

# Ethnography and fiction

## What is the difference?

My dreams are your dreams, and the only difference between you and me is that I  
can articulate them. (Werner Herzog)

### **Abstract**

It has been said that ethnography is «suspended between fact and fiction». If so, can one infer that the *proprium* of the ethnographic operation lies precisely in such a «suspended» state? Some considerations are advanced here concerning the relation that exists between ethnography and fiction with respect to their basic epistemological operation. Specifically, it is suggested that whereas ethnography is premised on the requirements of «being there», fiction ignites a different dynamic, here defined as «decoming that» (the neologism is explained in the piece).

**Keywords:** social theory, epistemology, theory of ethnography, literary fiction, storytelling.

Ethnography has been said to be «suspended between theory and fiction»<sup>1</sup>. The expression alludes to the general expectation among practitioners that ethnographic inquiry needs to find its own place between the two alternative fields of, respectively, sociological theory and the literary creation. Put it differently, neither social theory nor literary fiction are, *per se*, ethnography. At the same time, though, the expression also allusively admits a state of undecidability as something that might be intrinsic to the ethnographic endeavor. There is, in other words, a difficulty with localizing the boundaries supposedly keeping theory, ethnography and fiction apart. For the purpose of the present short-note discussion, at the center of the reflection are the ghostly boundary severing – and, at the same time, tying – ethnography and fiction, while theory is provisionally left apart.

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<sup>1</sup> Title of a session at the 2002 *Ethnografeast* conference, as reported in Wacquant (2003, p. 19).

To begin with, there are certainly intuitive similarities between ethnography and fiction, insofar as both appear to be plunged in an element of «telling», substantiated in a careful descriptive-narrative take on the social realities under consideration. In addition, the difficulty of singling out the difference between the two practices is only enhanced if we adopt an anti-essentialist stance: neither the province of ethnography nor that of the literary fiction can be easily determined in themselves. No official definition stands up scrutiny, and no single feature suffices to unify such enterprises as wholes. In the literary field, it is even problematic to assume that, for instance, Dostoevskij, Kafka, Musil, Broch, Joyce, Proust, Mann, Woolf, Orwell and Faulkner – to mention some of the uncontested giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western literature – ever shared one and the same idea of literature. In the complexity of fictional poetics, consider for instance two nearly antithetical stances. On the one side is the «suspension of disbelief» notion, first advanced by Coleridge, which hints at a contract between the writer and the reader, whereby the second abdicates all requests for realism in exchange for a global effect of *vraisemblance*. Overall, such an approach prioritizes attention towards the inner coherence of the narrative worlds. On the other side is, by contrast, the «powers of falsehood» notion, whereby literature is regarded as an attempt to craft things that are deliberately false – as happens for instance in Queneau, Perec, Calvino and Manganelli, or, in films, Orson Welles and François Truffaut. Whereas Coleridge’s recommendation makes the medium of writing invisible, nudging the reader towards the realistic effect of the (untrue) story being served, experimental literary groups such as Oulipo sought to expose the very medium of writing, skillfully playing with its constitutive logic as well as with its inevitable anomalies.

The internal variety of ethnographic productions may have not been remarked to the same extent as that of literary creation, yet there are clearly styles of writing ethnography that give more emphasis to narrative and scenic aspects, engaging the reader more compellingly in facing the sometimes weird situations social life breeds, as opposed to others openly calling for a more detached, «colder» social-scientific gaze on the mechanics and the forces at play. For instance, Katz (2018, p. 18) argues that in what he dubs «comparative analytic ethnography», «the focus is not fundamentally on people but ... on situations and the identities people enact in them». Extracting general patterns from the singular and contingent materials at hand is, in other words, the fundamental concern of comparative analytic ethnography. In his plea for a «peopled ethnography», Fine (2003, p. 46) follows Katz in accepting that «it is not the individuals being observed who direct our interest but rather their position within a group or social system». Still, in his ethnographic variant the role of detailed observation and narrative sequences seems to be more accentuated, following a general recommendation to produce data that are «richly ethnographic». Even Fine’s ethnographies, however, read rather «cold» if compared to the more adventurous writings of scholars such as Anderson (1990), Jackall (1997), Bourgois (2003), or, more recently, A. Goffman (2014), where the ethnographic materials are often presented in what appear «raw» forms and, sometimes, also graphic detail.

These introductory remarks already hint at the unsettled relation between explanation and narration as two different ways of sense-making. Whereas explanation aims to ascertain the links between events that be as univocal as possible, narration preserves a multiplicity of nexuses that eschews synthesis. More generally, the relationship between literature and the social science is a long-standing, complex, and unsettled one. In sociology, for instance, an articulated comparison between sociology and literary creation was first advanced by Lewis Coser (1963, p. 2). Literary creations were used by Coser to illustrate classical sociological categories such as social control, status, power, deviant behavior, and so on. «The literary creator – Coser observed – has the ability to identify with wide ranges of experience, and he [*sic*] has the trained capacity to articulate through his fantasy the existential problems of his contemporaries» – yet, he continued, «fiction is not a substitute for systematically accumulated, certified knowledge» (p. 3). Thus, it seems that, for Coser, the usefulness of literary texts lies in providing exquisite case studies in the shape of «condensed monographs», from which social theory and social research can gain a number of substantive insights.

As can be appreciated from the quotes above, in the early 1960s Coser still strove to preserve the dichotomy (inspired by Kant, and commonly associated with Windelband) between nomothetic and idiographic types of knowledge. In the decades after Coser, though, the developments of postmodernist and reflexive anthropology have quite complicated the picture. At the same time, it is worthwhile to recall that forms of academic writing where literature and the social science appear in hybridized forms are not a postmodern invention. In the 1930s, to mention one *cas célèbre*, the *Collège de sociologie*, animated by Bataille, Caillois and Leiris in Paris, gathered together surrealist artists, writers and ethnographers in close proximity with one another, often with shifting roles. Michel Leiris, in particular, covered an uncharted terrain across anthropology and avant-garde surrealism with his *L'Afrique fantôme* (Leiris, 1934), which, while compiled as the official journal of the 1931-33 Dakar-Djibuti mission headed by Marcel Griaule, is widely recognized also as a literary text that explores the author's inscape.

The postmodernist thread in the social science has since the 1970s enhanced the blurring of genres. Through the case of «writing cultures», postmodern social scientists have multiplied the number of contentious issues at stake: not only the relation between the ethnographer and the people under study, but also the relation between these people and their «writing» (*lato sensu*) activities, as well as the relation between the ethnographer and his or her own writing activity. Overall, this can be said to have had a «textualizing» effect: to the extent that culture has been examined as text, ethnography, too, has been scrutinized, and valorized, as a form of inherently «written» production. In the pure medium of writing as such, ethnography and fiction may not be easily extricated from one another. The postmodernists, in sum, have made their best to weaken and dilute the distinction between ethnography and fiction. While the process may have been liberating at first, it has also caused grave problems in the long run, leading to a frustrating relativism that not only has

proved detrimental to science, but only rarely has produced any literary quality.

Since the 2000s, the generations after postmodernism have reacted against what has been perceived as an excessively long detour of «overtexualization». The question of language has been somehow decentred. In anthropology, sociology, human geography and social psychology, an increased interest has been paid to topics such as the senses, emotions, affects, and the body. Even more recently, the notion of atmosphere has been extensively deployed in ethnographic research. In parallel, a great return of interest towards ghosts, magic, animism, and vitalism has brought back into the limelight issues that were already well represented in 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropology, but which the linguistic turn had marginalized. What is more, insofar as categories of belonging and perception have been increasingly treated as «positional», new complexities for the ethnographic observer have derived from the need to acknowledge in full one's own sociological location in the picture. A host of questions concerning difference and representation have popped up: How can a man describe the bodily experiences of a woman? How can a white man describe what it feels like to be a black man? How can an adult, middle class researcher understand the experience of a working-class adolescent? How can a Western researcher speak of indigenous worldviews? And so on.

While legitimate and even inevitable, similar questions have led to the pitfalls of political correctness and the raging of veritable «culture wars» in the academia, whereby the limits of one's social place have been rendered coincident with the limits of one's sociological knowledge. The neat outcome of such manoeuvres is not only ideological entrenchment but, more pointedly, an impoverishment of social scientific knowledge. Instead of recognizing and embracing the challenge of producing better, more subtle and potentially more emancipatory forms of knowledge, existing sociological barriers have been either obscured and denied (by the «universalists» reacting against «positionality»), or denounced *ad libitum*, but inherently also steeled and declared insurmountable (by the «differentialists»). In both cases, the existing persuasions, instead of being made more porous and negotiable, have been increasingly made incommunicable, leading towards stalemate and, ultimately, intellectual debacle.

The idea that there are advantages in researching people who are similar (demographically, culturally, etc.) to the researcher is certainly not new. The beginnings of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology offer many cases in this vein: for instance, the former hobo Nels Anderson was perfectly suited to write about hobo life, just as was Louis Wirth well equipped to describe how Jewish immigrants adjusted themselves to the North-American city – and so on. Retrospectively, Riemer (1977) framed this operating principle as «opportunistic research»: a process whereby the ethnographer seizes opportunities deriving from non-scientific facts of life, which make one well acquainted with given social settings, rather than others. The ethnographer is set to be able to profit from previous knowledge, ease of access, and the possession of a number of linguistic and cultural tropes. Whereas Riemer emphasized how insider status (i.e., being a group member) can be effectively put to good use in ethnography, the

counter-chant to this is the idea of the ethnographer as «professional stranger» (Nash, 1963; Agar, 1980), i.e., someone who – as per Simmel’s famous definition, and Schütz’s no less famous elaboration – entertains a mixture of nearness and farness vis-à-vis the studied group, gaining only partial access to its worldview, while never belonging fully to it. Sociologically speaking, the professional stranger lives in a condition of *anomie*, or alienation. On the ground, a specific sense of awkwardness may derive from the fact that, as Agar (1980, p. 59) put it, while approaching people, often «the ethnographer is asking for trust without yet having earned it. Little wonder that initial contact by the ethnographer is so often viewed with suspicion by group members».

At bottom, the «opportunist ethnographer» and the «professional stranger» share the same crucial requirement, namely, spending a conspicuous amount of time among «the people» to be observed, so as to harvest first-hand information of what the participants see and imagine of the social worlds from their local, contingent perspectives. What matters is capturing «the point of view of the natives» – or, as Geertz (1974, p. 29) elegantly phrased it, «what the devil they think they are up to». Key to ethnography is, accordingly, the imperative of «being there» (Borneman, Hammoudi, Eds., 2009) or – as per Robert Park’s directive to his students – «go get the seats of your pants dirty» (McKinney, 1966, p. 71). Interestingly, though, the «there» in «being there» is construed differently in the two approaches: for the opportunist ethnographer, from naturalized at the start, the field must become thematized, whereas for the professional stranger, it is a matter of approaching it while cultivating full awareness of one’s factual distance from it (factual, but also necessary to escape the process known as «going native», that is, the process that leads to the field becoming naturalized).

It is with respect to the imperative of «being there» that one begins to appreciate what is distinctive of literary fiction. Since there is no global blueprint to these routes, one cannot proceed but through examples. One can take for instance the case of Herman Melville. Most assuredly, he could never have written his famous maritime stories and novels without his previous years at sea from 1839 to 1844, when he sailed various whalers and a military frigate (Parker, 2002). Not only were Melville’s novels inspired by his real life vicissitudes, but during those vicissitudes he acquired solid first-hand knowledge of the social worlds he experienced, along with its techniques, its languages, its sensory landscape, etc. From this perspective, an ethnographic component is quite present in Melville’s work. The almost instant success of his first books *Typee* and *Omoo* gave Melville the fame of an «adventurer» – an image which he cultivated extensively, regaling visitors and admirers with endless exotic stories at his disposal.

A few additional essential biographic facts must be recalled, however. Melville’s heavily-indebted father died aged 50, when Melville was 14, at the end of a terrible month of fevers and delirium. In all likelihood, Melville, who had dropped out of school because the family could not afford the tuition, witnessed the final scenes of his father’s life. Later in life, he exhibited a notoriously short-tempered character, bullying home servants and mistreating his

wife. After the flair of his first two novels, his work was met with increasing critical and commercial failure (particularly *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence-Man*), which led him in 1866 to give up full-time writing for a post as NYC custom inspector. He held that post for 19 years, while creatively focusing mostly on poetry. In 1867, his oldest son Malcolm, then aged 18, shot and killed himself at home, whereas his youngest son Stanwix died from tuberculosis in 1886, aged 36. Melville was long plagued by manic states, bouts of rheumatism and sciatica, and died by a stroke in 1891, at 72.

If initially Melville took advantage of his personal experiences to conceive and set his literary creations, progressively he became unadjusted to the factual realities surrounding him. The fiction writer can perhaps be said to combine elements of the opportunistic researcher and the professional stranger, but must also be recognized as transcending them in fundamental ways. It is as if the writer cannot «be there». If, for the ethnographer, synchronization with the present is the precondition for actual work, being out of sync appears somewhat inevitable for the writer. Anecdotally, it is known that Kafka's watch used to run one hour and a half back. Not simply this, but Kafka himself described the feeling of being utterly unable to enjoy a conversation with friends: «Despite my most exhausting efforts, I was not there, and neither was I anywhere else: might that be that during those two hours I did not exist?» (Kafka, 1948, p. 227). The writer, in other words, seems to be prevented from having an ordinary access to the social world. In a similar way, Proust marveled at the semiotics of the demi-monde he had frequented, which he captured and rendered in hieroglyphical details. Proust is another case of someone who had «been there», but could only become a real writer by rescinding his belonging through self-seclusion.

The fiction writer's lack of access to the actual circumstances of social life does not mean that the writer can be explained away simply as a recluse. Rather than being cut out from reality, what is at stake is a different mode of access to it, quite distinct from the format of «being there». Elias Canetti's trope of the writer as the *keeper of transformations* can be evoked here (Canetti, 1976; Brighenti, 2023): in Canetti, the *Dichter* figure (namely, the writer, but also the poet and, more generally, the intellectual) coincides with the task to salvage humanity in its manifold expressions. The writer collects and protects human transformations, preventing them from becoming steeled in concrete casts (which he calls, «power»), as well as from withering away into accidental or enforced oblivion. The writer is someone who dwells in language, and takes language seriously to the point of harboring an «irrational ambition to bear responsibility». While Canetti's *Dichter* is often seen mainly as an ethical stance, its epistemological entailments are no less significant. Indeed, what the writer seizes are primarily not ethnological facts, but the talent humans have to evoke fundamental images of becoming (in particular, crowds and their mirror images present in the natural elements, like rivers, wheatfields, swarms of mosquitoes, cattle etc. are often discussed by Canetti). Such modes of becoming are veritable modes of communication: «That gift [i.e., transformation], once universal, but now doomed to atrophy, has to be preserved by any means possible; and the

*Dichter*, thanks to that gift, ought to keep the accesses *between* people open» (p. 162).

In such unique form of access, the ethnographic «there» appears as surrounded by all sides by a virtual manifold that comes in the guise of words, myths, and dreams belonging to all. Going beyond personality and personalism (like the celebrity-seeking narcissism of the author), the veritable act of writing equates with the gesture of *becoming-anyone*. Deleuze (1995), for his part, spoke of an «impersonal and yet singular» life – «a life» – that flows within and across people, and is the true element of fiction taken as an instance of a «transcendental field». Deleuze refers to a story by Dickens to explain this: «A scoundrel, a bad apple, held in contempt by everyone, is found on the point of death, and suddenly those charged with his care display an urgency, respect, and even love for the dying man's least sign of life. Everyone makes it his business to save him. As a result, the wicked man himself, in the depths of his coma, feels something soft and sweet penetrate his soul. But as he progresses back toward life, his benefactors turn cold, and he himself rediscovers his old vulgarity and meanness. Between his life and his death, there is a moment where a lift is merely playing with death. The life of the individual has given way to an impersonal and yet singular life, which foregrounds a pure event that has been liberated from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and the objectivity of what comes to pass: a *homo tantum* with whom everyone sympathizes and who attains a kind of beatitude; or an *ecceity*, which is no longer an individuation, but a singularization, a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, since only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things made it good or bad. The life of such individuality is eclipsed by the singular immanent life of a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other» (pp. 386-7).

The crucial difference between the classical theories of transformation-as-imitation-of-a-model and Deleuze's own theory of becoming (*devenir*) lies in the fact that the latter is asymmetrical and fundamentally evental (Deleuze, Guattari, 1975): *devenir* has the nature of an operation and an event («allagmatic»). Since the English verb «become» is quite deterministic in suggesting coming-to-be, one should perhaps better translate *devenir* by employing a neologism, *decoming*. Decoming has the characteristic of not occurring between pre-constituted entities, such as objects and subjects. It is not a transition from state A to state B – to the contrary, as soon as the first state appears in the process of turning into the second, the two are caught into a single «bloc», so that the second state must also morph into something else. Consequently, the second state can never serve as model for the first one. This also speaks fundamentally to the political problem of representation and voice evoked above, currently at the center of infamous «culture wars». The perspective of fiction as the protection of transformations, or as «decoming-anyone», leads to considering fiction as something that differs from representation, sympathy, or even ventriloquism. Rather than mirroring the social reality, or speaking in representation of someone else, fiction truly creates unique conditions of visibility for the social world that make new modes of perception and thought possible. Whereas ethnography is «being

there», literature is «becoming-that». The «that» in question is not simply a character or an item in a story, but a whole ensemble, a bloc-of-decoming.

As considered above, whereas the aim of explanation is a reduction of the number of sense-linkages present within a manifold, so as to let a single explanatory thread emerge, narration is characterized by an irreducible plurality of links: it puts its elements into resonance. In acoustic physics, resonance is the reinforcement, or prolongation, of sound by reflection from a surface, or by the synchronous vibration of a neighboring object. Similarly, narration takes heterogeneous elements and sets them into motion, making them converge towards a compound becoming. In this vein, the fiction writer's commitment involves, not simply a fidelity toward humans in their capacity beyond factuality, but a veritable move beyond actors and plot, in order to become *a world*: communication. Herzog's quote put in the epigraph to this note recalls that fiction and story-telling have fundamentally to do with shared dreams. An ethnography of dreams is perhaps still to be developed, but it is certainly worthwhile asking whether, and how, it could be envisaged. If ethnography is concerned with the actors' point of view (and ethnomethodology, one may say, with the actors' point of *non-view*) the *point of view of the story itself* remains uncharted.

This is an ongoing reflection. As a provisional conclusion, it is perhaps possible to submit that «being-there» and «decoming-that» are two distinct, yet related, epistemological options as well as anthropological functions. Rather than as disciplines, ethnography and fiction can be regarded as analytical types of empirical activities that concretely mix and blend. It should then be possible, examining each single piece of social scientific and literary production, to assess how much of each operation is at play in them.

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