument. We claim that his humorous tones permit a "partisan view," but simultaneously lead to questions about his political commitments and concern about ambiguous meanings.

**SARCASM**

Perhaps the least kindly form of humor (and, for many, the most annoying) is sarcasm. Sarcasm, often lumped with satire, has rarely been studied as a humorous phenomenon in its own right, but, according to Donald Ball, sarcasm is a distinct style of discourse: a "societal form" in the Simmelian sense (Ball 1965, 190). While Ball does not provide a formal definition of sarcasm, he notes it is "a common everyday linguistic form of biting communication" (Ball 1965, 191). The core of sarcasm (as opposed to other forms of humorous expression) is open hostility or contempt, and, because of its bitterness, sarcasm is not always experienced as funny. As incongruous communication, it is linked to humor (Berlyne 1969)—often involving saying the opposite of what is meant; that is, an "inversion" (Fowler 1926). Sarcasm announces a position, the attitude of the rhetor toward the target. This position is not often inherent in the denotative meanings of the words themselves. The context and persona (of writers) and the non-verbal and paraverbal expressions (of speakers) must convey the message. The person who disagrees may "sarcastically" respond "Right," when what is meant is "Wrong." Consequently, sarcasm may miss its target with an unsympathetic or naive audience.

With an audience that is potentially sympathetic or that identifies with the "sarcastor" (Ball 1965, 192), sarcastic comments have considerable power and can shape attitudes. Goodchilds (1959), in an experimental study of reactions to humor, discovered that a "sarcastic wit" was more influential, and less popular, than a "clowning wit." One trades one's halo to do the devil's business. Effective though it is, some negativity rubs off on the sarcastor.

The existence of a sarcastic tone in the works of Goffman has been noted in reviews. Caudill (1962, 368) in his generally favor-
able review of Asylums, refers to Goffman's use of "biting concepts." Macintyre (1969, 447) remarks on "Goffman's sometimes sour, sometimes bitchy . . . determination."

In "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions" Goffman attempts to demonstrate that total institutions of different emotional stripes have remarkable structural and interactional similarities. Yet, his goal extends beyond a dispassionate comparative sociology. Goffman wishes to uncover the self-protective, altruistic ideologies that swaddle most of these institutions. The primary goal of total institutions is to protect the institutions, not to help their "clients." Goffman proposes no ameliorative solutions, no way of humanizing these sites. In the guise of analysis, he savages them.

Unprivileging. A common rhetorical technique in sarcasm is to remove the privileged status, uncovering taken-for-granted reality. In the case of mental hospitals, this means suggesting that one should accept their own justifications provisionally. All claims for which we lack personal empirical judgement (deriving from a third-party claim) could be treated in this way; in reality, only some are. Just as journalists use "allegedly" and "unreportedly" to separate loony or self-serving statements from claims they consider "factual" and "legitimate," Goffman does the same with psychiatric practice, a realm that is accustomed to being treated with respect. Consider:

[T]he various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution. (p. 6; emphasis added)

The process of entrance typically brings other kinds of loss and mortification as well. We very generally find staff employing what are called admission procedures . . . . Admission procedures might better be called "trimming" or "programming" because in thus being squared away the new arrival allows himself to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations. (p. 16, emphasis added)

These statements undercut claims of unquestioned authority of the keepers of these institutions, and gain resonance from Goffman's own authority derived from having observed these practices in person.

Absurd compliments. The "misplaced" adjective similarly conveys a skepticism of the target. This is harder to achieve in writing than in speech because of the difficulty in establishing cues conveying the intended frame. With a shared sense of context, it can be achieved. While the text read seriously is complimentary, readers should not read "seriously." Consider:

Mental hospitals stand out . . . because the staff pointedly establish themselves as specialists in the knowledge of human nature, who diagnose and prescribe on the basis of this intelligence. Hence in the standard psychiatric textbooks there are chapters on "psychodynamics" and "psychotherapy" which provide charmingly explicit formulations of the "nature" of human nature. (p. 89)

Charmingly is a factious way to characterize claims that Goffman believes are unwarranted. This literary terrorism—an apparently innocent package is, in truth, a bomb.

The Cutting Metaphor. Perhaps the most effective tool of the sarcaster is the metaphor that casts an admired target in a hostile light. Mark Twain's mot that "there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress" (Twain 1897) is a quintessential instance of sarcastic "guilt by association." Goffman uses this technique throughout his essay to discredit the standing of the mental hospital. Consider:

A total institution is like a finishing school, but one that has many refinements and is little refined. (pp. 41-42)

If the ordinary activities in total institutions can be said to torture time, [playful activities] mercifully kill it . . . . Every total institution can be seen as a kind of dead sea in which little islands of vivid, encapturing activity appear. (p. 69)

Many total institutions, most of the time, seem to function merely as storage dumps for inmates . . . . Given the physiological characteristics of the human organism, it is obvious that certain requirements must be met if any continued use is to be made of people. But this, of course, is the case with inanimate objects, too; the temperature of any storehouse must be regulated, regardless of whether people or things are stored. (pp. 74-75)
To refer to a mental institution as a storage dump, dead sea, finishing school, or Potemkin village (p. 103) skewers the privileged claim. The "hospital" is not what it alleges; its pretense is negated through rhetoric.

**Sarcastic arguments.** The previous examples have used dramatic imagery to undercut claims, but sarcasm can also be embedded in argumentation. The biting tone, while not to be found in a single word or phrase, is inherent in the text. The persona's hostility toward the target is made palpable by the dismissal of the target's argument. Consider:

There is always the danger that an inmate will appear human; if what are felt to be hardships must be inflicted on the inmate, then sympathetic staff will suffer... And, on the other hand, if an inmate breaks a rule, the staff's conceiving of him as a human being may increase their sense that injury has been done to their moral world: expecting a "reasonable" response from a reasonable creature, the staff may feel incensed, affronted, and challenged when the inmate does not conduct himself properly. (pp. 81-82)

"In mental hospitals we find the engaging phenomenon of the staff using stereotyped psychiatric terminology in talking to each other or to patients but chiding patients for being "intellectualistic" and for avoiding the issues when they use this language, too. (p. 97; see also Wiley 1989)

While one could not fairly claim that these passages raise laughter, they are sarcastic and sardonic. If one accepts that Goffman witnessed behaviors that led to these conclusions (the claim he puts forth by virtue of his presence in the hospital), then one is likely to be sympathetic to his lack of sympathy. His anger is not aimed at the practitioners who put this into place (see p. 124), but to the functional requirements of the system that "necessarily" gave rise to the dehumanization of patients.

**SATIRE**

The satirist has a painfully difficult task. By indirect he (satire, like much humor, has been a male domain) must undercut the self-satisfied. More than most humor, satire has the reputation of being subtle, so subtle that many miss it (a fate attributed to some writings of Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe). In its rhetorical force it overlaps with sarcasm, and some communications are both satiric and sarcastic, and others are either sarcastic or satiric.

Satire is, at its root, profoundly moral; it opts for a morality that we all supposedly hold, but which, as hypocrites, too often we ignore. By indirect it argues for moral "ought claims." The satirist is acutely aware of the gap between the way that things are and the way they should be (Pollard 1970, 3), and aims to correct this through the weapon of satire (Elliott 1960). The satirist is the minister of the mordant.

While definitions of "satire" are wondrously imprecise, and often not even attempted, we shall define satire as "a playfully critical distortion of the familiar" (Feinberg 1963, 7). Satire is playful, critical, distorted, and familiar. Unlike sarcasm, it is not necessarily hostile or biting (e.g., gentle satire) and it always has a moral component.

That Goffman used his bully pulpit to condemn the falsity of society has not been missed (e.g. Sennett 1973, 31). When Hall (1977, 542) suggests that Goffman has a disenchanted view of society or when Davis (1975, 602) suggests that Goffman is a social destructionist, what is suggested is that Goffman will not accept the claims of the social system at their face value. Like any good satirist, he insists on holding up a mirror to society, showing hypocrisy. While this leads some to see him as cynical (Rosenberg 1975, 21; Dawe 1973, 246), it could also be taken as the howl of a true believer. As Berman suggests, in "The Underlife of a Public Institution," Goffman's concern is the ways and means of resistance to structured indignities of a totalistic institution (1972, 2). No wonder Berman should link Goffman to Kafka as a corrosive critic of the immorality and inhumanity of modernism.

"The Underlife of a Public Institution" is a portrait of how the inmates run the asylum—and how they quite legitimately do so. Read in conjunction with his destruction of the moral basis of mental hospitals in "On The Characteristics of Total Institutions,"
this essay propounds the thesis that the patients' organization may be more humane than the nostrums their doctors prescribe. The "reality" of life in the hospital is a tonic for what should be occurring there.

Of all the essays in Asylums, "The Underlife" is the most ethnographically rich, as, indeed, it needs to be to present the behaviors and actions of the inhabitants of this underworld. It is also the most laughable, almost farcical in some of its "loonier" moments. It is within that tradition of accounts (e.g., One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest; King of Hearts) in which mental patients serve as moral exemplars for the rest of us. Unlike much satire (as exemplified by Gulliver's Travels) in which the satirist creates a world of his choosing, Goffman has his world, but it is a world that is known through such stereotypical and brutal visions that his implicit claim that these inhabitants are as normal as we strikes with immense force, for it carries the implication that we are as "mad" as they.

The Metaphor of Place. One technique that Goffman borrows from other satirists is to suggest that what is officially one kind of place is "honestly" another quite dissimilar. Swift's treatment of the Grand Academy at Lagado (in Book Three of Gulliver's Travels) reveals it to be not a university but dilapidated hovels in which madmen reside. Goffman takes the mental hospital and turns it into a university, referring to the "campus" (p. 268) and "campus wheels." (p. 217) Elsewhere the hospital is made a "drunk tank" (p. 216). Still again, it becomes a "poor house" in times of economic uncertainty:

[One] group were Negroes: some of these who so wished were able to some degree to cross the class and color line, cliquing with and dating white patients, and receiving from the psychiatric staff some of the middle-class professional conversation and treatment denied them outside the hospital. [Another] group were the homosexuals: incarcerated for their proclivities, they found a one-sexed dormitory life awaiting them, with concomitant sexual opportunities. (p. 217)

What is "officially" one kind of place is transformed through metaphor (both satiric and sarcastic) to something unexpected.

The Metaphor of Person. For the satirist, people are not always what they seem: the perfect become flawed, the flawed perfect. Just as a hospital is not always a hospital, so the mentally ill are not always mentally ill; they are really cagey actors out for rewards that make life bearable:

It was widely known by parole patients that at the end of charitable shows at the theater hall cigarettes or candy would probably be given out at the door, as the patient audience filed out. Bored by some of these shows, some patients would come a few minutes before closing time in order to file out with the others; still others would manage to get back into the line several times and make the whole occasion more than ordinarily worth-while. Staff were of course aware of these practices, and late-comers to some of the hospital-wide patient dances were locked out, the assumption being that they timed their arrival so as to be able to eat and run. The Jewish Welfare women apparently served brunch after the weekly morning service and one patient claimed that "by coming at the right time you can get the lunch and miss the service." (p. 212)

Such strategies convey slapstick, as one imagines a clever Charlie Chaplin cunningly sneaking into the theater only to file out again, as guards guard the door. The strategies became a game (p. 285).

Therapy was also transformed into something other than it was supposed to be as patients "made-do" with their secondary adjustments:

Some patients even managed to find hidden values in insulin shock therapy: patients receiving insulin shock were allowed in bed all morning
in the insulin ward, a pleasure impossible in most other wards, and were treated quite like patients by nurses there. (p. 223)

In Central Hospital the chief forms of psychotherapy were group therapy, dance therapy, and psychodrama. All were conducted in a relatively indulgent atmosphere and tended to recruit the kinds of patients who were interested in contact with the opposite sex. Psychodrama was especially workable because lights would be turned low during a performance. (p. 224)

Patients are skilled connivers, like the professional pickpocket, who has too much self-respect to pay for what he might need (p. 183).

Metaphors of Relations. Within Goffman's satiric vision is the belief that patients and staff are not striving for the same end, but are in battle against each other: "[For some patients] the hospital represented a kind of game situation in which one could pit oneself against the authorities, and some of the relationships that flourished seemed to do so partly because the participants enjoyed the intrigue of sustaining them" (p. 285). The patients work the system, sometimes using their symptoms for their own ends and slipping in and out of them at will:

Occasionally a patient in the role of someone out of contact would preferentially select a particular person as someone not to be out of contact with. (p. 258; emphasis added)

Almost all patients in the hospital, with the exception of the few preadolescents, formed a single cigarette system involving the right to request and the obligation to grant a light from a lighted cigarette. Very surprisingly, patients on the worst wards, sick enough to be mute for years, hostile enough to decline the offer of a cigarette, and distracted enough to forget to extinguish a lighted cigarette which had begun to scorch their hands, observed this system. A function of this system, of course, was that it saved patients from having to beseech an attendant for a light. (p. 283)

Even muteness, can be seen as a "defense" against staff, and was "grudgingly accepted as a legitimate mental symptom." (p. 257). Elements of mental dysfunction that might be seen as essential to the patient's character are presented as techniques for undercutting the staff, of denying the legitimacy of the institution.

Ultimately, the satire consists of a robust transformation of a privileged medical world into a illegitimate political world (pp. 299-300; 304-8). Recall the definition of satire as a playfully critical distortion of the familiar:

Participants decline in some way to accept the official view of what they should be putting into and getting out of the organization and, behind this, of what sort of self and world they are to accept for themselves. Where enthusiasm is expected, there will be apathy; where loyalty, there will be disaffection; where attendance, absenteeism; where robustness, some kind of illness; where deeds are to be done, varieties of inactivity. We find a multitude of homely little histories, each in its way a movement of liberty. . . . From the patient's point of view, to decline to exchange a word with the staff or with his fellow patients may be ample evidence of rejecting the institution's view of what and who he is; yet higher management may construe this alienative expression as just the sort of symptomatology the institution was established to deal with and as the best kind of evidence that the patient properly belongs where he now finds himself. In short, mental hospitalization outmaneuvers the patient, tending to rob him of the common expressions through which people hold off the embrace of organizations. . . . [w]hen a patient, whose clothes are taken from him each night, fills his pockets with bits of string and rolled up paper, and when he fights to keep these possessions in spite of the consequent inconvenience to those who must regularly go through his pockets, he is usually seen as engaging in symptomatic behavior befitting a very sick patient, not as someone who is attempting to stand apart from the place accorded him. (pp. 304-8)

This is brilliant, corrosive satire. That it is composed within the privileged tradition of academic style (as Gulliver's Travels was ostensibly a traveller's account) means that Goffman plays off the genre, and can report quite ludicrous happenings as if they are most ordinary. The emotion that some claim that Goffman lacks (e.g., Berman 1972, 10) must be read into the text. Like much satire, the most absurd or outrageous events are depicted in a deliberately unremarkable style. That Goffman claims (like Lemuel Gulliver) that he was there—in reality, not in fiction—
increases the power of the voice (see Geertz 1988). The measured academic style magnifies the attacks.

**IRONY**

Irony, like satire or sarcasm, is difficult to define (Booth 1974, 2) and has numerous subtypes (Handwerk 1985). In general, irony refers to the technique of using incongruity to suggest a disjunction between reality and expectations; saying one thing and meaning another (with the audience aware of both). In this there is a close connection between satire and irony, so much so that irony is typically considered a major component of satire (Worcester 1969; Pollard 1970, 66). Yet, unlike satire, criticism of the status quo is not necessarily implied, just as satire need not be based upon a verbal incongruity. Some satire is not ironic; some irony lacks satiric bite.

Discussions of Goffman’s use of “perspective by incongruity” refer to his ironic stance. Manning (1976, 16) describes Goffman’s irony in seeking “to have the reader understand that [certain] phenomena are all that he suggests they are not.” Hollingshead (1962, 185) specifically notes Goffman’s “delicate irony” in Asylums, while Manning (1980: 265) refers to this same collection as revealing “cutting irony.” Cutting or delicate, Goffman uses an ironic stance throughout Asylums.

Perhaps the ironic stance is most evident in the final essay in Asylums, the ironically labelled “The Medical Model and Mental Hospitalization: Some Notes on the Vicissitudes of the Tinkering Trades.” This essay presents a decidedly off-kilter view of psychiatric practice. The essay, in its ironic persona, has two tonal segments. Goffman begins by describing the processes involved in repair, a metaphor he contends describes medicine. People, like cars, are brought into a workshop and fixed.

By the middle of the essay, Goffman's tone subtly shifts from seeing the doctor as Mr. Goodwrench to describing the psychiatrist as The Man. Patients are like autos, in part because they need to be fixed (comedic irony), but also because the fixer has total control over what can be done to them: a Buick has no privileged status in its relationship with the mechanic (satiric irony). Goffman guilds from wry amusement to sardonic outrage. As Dawe (1973, 249) notes, referring to the change in tone in Goffman’s writing revealed in Relations in Public, but equally applicable to “The Medical Model . . .”, Goffman’s writing shifts from “social comedy” to “sheer terror.”

**Humorous Irony.** Consider, for lightness of tone, these incongruities suggested in the early pages of the essay:

1. The body is one possession that cannot be left under the care of the server while the client goes about his other business. (p. 341)
2. Due to medical ethics, a physician cannot advise a patient to junk the badly damaged or very worn object his body may have become (as can those who service other types of objects), although the physician may tacitly give such advice to other interested parties. (p. 342)

These passages are written with a gently ironic touch. The body may be a damaged object, but the ways in which it is not are theoretically rich for the sociologist. In these passages, one can not claim that Goffman is saying that the medical profession is other than what it must be, given bodily reality.

**Satiric Irony.** When Goffman turns his attention from medicine to psychiatry his gaze becomes a glare. From his deep suspicion of psychiatry, Goffman is dubious that psychiatrists really fix these human machines:

If we view the mentally ill as persons that others have had a special kind of trouble with, then the custodial role of the hospital . . . is understandable and, many would feel, justifiable; the point here, however, is that a service to the patient’s kin, neighborhood, or employer is not necessarily . . . a service, especially not a medical service, to the inmate. Instead of a server and the served, we find a governor and the governed, an officer and those subject to him. (p. 353)

Here, Goffman is operating within that rhetorical domain in which sarcasm, satire, and irony are joined, but still sounding like a social scientist. His partisanship is clear, and has gained legitimacy by his presence at the scene of the crime—the crime
being the total domination of the patient by the psychiatrist, even when the patient is supposed to be a client of that psychiatrist:

None of a patient's business, then, is none of the psychiatrist's business; nothing ought to be held back from the psychiatrist as irrelevant to his job. (p. 358)

Psychiatric staff share with policemen the peculiar occupational task of hectoring and moralizing adults; the necessity of submitting to these lectures is one of the consequences of committing acts against the community's social order. (p. 366)

Finally, there are heart-warming stories of impossible patients who finally came to form a good relationship with an understanding doctor and thereafter dramatically improved. As with the other of exemplary tales, these relationship stories seem to center on proof of the rightness of the position taken by staff. [Footnote: Patients, of course, have their own set of exemplary tales almost equally discrediting of staff.] (p. 374)

These announcements have undeniable power as typifications, but the real brutality of Goffman's satire comes when he, as observer, describes the hideous falseness of the euphemisms and hypocrisy of psychiatric "rationalizations" in this world "relatively uncontrolled in barbarity" (p. 378):

[T]o cite a relatively extreme example I have seen a therapist deal with a Negro patient's complaints about race relations in a partially segregated hospital by telling the patient that he must ask himself why he, among all the other Negroes present, chose this particular moment to express this feeling, and what this expression could mean about him as a person, apart from the state of race relations in the hospital at the time. (pp. 376-77)

The punishment of being sent to a worse ward is described as transferring a patient to a ward whose arrangements he can cope with, and the isolation cell or "hole" is described as a place where the patient will be able to feel comfortable with his inability to handle his acting-out impulses. Making a ward quiet at night through the forced taking of drugs, which permits reduced night staffing, is called medication or sedative treatment. Women long since unable to perform such routine medical tasks as taking bloods are called nurses and wear nursing uniforms; men trained as general practitioners are called psychiatrists. (p. 381)

Psychiatrists have endless tricks to make their patients fall in line, and are facile with justifications for failure. It is all a facade. The goal of the hospital is to uncover a crime that fits the punishment, and recreate the character of the inmate to fit that crime (p. 385). This is bitter writing—no social comedy here. The irony is that what "allegedly" is designed to perform moral acts has quite different effects.

GOFFMAN AS PARTISAN

It is a signal irony that both Alvin Gouldner (1968) and Erving Goffman consider themselves to be sociological "partisans." Equally ironically, Goffman is often seen as "on the side of the system" (Dawe 1973, 251; see also Gouldner 1970). Collins and Makowsky (1978, 235) wrote:

He explores the underside of life, but he is not really sympathetic to the underdog. Asylums does not condemn hospital personnel for destroying the selves of mental patients, but explains their behavior in terms of the exigencies of a necessarily bureaucratic total institution.

If the argument is that Goffman didn't experience hospital employees as "evil," this is true enough, and rather silly. Instead, he presents the institutions as dehumanizing because of its structure and ideology. In Asylums, we read both the corrosive power of his critique and some reasons why it may not have been read as such. Consider passages from the Conclusion:

I do not mean to imply that the application of the [medical-service] model has not sometimes proved useful to those institutionalized as patients. The presence of medical personnel in asylums has no doubt served to stay somewhat the hand of the attendant. (p. 383)

The point is not that the hospital is a hateful place for patients but that for the patient to express hatred of it is to give evidence that his place in it is justified and that he is not yet ready to leave it. (p. 385)

Mental patients can find themselves in a special bind. To get out of the hospital, or to ease their life within it, they must show acceptance of the place accorded them, and the place accorded them is to support
the occupational role of those who appear to force this bargain. This self-alienating moral servitude, which perhaps helps to account for some inmates becoming mentally confused, is achieved by invoking the great tradition of the expert servicing relation, especially its medical variety. Mental patients can find themselves crushed by the weight of a service ideal that eases life for the rest of us. (p. 386)

Like so many satirists, Gottman finds that this audience does not always "get" the message (at least, they don't get the message that we get). The problem, evident in these passages, is that Goffman writes with tongue-in-cheek, and perhaps in doing so overestimates his audience. It is not that Goffman doesn't care how he is viewed or that he presents both sides (Posner 1978, 67, 73), but that the connotations of irony, satire, and sarcasm can be misread (Johnson 1966). It is a subtle form of persuasion (Sutherland 1958, 5). The effective rhetor is the one who uses language in such a way that it speaks to an audience, a community (Overington 1977, 158).

Thus, in the first passage, Goffman admits the utility of the medical model. But why? To stay the hand of the attendant. The second passage doesn't deny that the hospital is a hateful place (we know from his ethnography that it is), but says that to admit it makes the patient's situation that much worse. In the final passage, acceptance of "the great tradition of the expert servicing relation" leads to confusion ("mental illness"), which implies that greatness adheres to the tradition, not to the relation. The text demands close reading and the active involvement of the reader.

We read Asylums as a political tract, aimed, in part, as unmasking the "fraud" of mental hospitals and psychiatric practice. It does not aim to demean individuals, but it does take on this system and those elements of the outside world that are being conveniently by the existence of the system. The mental institution is functional like the institution of slavery is functional, it makes life easier for some at the expense of others. Whereas Goffman adopts a "cooly detached" persona—a complaint that Gouldner (1968, 105) levelled at Becker—his role as partisan may be stronger for that. He has just emerged from "behind the lines" with his scalp intact and his evidence uncontaminated by the visions of others. The problem is for his readers to recognize the existence of his broad critique.

ETHNOGRAPHIC LAUGHS

As our discussion of Asylums has indicated, certain types of humor can be effectively used in ethnographic writing, although these techniques are not without their danger. Humor draws an audience, and may be an effective rhetorical tool by which social and political arguments can be made. Yet, because these techniques often work by indirection, some audiences "misread" the argument.

The danger derived from indirection seems particularly relevant with regard to ethnographic writing. The standard mode of writing in ethnography is the "realist tale"—the account that purports to be "true," because of the presence and the objectivity of the author. In sarcasm, satire, and irony, objectivity is jettisoned. "Truth" represents a lower or higher ideal—humor is a framing technique of the kind in which Goffman luxuriates in the pages of Frame Analysis. This leads readers to question the fairness of the account as description, and, unless the author can get us on his side, the wisdom of the charges. Given that sarcasm, satire, and irony do not present suggestions for change or ways to right the wrongs (Posner 1978, 72), those readers who might be sympathetic to the radicalness of the critique, now see the argument, lacking a call for change, as supporting the status quo. As negative statements, such humorous techniques deny the ameliorative optimism that many social change agents share.

It is the power of satiric humor as a tool for memorable criticism, for denying us the possibility that the target can be seen as anything else but ludicrous, that ignores the possibility of a positive integration. That must come from the reader. Often the humorist implies that there are no good solutions (and, here, the problem of the mentally ill may be just such an intractable issue).
Perhaps readers will now return to Goffman's Asylums, re-reading it for its styles and for its power, seeing it as a literary experiment that depends on the triangulated relations between author, audience, and subjects. It would be more desirable still if other ethnographers would continue that experimentation evident in Goffman's oeuvre. Humor need not be inconsistent with academic writing. Ethnography is literature; let us hope that more of it can be good literature.

NOTES

1. One recalls Alvin Gouldner's (1968) screed, "The Sociologist as Partisan," penned in attack on Howard Becker's (1967) "Whose Side Are We On?" Gouldner uses "partisan" with the first meaning, without the hint of ironic subversion that one finds in Goffman. Goffman's "partisan," content to present sly, ambiguous calls to arms, is not Gouldner's street fighter.

2. In "Role Distance" Goffman refers to "brief observations in the medical building of a mental hospital [presumably St. Elizabeth's] and the operating rooms of a suburban community hospital [presumably Herrick Memorial Hospital, Berkeley, California]" (Goffman 1961b, 117). The references to this body of research were few and far-between, and there is no clue as to what "brief" might mean. Apparently Goffman also did some observations in Las Vegas casinos during the 1970s, but we are unaware of published analyses of this data.

3. Goffman (1989) avers that "you have to be young to do field work. It's harder to be an ass when you're old."

4. This document, "Communication Conduct in an Island Community" (1953), is a more traditionally ethnographic in tone and in use of data. It is like Asylums in that Goffman's primary goal is not the description of life in a small town in the Celtic fringe, but to examine demeanor and interaction: questions that were pursued in Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), which relies only occasionally on the material in the dissertation. Both the dissertation and the essays in Asylums are "theoretical ethnographies." Even in his dissertation one can occasionally see flashes of wit that are given free rein in his published writings.

5. Whatever else Asylums might be, it is not an instance of a "confessional tale" (Van Maanen 1988). The reader rarely sees Goffman in these adventures, thus, it is a considerable shock when we read: "I drank a few times on the grounds both with attendants and with patients." p.267. More typical is a coy reference to the same issue within the same essay, "I knew an extremely resourceful alcoholic who would smuggle in a pint of vodka, put some in a paper drinking cup, and sit on the most exposed part of the lawn he could find, slowly getting drunk; at such times he took pleasure in offering hospitality to persons of semi-staff status." p.313, emphasis added.

6. According to Bail (1965, 192): "Etnologically, sarcasm comes from the Greek sarkazein, to speak bitterly—literally, to tear flesh."

7. Perhaps the classic instance of this is Freud's. When finally permitted to leave Vienna after the Anschluss, Freud was forced to sign a document claiming no ill treatment by the German authorities. Freud asked to add a sentence to the document: "I can heartily recommend the Gestapo to anyone" (Jones 1957, 226).

8. Richter remarks "Definitions of the comic serve the sole purpose of being themselves comic" (Worcester 1969, 10).

REFERENCES


HUMOR IN GOFFMAN'S ASYLUMS

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