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By Marshall Ledger

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LIKE A JOYCEAN LANDSCAPE, GOFFMAN'S UNIVERSE IS FECUND WITH CHARACTERS AND BITS AND PIECES OF ORDINARINESS.

that it does not go to pieces and make everyone crazy. The most commonplace exchanges demonstrate the point. Here is one such exchange, analyzed by Goffman in his latest book, *Forms of Talk*, published last year by the University of Pennsylvania Press (and nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award):

“Do you have the time?”

“Sure. It’s five o’clock.”

“Thanks.”

(Gesture) “It’s okay.”

The question, Goffman observes, could have been put this way: “What’s the time?” But it is couched more smoothly because it is, in fact, an intrusion, “encroaching on another with a demand,” as Goffman puts it. The response not only provides an answer, it includes the right tone; the smoothness of the reply is recognized for its intent and is deemed acceptable. The gratitude expressed is for both the information supplied and the grace with which the intrusion was accepted. And the final expression suggests that “enough gratitude has been displayed” and that the inquirer “is to be counted a properly feeling person.”

According to Goffman, this interchange preserves the “tacit claims” of the speakers to good character and social worth and territoriality. For something else happens if the response to the question about the time is merely “yes.” The questioner is forced to say, “Can you tell me it?” and feels insulted or played with. Other expressions must then be brought into play to repair the rupture. To Goffman, social stability is constantly endangered by those who subvert social situations. Still, he feels, people want to avoid embarrassment at all costs, so they generally behave themselves. They conform to the conventions necessary to keep events running smoothly, and they hasten to patch them up when they are torn. They may even repress a personal insult and pretend that the form has not been threatened.

No encapsulation of Goffman’s ideas, however, can do justice to the real complexity of his books. His writing resists compression. He discusses “What’s the time? ‘Five o’clock’” and its variants for nearly 60 pages with a virtuosity and attention to nuance that humbles normal academic subtlety. His essays call to mind the retort attributed to James Joyce when the novelist was asked if his subject matter was not trivial: “It’s quatrivial.” This is not to say they are perfect. He lays out categories so extensively that the narrative grinds to a halt, even as we admire how he exhausts the possibilities. And he creates a body of jargon in every work, benumbing us, even as he is dazzling us with metaphors, anecdotes, high style and low style deliberately juxtaposed, self-humor, fun (for instance, a parody of Biblical style), and false humility, which he surely expects the reader to see through. Like a Joycean landscape, Goffman’s universe—is both content and style—is fecund with characters and details, bits and pieces of ordinariness seen in fragments, fragments which, when put together, suggest a coherence.

Or—and this is one reason why it is absurd to synopsize Goffman—perhaps they do not.

Consider his analysis of one form of talk, “The Lecture,” which Goffman actually delivered as a lecture. He distinguishes between “the business at hand” (the spoken text) and “the custard of interaction in which the business is embedded” (the social event at which the text is delivered). In passing, he observes that both are termed a lecture. The speaker arrives with a text and a “textual self,” that is, one who is going to read the text—usually himself, although a pinch-hitter can also do the job. What interests Goffman, however, are the speaker’s deviations from the role of reader, deviations which individualize his performance and cannot be imitated. He may depart from the “pomp of presentation” to make parenthetical remarks. He may scan his next cluster of words, then make eye contact while reciting it, giving the illusion of “fresh talk.” He may sip from a glass of water or light a cigarette to mark the transition from “aloud reading” to the fresh talk of answering questions. He may make remarks which fit the mood of the occasion and the particular interests of the audience before him. He may give vocal cues to indicate irony or passion, which would be difficult to perceive in a printed text and confusing for a stand-in to express (“Whose irony would the stand-in be expressing, Goffman asks, “whose passion?”). By such “embroidery,” the speaker “exposes himself to the audience” and “addresses the occasion,” says Goffman. “In both ways, he gives himself up to the situation.”

Through the speaker’s departures from his “textual self,” the audience comes to apprehend him, Goffman continues. The speaker stands as a “broker” between the audience and his message. His asides and interruptions make him appear to be one with his audience, to be able to wear his learning lightly, leading the audience to come to feel “fully equal to the task of appreciation,” says Goffman. “In thus gaining access to an authority, the audience also gains ritual access to the subject matter over which the speaker has command. (Substantive access is quite another matter.)”

“The Lecture” is rife with shrewd observations. A speaker writes out a text in order to render it in spoken prose “to foster the feeling that something like fresh talk is occurring.” The delivery must be “hypersmooth” because of what Goffman calls a paradox: minor hitches, common but mostly unnoticed in conversation, become glaring in reading aloud, so the speaker tries to eliminate them to give the impression of fresh talk. But a practiced delivery also makes him vulnerable. If he misconstrues a word or mark of punctuation, he may reveal his text. “The eventual, and necessary, correction of that reading will expose the speaker as having all along faked the appearance of being in touch with the thoughts his utterances were conveying. As all of you know, this can be a little embarrassing.” When the speaker is at his wittiest, and seemingly most responsive to the particular occasion, he may be the least so, Goffman warns, since the clever remark or epigram may have been tested through time for use at a specific place in the text: “At this moment of obvious relevance, it is rarely appreciated that anecdotes are specialized for aptness.” When time runs short, a speaker may turn pages rapidly and summarize his text spontaneously, “projecting the rather touching plea that he be given credit for what he could have imparted.”

If all goes well, that is, if the speaker has projected an engaging “speaking personality,” his audience credits him as having “intelligence, wit, and charm” as part of “his own internally encompassed character.” For what he has done has not only provided “vivacious access” to himself, but he has presented a “model” of how to do that—and in so doing, he has made his audience feel capable of handling his subject matter.

Despite a few contemptuous phrases for the masterful lecturer—Goffman speaks of the “shrewd reader” who “trumps up an audience-usable self to do the speaking”—the successful lecture leads both audience and speaker “to treat lecturing, and what is lectured about, as serious, real matters.” And from this observation, Goff-
man steps onto a different, philosophical plateau.

The sum of all of the illusions is not entertainment or even information, he suggests. When everything clicks, the lecturer and audience “join in affirming that organized talking can reflect, express, delineate, portray—if not come to grips with—the real world, and that, finally, there is a real, structured, somewhat unitary world out there to comprehend,” he says. “And here, surely, we have the lecturer’s real contract,” which is to “project the assumption that through lecturing, a meaningful picture of some part of the world can be conveyed, and that the talker can have access to a picture worth conveying.”

The point, he feels, is worth iterating twice more: “There is structure to the world. … This structure can be perceived and reported, and, therefore, … speaking before an audience and listening to a speaker are reasonable things to do. … Valid pictures are possible.”

Then he upsets his neat conclusion with a final sentence: “Give some thought to the possibility that this shared presupposition is only that, and that after a speech, the speaker and the audience rightfully return to the flickering, cross-purposed, messy irresolution of their unknowable circumstances.”

All through “The Lecture,” Goffman impresses us with his ability to see the figure in the carpet, calling perhaps disconcerting attention to our pretenses: for instance, the pretense that the speech is a “once-only” performance. Or the pretense that a speaker who is apparently photographing is “fully caught up” with the audience (“don’t count on it,” he warns). Or the way a prominent speaker, presumably invited because he has something to say, is, more to the root of the matter, a shill for the sponsoring organization, whose intent is to gain public approval, “some recognition of their presence and their mission.” As he puts it, “In a sense, then, an institution’s advertising isn’t done in response to the anticipated presence of a well-known figure; rather, a well-known figure is useful in order to have something present that warrants wide advertising.” Such observations seem to stream from Goffman. They amount to the conveyable part of his academic discipline, partly invented from need. It is style come to the extreme and become content, like the stem of an Art-Nouveau flower which initially seems to function as an elaborate frame for the flower but, on closer inspection, is seen to usurp the attention.

The only defect of “The Lecture” is the title. It should have been called “The Last Lecture” because, once the structure of lecturing has been described by the content and the form of the lecture, no one can then step up to do it without weakly imitating Goffman. The next lecturer cannot even come on if as a performer because Goffman has anticipated that as well. Having begun his lecture by acknowledging that the content of the lecture is all the things that go on while he delivers it, he comes close to suggesting that there is a self-reflexiveness which could lead him into an endless regression of observation. Trapped within the form, he cannot intentionally execute it badly by means of illustrating his point; otherwise, “he becomes a performing speaker, not a speaker performing.” Moreover, “he who attempts such breaching, and succeeds, should have come to the occasion dressed in tights, carrying a lute, who attempts such evasion and fails—as is likely—is just a plain schmuck, and it would be better had he not come to the occasion at all.” He asks whether he is “giving a lecture or a lecture-hall exhibition,” then asks further, “Is it possible to raise that question directly without ceasing to lecture?”

As much as about lectures, Goffman is talking about his own behavior, having us admire his control, since he makes us aware that he can break the conventions at any time yet chooses not to. He plays a cruel game, but, as he suggests, maybe there is nothing else.

Such an inward direction suggests that Goffman is withdrawing from the world “out there,” where he gets his material. The development of his scholarly career exhibits a similar movement. For his dissertation, he spent a year on one of the Shetland Islands. A few years later, he passed himself off as an assistant athletic director in a mental hospital (he was known only to the top administrators) and, from the experience, wrote Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates; this book, for its powerful combination of theory and empirical research, puts Goffman in a league with the major figures of the discipline, according to Robert Nisbet in Sociology as an Art Form.

But, ask observers of Goffman, when has he gotten his pants dirty since then? He seems to be going away from direct exchanges. He delivered “The Lecture”—which is face-to-face interaction of an attenuated sort—in 1976. In the same year, he came out with “Gender Advertisements,” a long essay with hundreds of pictures from magazines. The one essay in Forms of Talk that did not appear in an earlier form is “Radio Talk.” Twice as long as any of the other four essays, it is an analysis of boners and hitches by announcers and, in terms of human interaction, reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s The Unnamable, in which man is reduced to a brain and a mouth. In another essay, Goffman uses as an example a faceless telephone exchange between himself and someone who dialed his number by mistake. (In rendering the conversation, Goffman gives his actual telephone number. That is the sort of detail he does not take lightly, but what does he mean by it?)

For Goffman, life around his scholarship has followed suit. For some years now, he has not permitted reporters to interview him, photographers to take his picture, or recorders to tape his words. (The one exception is an interview he granted when he became president of continued
ONE COLLEAGUE SAYS THAT SINCE GOFFMAN'S ALWAYS OBSERVING, HE'S HARD TO DEAL WITH - 'A CRITIC OF THE LEAST MOMENT.'

the American Sociological Association earlier this year, a requirement of the position, although observers of Goffman are mystified as to why he accepted the post. In his defense, some feel that, as an observer who may again some day be required to infiltrate situations, he harms himself by being recognized. Maybe he does not want to relinquish control. A student of embarrassment, he might be quicker than most to be embarrassed by his own gaffes. In "The Lecture," he suggests he is afraid of what his audience might think of him if he gets carried away demonstrating fault as a lecturer. He says he saw Konrad Lorenz, the ethologist, illustrate bird behavior with his whole body, "something of the sort that only Lorenz can get away with doing, and he not without leaving a confirming residue in his reputation."

When I asked for an interview, Goffman was so direct that I found it difficult to disbelieve him. He said he would discuss his work, not his thoughts about his work or himself, because the latter "makes an entity from something that isn't." He claimed that I would give "meaning and direction" to life, when life did not rightly have those qualities. On the other hand, he enjoys reading such writing but wants "no hand in producing it," he said: "I love publicity—without asking for it." Some day, he added, he may change his mind. For now, he said he did not care to contribute to "easy repute," and he objected that a publication focusing on such a small part of the world as a college campus necessarily tends to make the insignificant look important. He, of all people, lost me there.

Between my curses, I must confess to some respect for his position. On occasion, he even seems to be right. He is acutely aware of contexts; in his audience feel, could be misconstrued if others heard them. A graduate student proposed to dwell with a minority group to get material for a dissertation. Goffman is said to have suggested in so many words that the student would be throwing away his career—not a racist suggestion, the student says, but making the point that a scholar specializing in the stigmatized has no academic future. (A strange position, perhaps, from one who made his reputation studying the handicapped and the insane.)

Once Goffman, appearing as a guest panelist at a conference in Wytheville, Va., rebuffed a reporter. Her newspaper was infuriated. How he turned her down, whether the reporter was shamed in front of others, is not clear, but the newspaper proceeded to attack him editorially. His action, however, seems at least consistent with his ideas as expressed in the newspaper articles about him prior to the conference. The newspaper accurately presented Goffman's point that human behavior is designed to manage the impressions others have of us, that personality amounts to the sum of all of the managed impressions. Why, he might seem justified in asking, should he allow the personality he wishes to project to be shaped, in part, by a reporter? (What, the newspaper might have asked, does he owe for the fame, the fee, and the gratification he gains from showing up and presenting his ideas?)

What does not seem to have occurred to the newspaper was that Goffman may have set it up. He has been known to disrupt social gatherings—telling a hostess out loud, for example, that her preparations are excessive or underdone (and specifically where) or giving disconcerting remarks to passers-by. Goffman is said to be "perfect" at this. Students say that he is testing out the social rules, that forays to the boundaries of etiquette tell him where the boundaries are, that he makes notes while accidents he caused happen, and that the incident will be reported in his next book. Such tactics have become a discovery procedure for some schools of sociology. Is it ethical? "That's less interesting than 'does it work?'' one student of Goffman tells me. "Goffman believes in science and that science is a higher morality than the disruption of an occasion."

Some who read his books observe that not every breach of the peace he causes does appear—so they wonder at the deeper motive. One sociologist who has seen Goffman enter a house for the first time and explain aloud the social class of the owners after observing their household objects calls such behavior "sociological humor—I think."

Goffman's writings give a different impression of his capacity for sympathy. In Frame Analysis, he illustrated a point by quoting from The Art of Detection by Jacob Fisher: "When out for a stroll, it becomes an interesting game to see how far a pedestrian can be followed undetected. If the pedestrian realizes he is being followed, nothing is lost. In a footnote, Goffman suggests a perspective which Fisher has lost: 'Fisher does not address himself to the interesting question of what happens to the ease of mind of the haphazardly selected subject who finds out he is being followed and looks into his life to find a reason why."

Goffman can play the dupe himself—although he turns it to his own purposes. A colleague involved with Goffman on a scholarly panel once said, "These people are using us." Goffman reportedly replied, "The question is: Are they using us well?"

Another colleague says, "He's always observing and never not observing. He's never anything but professionally involved. Therefore, he's difficult to deal with because he's a critic of the least moment—which he's also a student of."

I asked Goffman if he would discuss the sources and development of this "power." He laughed, questioned whether it was a "power," and pointed out that it is the sort of question he does not enter. Goffman did his graduate work at the University of Chicago, where sociology had already been enshrined as the "Chicago School," due to the founding efforts of Robert A. Park, a former newspaperman who believed that sociologists should write about what they did, their works being "like first novels," as one observer puts it. A colleague suggests that Goffman "purposefully" misread Emile Durkheim, the eminent sociologist who examined human conduct toward sacred objects and demonstrated the importance of ritual. Such a "misreading," this view goes, is the creative sort of interpretation which one poet might make of another. Accordingly, Goffman secularized Durkheim, or, put another way, he gave sacred dimension to secular things: In the modern society, humans are sacred, and we use little rituals—called etiquette and manners—to make contact, little rituals which we can withhold or bestow on a moment's notice.

Historically and ideologically, Goffman's work should be set against the 1960s, one critic has stated. In that period, he says, society seemed to be falling apart or, from another point of view, people could meet face to face without regard to status and convention "in some absolute and unmediated sense." Either way, rules seemed to be out. Yet there was Goffman, peering...
into the minutiae of life and finding rules beyond belief.

Goffman now has become fully institutionalized. Scholars debate whether his work reflects the "new middle class" of bureaucrats and professionals or the old middle class of the "lumpen bourgeoisie." One says that Goffman's writings give readers "an exhilarating sense of their own possibilities for personal freedom." Another characterizes his work as "a pertinacious effort to defeat humanism." Another dubs Goffman's calculating social operator "GoffMan," as if to suggest such an entity is universal. Others argue whether or not his image of man is pejorative. At least one dissertation and one book are being written on his work. Everyone knows him. A graduate student giving a paper at a sociology convention replied to a statement from the back of the room, "That's a very Goffmanian type of comment." The audience broke out laughing because it was Goffman himself who had spoken from the back of the room.

His influence, however, is more puzzling to measure. One sociologist feels that Asylums, as a critique of bureaucracies and the way they manage personal identities, has been more instrumental in changing attitudes toward mental patients and hospitals than the works of R.D. Laing and Thomas S. Szasz, both psychiatrists. And Stigma is said to be a "culturally radical" contribution to the new awareness about the handicapped. It is not as a social critic that Goffman reportedly prefers to be known, however, but as a theorist. And on that score, the jury is still deliberating. In this year of his presidency of sociology's major professional group, a book called The State of Sociology appeared, carrying no analysis of him. In 1980, a collection of essays on him, called The View from Goffman, was published—not because he is important but to make him important; according to the editor, "few people take Goffman seriously as a social theorist with a vital contribution to make to the development of sociology.

Goffman reputedly enjoys some thoughtful critiques of his work but not most reviews. He is said to dislike criticisms because he considers the writers lightweights who make him seem lightweight. On the other hand, he does not put his own weight into reviews by writing them. If he likes a book, and says so, his motives, he feels, would be suspect. The same thing would be true if he did not like the book—and he would raise animosities as well.

In the early 1970s, he served as associate director of Penn's Center for Urban Ethnography, a post he is said to have taken to help pay Penn back for

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**PHILOSOPHICAL MEANDERINGS**

**HEGEL**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Was astonished that the bagel,
Tough and toxic little torus,
Could be such a tidbit for us.

But he knew the pestilent
Little doughnut was essential
To this grandest of all snacks:

First, you take a sharpish axe,
Hold your bagel edgewise, tightly,
And then cleave it expeditely.

(Lost your thumb and need repair?
None but the brave deserve the fare!

Open next the old ice-box.
Grab the cream-cheese and the lox
And with lavish fingers spread
Lots of cheese and lovely red
Slices of good salmon belly
On the bagel. Even Shelley
Scarce could pen a fitting ode
To your Bagel â la Mode!

Finally, of course, you eat it,
And there's nothing that can beat it!*

As upon the things just stated
Georg Wilhelm ruminated,
Suddenly an inspiration
Sprouted from this cerebration:

"Ach, du lieber!" marveled Hegel.
"This Entwicklungen of the bagel
Is, in fact, the paradigm

*If you've got an extra nickel,
Spend it on a stuckel pickle.

Of a total cosmic scheme!
Take it from your Uncle Freddy.
It's the Absolute, already!

"Here's mine simplisch exegesis:
Spirit says, 'Let's make a Thesis.'
'Fiat Bagel!' first itventures,
But the thing would bend your dentures.
So the Spirit's quitting baking
Und Antithesis is making.
'Fiat Lox mit Cheese!' it's saying,
But the combination's staying
In a kind of opposition
Which is not a real fruition.
So the Spirit says, 'Here, Georgie,
Taste this Bagel. It's an orgy!
Und the Synthesis, no question,
Will occur in your digestion.'
So I eat it right away,
And before someone could say
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
That delicious little bagel,
Aufgehenken from the vortex
Of the stomach to the cortex,
Is becoming an Idea
That's the Open Sesame
Other thinkers get in trouble
Drinking Schnapps und seeing double.
As for me, I never tipple;
I eat bagels und see triple.
Thesis und Antithesis
Giving yet a Synthesis:
That's the Open Sesame
To Absolute Philosophy!"
his chair. Currently, he remains accessi­ble by phone and through the one course a year he teaches; he reportedly turned down a recent offer from the University of California at Berkeley because of the freedom which he has with his time at Penn. (Goffman came to Penn from Berkeley in 1965.)

He continues to amaze colleagues and students with what are acknowledged to be his principles, even as he amazes them with tactlessness. He is merciless toward cant and sloppy language and poor argu­ments. "People often fade when he asks what they're rebelling against or what their work amounts to," says one observer. Goffman listened to a speaker argue that racism was a product of the Industrial Revolution, then reportedly demolished him by asking whether it was not caused by "every moment of interaction." He listened to someone who had studied space in New York apartments and concluded that space limitations could have pathological conse­quences. "Say it in public, and I'd agree," Goffman reportedly said, "but to stand here before God and the discipline and say what people's needs are is sheer chicanery." He is said to deliver these lessons in a soft, avuncular voice, the voice he used with me on the phone and no doubt the voice he used when, some time ago, he congratulated a newly tenured member of the sociology depart­ment (whose promotion he had opposed) and reportedly said, "You're a nice person but a mediocre sociologist." He can be simultaneously sweet and sour in the classroom as well. He was reading aloud from a book of one of his own teachers who writes in a flowery style when he reportedly stopped in the middle of the passage and said, "The trouble with this writer is that he suffers from a malady—he's read too many 19th-century novels." The students giggled, prompting Goffman to add, "A malady, I can see, that none of you ever suffered from." On another occa­sion, he was talking about sexual behavior when students objected that he was totally wrong. "You see it as Erich Fromm says it should be," Goffman reportedly observed, "not as Havelock Ellis says it is." In the first class he taught at Penn, recalls a former student, Goffman entered the room to find much too large a group for him to teach com­fortably. Making clear he felt bad about reducing the number present, he announced that those undergraduates with lower than a B average must drop the course. Apparently he expected a modest exodus, but nothing happened. He added that he would check the records. Still nothing happened. He asked those undergraduates with worse than a B average to raise their hands. One hand went up. "Just one?" he said. "Well, a rule is a rule." The student remained seated. Goffman stared at him. "Can't I at least stay through this class?" the student asked. Goffman replied, "I don't know why you should.

Goffman later reportedly told a colleague, "I don't know why students take that. I'd burn the building down." One professor of sociology elsewhere recalls coming to graduate school at Penn to study under Goffman. He had been attracted by Goffman's writing style but, once here, found that Goff­man would not admit students into his course in ethnography unless they brought knowledge of the discipline other than sociology, like theater or linguistics. (Goffman allegedly disliked the sociol­ogy department, its students, and its degree in those days.) Rejected for the course, the student arranged a tutorial with Goffman. They met regularly, but some time into each meeting, Goffman began to squirm and shift about. "Of course, since I had read his books, I knew what the squirming meant," the professor says. "I made myself blind to his signals in hope that I could squeeze out a few more minutes."

When the student was eventually admitted into the course, he found that Goffman does not want students as disciples but as collaborators: "not an affectionate collaboration—strictly business." Goffman made meticulous comments on papers, going to great depth on both subject matter and grammar. "You've noticed that, in his books, he quotes heavily from student papers, he says the professor. "He's polished them enough to be able to use them."

When this student completed his course work, he applied for a grant from the Center for Urban Ethnography to do his dissertation. Goffman wanted him to read an extensive list of books before receiving the money. The student insisted he could do the readings while engaging in field work. Goffman sug­gested that he should at least read his way—he read the books, got the money, and did the field work—and during the final stage realized that Goffman was right. (Apparently those studying under Goffman often fail to complete their dissertations because he holds them to the same standards he sets for himself.)

This student, who did make it through, remembers the day Goffman told him not to address him as "Doctor." The student eagerly waited for the next sentence, which he was sure would be permission to call Goffman by his first name. "Call me Mister Goffman," Goffman told him. The student refused. Sometime later—the professor still sends his manuscripts to Goffman for a reading—Goffman told him to call him Erving.

Colleagues and students are sometimes surprised to discover that Goff­man has a human, even a sentimental side. He has been known to offer money to students and scholars in need without stipulating it as a loan. He is said to fancy himself a person of taste in antiques, handmade articles, food, paintings, and music. He tends to press down, occasionally to the scandal of a hostess who did not expect it. And he enjoys those whom the rest of us enjoy for twisting the usual—the Marx Brothers and Monty Python, for instance.

He has been called "a waste of a good novelist" and reportedly is touchy about the comparison. Friends say he reads fiction widely, with a good eye for the quality of writing as well as for the meaning that. But tell me one thing: Do Marxists brush their teeth in the morning?"

END