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Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn

Heather Love

THERE IS PERHAPS NO TERM THAT CARRIES MORE value in the humanities than “rich.” In literary studies especially, richness is an undisputed—if largely uninterrogated—good; it signifies qualities associated with the complexity and polyvalence of texts and with the warmth and depth of experience. There is, to be sure, no necessary connection between the intricacy of texts and the intricacy of human feeling and cognition. Nor is there a necessary connection between the capacity to interpret such texts and the ability to respond justly and empathetically to the ethical dilemmas represented in them. Even so, this is a busy intersection. The link between the richness of human experience and processes of textual interpretation can be understood, on the one hand, through the origin of philosophical hermeneutics in practices of divination and, on the other, through the significance of the communicative situation in defining hermeneutics. The text, in its singularity, is both an access to otherness and a message or call to attention. A belief in the aesthetic and ethical force of literature is evident in the work of midcentury critics like Cleanth Brooks (“The poet . . . must return to us the unity of experience itself as man knows it in his own experience”) and Lionel Trilling (“literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty”).¹ It also appears in the work of Marxist critic Raymond Williams, for whom literature signals the inexhaustibility of human potential.² It appears as well in recent arguments against theory and on behalf of New Formalism (“literature could pose the largest issues of social and personal destiny in a vividly human context”) and in the recent turn to ethics, which, as Dorothy J. Hale writes, “has been accompanied by a new celebration of literature.”³ If the encounter with a divine and inscrutable message was progressively secularized in the twentieth century, the opacity and ineffability of the text and the ethical demand to attend to it remain central to practices of literary interpretation today.

Given the subsumption of many aspects of religion into the concept of culture after the Enlightenment, it is not surprising that these sacred aspects of hermeneutics should survive into the era of secular modernity. What is more surprising is that its humanist aspects have such a continued presence in supposedly anti- or posthumanist literary studies. The rise of interpretive practices borrowed from Marxism and psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism, and semiotics and deconstruction has displaced the individual and consciousness from the center of inquiry, shifting attention to structures of language, desire, or economic capital. At the same time, political forms of criticism such as feminism, postcolonial studies, African-American studies, diaspora studies, and queer studies have critiqued humanism by pointing to its founding exclusions. Common to the rise of these theoretical and political fields is a disavowal of earlier critical movements—particularly the New Criticism—that are understood to embody the shortcomings of humanist philosophy. In critiques of the canon, the text, organicism, the nation, culture, and tradition—as well as the very concept of the human—the anchors of humanistic criticism have come under sustained and powerful attack in the past several decades. Still, despite widespread rumors of the death of humanism, key humanist values remain alive and well in literary studies.

What to make of this persistence of humanist values in the context of a disciplinary milieu that often sees them as outmoded? It might be explained as a typical contradiction between intellectual conviction and lived practice—there are no doubt *de facto* humanists among posthumanists, just as there are Marxist heroes of consumption.⁴ More persuasive accounts of the persistence of humanism in contemporary literary studies can be found in histories of the discipline. While critics like Gerald Graff and John Guillory focus on the stabilizing role of universities, departments, and syllabi, Ian Hunter turns his attention to the role of teaching.⁵ In his essay “The History of Theory,” Hunter traces the persistence of humanist ethics in literary studies, suggesting that both “the New Criticism and the literary theory that displaced it . . . have an intensively ascetic-pedagogical dimension.”⁶ Hunter focuses on pedagogical practice and on the role of the seminar and the “teacher-student couple,” with its “relations of identification and correction,” as forms of governance.⁷ He argues that literary criticism remains within the horizon of the “pedagogical imperative”; processes of observation, correction, and exemplification that belong to the history of pastoral instruction have made the reading of literature the privileged site of moral education and self-making. With the decline of an explicit pedagogy of moral education, Hunter argues, ethical value migrated inside the text and into the activity of the critic.

Hunter's attention to pedagogy makes clear the importance of the figure of the privileged messenger or interpreter in maintaining a humanist hermeneutics in literary studies.⁸ I want to focus on the significance of hermeneutic activity—the practice of close reading—in this genealogy. Close reading is at the heart of literary studies, a key credential in hiring and promotion, and the foundation of literary pedagogy; it is primarily through this practice that humanist values survive in the field. As James F. English points out, there is a remarkable methodological continuity in literary studies across the twentieth century; during periods of rapid intellectual and social change, he argues, the “eminently teachable” method of close reading has served to stabilize and justify the discipline.⁹ Tracing the decline of the New Criticism in English departments, Catherine Gallagher remarks that “Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, existentialism, archetypal analysis, Marxism, and structuralism all mixed well with what came to be thought of simply as techniques of ‘close reading’ or ‘practical criticism,’ and the concentration on the opacity of literary language in turn gave something back to each of those theoretical orientations.”¹⁰ Hortense J. Spillers agrees that New Criticism “mixed well” with structuralism and suggests further that the success of its critical methods in distancing the literary object of study from its social context meant that, during the transformations of the 1960s, a critical sensibility “trained on the academy’s ‘close reading’ and the conventions of irony/ambiguity” transferred its attention “to the world of text and discursivity.”¹¹ Despite intellectual and social changes, the richness of texts continues to serve as a carrier for an allegedly superannuated humanism.

This methodological continuity has recently been challenged by new methods—which we might group under the rubric “new sociologies of literature”—that distance themselves from texts and from practices of close reading altogether. One strain of this work has been identified by Leah Price as a shift in emphasis from texts to books and other media: in work on analytical bibliography, histories of reading, book production, distribution, and consumption, copyright and intellectual property, and new and old media (Price, Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Peter Stallybrass, Meredith McGill, Alan Liu, and Matt Kirschenbaum).¹² Other work has taken up questions of value and cultural capital in canon formation, the university, and the world literary system (Pierre Bourdieu, Janice Radway, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Pascale Casanova, Mark McGurl, English, and Guillory). We might also look to an array of new techniques in the digital humanities (for instance, data mining and visualization).

This broadly sociological rejection of traditional literary methods finds its most polemical form in the work of Franco Moretti. In his recent

studies of world literature, Moretti has experimented with scientific and social-scientific methods, including mapping, systems theory, the statistical analysis of genres, evolutionary modeling to account for literary competition, and cognitive methods. The most pointed and salient of his interventions has been his forwarding of the method of *distant reading*.¹³ As an explicit refusal of the key method in literary studies, Moretti's embrace of reading from a distance should be understood as both a departure from traditional hermeneutics and a shift in the habitus of literary critical practice. Drawing on the tactics of the Annales School as well as of quantitative sociology, and borrowing on a model of collaboration current in the sciences, Moretti argues for the importance of scholarship at "second hand." Distant reading refuses the richness of the singular literary text in favor of the production of knowledge on an enlarged scale. By sacrificing richness—and turning it into data—he is able to handle greater quantities of material, and to observe literature as a vast geographical and historical system. Moretti is clear about what is to be gained through a refusal of the messy intimacies of traditional forms of humanistic inquiry: scientific authority, generality, knowledge, legitimacy. He is also clear that it will entail losses: richness, singularity, exceptionality, the text. In refusing the "theological exercise" of close, sustained textual analysis, Moretti also turns away from the intimacy of ethical pedagogy, mediated, as Hunter suggests, through a sustained encounter with an exemplary literary text.

What is occurring, then, in much of the recent work at the intersection of sociology and literature is a turn away from the singularity and richness of individual texts and a concomitant refusal of the ethical charisma of the literary translator or messenger. Disengaging from the operations of close reading promises a more fundamental rethinking of the grounds of the discipline than earlier challenges to the human subject, the canon, or the referential capacities of language. Because they address the key techniques of the discipline rather than its explicit ideology, these new methods are more effective than structuralist and poststructuralist theories in challenging the residual but nonetheless powerful humanism of literary studies. This break with the hegemony of close reading presents an opportunity for an interrogation of the relation between literary studies and other disciplines. If, as English argues, literary studies over the past several decades has remained "all too literary" if viewed from the normative vantage of history, or sociology, or economics, or geography, or philosophy," possibilities for renewed interdisciplinary exchange emerge once this fundamental disciplinary protocol is suspended.¹⁴

As persuasive as I find this account, I want to suggest that the suspension of close reading is not the only way to get traction on these

institutional and ethical questions. In this essay, I outline an approach to literary texts that derives not from hermeneutics but from a different tradition. The encounter between literary studies and sociology that I stage here does not rely on a complete renunciation of the text (to focus, for instance, on books as objects or commodities). Instead, I play out the possibilities for a method of textual analysis that would take its cue from observation-based social sciences including ethology, kinesics, ethnomethodology, and microsociology. These fields have developed practices of close attention, but, because they rely on description rather than interpretation, they do not engage the metaphysical and humanist concerns of hermeneutics. Through studying such models, I suggest we can develop modes of reading that are close but not deep.

I consider practices of description in the work of two social scientists, Bruno Latour and Erving Goffman. Both figures are difficult to categorize in the central traditions of sociology, since they focus neither on individual agency nor on deep social structure. Both might be understood as pragmatist sociologists, since they avoid discussion of underlying drives or essences and attend instead to gestures, traces, and activities. Latour and Goffman are interested in the potential of literature to account for the complexities of social life, but they have little time for traditional humanist categories of experience, consciousness, and motivation. In the place of a depth hermeneutics, they offer descriptions of surfaces, operations, and interactions. In doing so, they suggest an alternate model of reading that does not depend on the ethical exemplarity of the interpreter or messenger.¹⁵

I begin the essay by discussing Latour's actor-network-theory and his refusal of the distinction between human and nonhuman actors. I then turn to Goffman, and discuss his central analytic category, the "situation"; I suggest that an exhaustive but "thin" description characterizes his accounts of the social world. Finally, as a way of suggesting the consequences of descriptive reading, I take up a literary case study: Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. Morrison's novel is widely praised as one of the richest of twentieth-century literary texts because of its formal virtuosity as well as its ethical power; in its retelling of an act of infanticide in the context of American slavery, it has been seen as a model of historical empathy. I argue that a descriptive rather than an interpretive account of *Beloved* draws attention to qualities of the text that critics have tended to ignore, particularly its exteriorizing and objective accounts of social life. Reading the novel at the surface brings into focus its critique of historical reclamation. A flat reading of *Beloved* suggests the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness.

In his book on philosophy and the social sciences after the decline of structuralism, *Empire of Meaning*, French intellectual historian François Dosse draws attention to what he calls, following Louis Quéré, the “descriptive turn.”¹⁶ Dosse identifies several features of this recent work, associated with the “pragmatist pole” in late twentieth-century sociology: attention to action, to everyday experience and consciousness, and to things, and a tendency to validate actors’ own statements about their behavior rather than to appeal to structural explanations. The key intellectual traditions that inform this work, according to Dosse, are pragmatism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology. In this descriptive sociology, the “familiar, describable world . . . become[s] problematic, an object of questioning, no longer a starting point but an end point of analysis.” While neither Bruno Latour nor Erving Goffman perfectly exemplifies Dosse’s characterization of the descriptive turn, the concept is useful in drawing attention to their shared methods. Neither Latour nor Goffman is particularly interested in phenomenological categories of experience, perception, or intention; rather, their practices of description involve them in antihumanism, a turn away from depth hermeneutics, and a questioning of the ethical and political agency of the scholar-critic.

In his general account of actor-network-theory (ANT), *Reassembling the Social*, Latour writes, “No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description.”¹⁷ His “object-oriented philosophy” was developed in the context of Science and Technology Studies (STS), where, as he has discussed, the focus on technology and on the laboratory made it difficult to maintain the distinction between a meaningful world of human actions and intentions on the one hand, and an inert and insignificant world of material objects on the other.¹⁸ The institutional context of STS also pushed Latour to grant authority to his research subjects, for in contrast to traditional ethnography, the “‘cultural capital’ of those studied”—that is, scientists—“is infinitely higher than those doing the study” (RS 98–99). He argues that the “studying ‘up’” model that has taken hold in STS can be a model for a renewed social science that does not aim to see beyond the self-descriptions of its subjects. However, this respect for the people one studies is not framed in traditional humanist terms. Instead, Latour argues that social scientists can find a model in the work of natural scientists who do not “muffle their informants’ precise vocabulary into their own all-purpose meta-language” but are forced instead “to take into account at least some of the many quirks of their recalcitrant objects” (RS 125). Extending the same treatment to objects and people does not mean elevating objects to the status of humans but rather putting humans “*on par*” with objects (RS 225).

Latour's key target in *Reassembling the Social* is what he calls "the sociology of the social," by which he means those methods which seek to add a "hidden social force" to explain the world (RS 11). He writes, "Structure is very powerful and yet much too weak and remote to have any efficacy" (RS 168). Latour argues that, because of the inadequacy of conventional social or structural explanations, the social sciences swing back and forth between large-scale explanations and small-scale phenomenological accounts of events, scenes, and interactions. For Latour, however, the small worlds of microsociology, despite their air of concreteness and immediacy, are just as abstract as the contexts that are brought in to explain them. He writes, "But an 'interpretive' sociology is just as much a sociology of the social than [sic] any of the 'objectivist' or 'positivist' versions it wishes to replace. It believes that certain types of agencies—persons, intention, feeling, work, face-to-face interaction—will *automatically* bring life, richness, and 'humanity'" (RS 61).

In place of the sociology of the social or a pseudoconcrete phenomenological sociology, Latour argues that we need to develop a "sociology of associations" that "*traces a network*" (RS 9,128). In going from metaphysics to ontology, this constructive sociology aims to show "what the *real* world is *really* like" (RS 117). As much as this project might seem to return to a naïve empiricism, Latour insists that empiricism is inadequate as a means for accounting for the world. He writes, "Empiricism no longer appears as the solid bedrock on which to build everything else, but as a very poor rendering of experience. This poverty, however, is not overcome by moving *away* from material experience, for instance to the 'rich human subjectivity,' but *closer* to the much variegated lives materials have to offer. It's not true that one should fight reductionism by adding some human, symbolic, subjective, or social 'aspect' to the description since reductionism, to begin with, does not render justice to objective facts" (RS 111–12). Good descriptions are in a sense rich, but not because they truck with imponderables like human experience or human nature. They are close, but they are not deep; rather than adding anything "extra" to the description, they account for the real variety that is already there.

Latour's proposed solution to the actor/system (or macro/micro) debate is to refuse the distinction. This alternation should be set aside, he argues, so that the work of assembling the social can take place. Latour figures this work of assembly as textual: his two key models are literature and cartography. He identifies the difference between a standard sociological report and a good description as a "literary contrast" (RS 130) and argues that social scientists "should be inspired in being at least as disciplined, as enslaved by reality, as obsessed by textual quality, as good writers can be" (RS 126). Literature offers accounts of the world that are

faithful, detailed, and complex, and that trace networks. Maps provide another model for the activity of the sociologist, who should try to “keep the social flat” (RS 165): “Although social scientists are proud of having added volume to flat interactions, it turns out that they have gone too fast. By taking for granted this third dimension . . . they have withdrawn inquiry from the main phenomenon of social science: the very production of place, size, and scale. Against such a three-dimensional shape, we have to try to keep the social domain completely *flat*” (RS 171).

Latour’s embrace of flatness is an argument for the conceptual significance of networks; it is also an argument against phenomenology. For Latour, face-to-face interactions as represented in microsociology are no more concrete or real than hidden social forces. He writes, “Hermeneutics is not a privilege of humans but . . . a property of the world itself” (RS 245). Although Latour’s critique in *Reassembling the Social* is directed most explicitly at the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel, the repeated invocation of “face-to-face interactions” recalls Goffman, who developed the concept of the “interaction order.” While Goffman was invoked as a significant model for his concept of the actor-as-network in an earlier articulation of ANT, he is here critiqued along with other practitioners of microsociology for a belief in the authenticity and presence of small-scale social encounters.¹⁹ Goffman should not be assimilated to a phenomenological tradition of sociology, however. Although he focuses on the small worlds of face-to-face interactions, these worlds are flat: complex and variegated, but not rich, warm, or deep.

Like Latour, Goffman took great interest in literature as a mode of accounting for social life, and cited literary texts (novels, autobiographies, memoirs, literary case studies) extensively in his work. Despite his engagement with literary materials—and the textured, ironic quality of his prose—Goffman does not see literature as a storehouse of human potential, experience, or feeling. His accounts of the rituals and gestures of everyday interaction are full of details, but not rich or warm. Noting Goffman’s lack of attention to both structure and individual psychology, Anthony Giddens describes his work as “flat” and “empty.”²⁰ Goffman’s minimal account of his actors recalls Latour’s injunction to treat people like things; in his account of social interaction, Goffman drew on fields such as animal ethology, kinesics, and game theory that are less interested in motivation than in gestures, behavior, and pattern. Goffman drew extensively on the procedures of ethnomethodology, but distanced himself from the phenomenological aspects of the field, and from its emphasis on meaning. Goffman has also been associated with the tradition of symbolic interactionism founded by Herbert Blumer, but his lack of interest in questions of interpretation and symbolic mean-

ing also place him outside of this tradition. Goffman's accounts of the interaction order are difficult to fit into these categories because they are relentlessly thin and cold.

In his essay "Blurred Genres," Clifford Geertz takes Goffman's work as representative of the importance of the "game analogy" in the social sciences.²¹ Geertz describes how, for Goffman, social interactions are made up of stratagems, lies, ploys, and impostures to take advantage of the rules that condition a given setting. This probabilistic view of human relations does not produce a rich or rounded view of the social world; instead, Geertz writes, we get "tight, airless worlds of move and countermove, life *en règle*" (26). In his strict adherence to a game model of social interaction, Goffman avoids the usual "humanistic pieties," offering instead a descriptive account of the games people play and the moves they make.

A good example of Goffman's abstract, thin form of description can be found in his essay "The Insanity of Place," in which he argues that mental illness does not inhere in persons but in places, situations, and institutions. His larger point is that the "deepest nature of an individual is only skin-deep, the deepness of his others' skin."²² In a footnote, Goffman illustrates this principle by describing the distribution of social attention on the street as it affects two figures, a "black wino" and a "blond model":

For an analytical illustration, consider an extreme comparison: a black wino and a blond model . . . Consider the eye practices each must face from . . . walkers-by.

The wino: A walker-by will take care to look at him fleetingly if at all, wary lest the wino find an angle from which to establish eye-to-eye contact and then disturb the passage with prolonged salutations, besmearing felicitations, and other importunements and threats. Should the wino persist in not keeping his place, the discourtesy of outright head-aversion may be necessary.

The model: A walker-by will fix her with an open gaze for as many moments as the passage will allow without his having to turn his head sharply. During this structured moment of staring he may well be alert in fantasy for any sign she makes interpretable as encouraging his attentions. Note that this helter-skelter gallantry remains very well in check, no danger to the free flow of human traffic, for long ago the model will have learned her part in this ceremony, which is to conduct her eyes downward and unseeing, in silent sufferance of exposure.²³

In this passage, Goffman provides a snapshot of quotidian behavior in order to illustrate his claim about the way that different kinds of persons suffer the attention and inattention of others on the street. The example implicitly supports his claim that identity should be understood as an effect rather than a cause in such interactions. Because Goffman is fluent

in the language of midcentury deviance studies—invoking off-handedly the cliché figures of the “blond model” and the “black wino”—it would be easy to mistake his casting of these actors as an ontology. But the “extreme contrast” that Goffman invokes in the opening of the passage is not the contrast between two different kinds of people; he does not allude to the “facts” of race, gender, and class, but rather to extreme differences in habitual behavior.

It is of course impossible to account for behavior without any projection of a “rear world” of intentions, structures, or values.²⁴ There is no such thing as a “pure” description, since every description entails an interpretation of some kind.²⁵ Goffman projects an assumed background of cultural values, and even hints at an interior world colored by desire—though by using “fantasy” in the sense of “delusion” in this context he undermines the psychological connotation of the term. His use of the word “ceremony” is caught in the same undertow, since the ritual significance of the term is hollowed out by what Geertz identifies as Goffman’s “play-it-as-it-lays ethic.”²⁶ Each term that might carry a greater “human” significance—an account of interiority, sensation, affect, or motivation—is systematically excluded or ironized. What is left is an account of mere behavior, Geertz’s “thick description” in reverse. Geertz drew his notion of thick description from Gilbert Ryle’s discussion of “eye behavior”; he distinguished between a “thin” description that details all the physical components of a wink and a “thick” description that offers a richer account of significance, cultural context, and layers of individual intention. In his account of “eye behavior” on the street, Goffman favors thin description. Even when he zooms in to address individual agency or zooms out to account for social structure, his account is wholly constituted by minute descriptions of visible, physical acts; no atmosphere of experience or feeling can emerge, and “cultural context” is a dead letter.

The distance of Goffman’s descriptive method from rich, humanist portraiture is pronounced in the closing comment of his essay “Role Distance.” Discussing the distinction between socially enforced roles and natural action, he writes,

There is a vulgar tendency in social thought to divide the conduct of the individual into a profane and sacred part . . . The profane part is attributed to the obligatory world of social roles; it is formal, stiff, and dead; it is exacted by society. The sacred part has to do with “personal” matters and “personal” relationships—with what an individual is “really” like underneath it all when he relaxes and breaks through to those in his presence. It is here, in this personal capacity, that an individual can show “what kind of a guy he is.” And so it is, that in showing that a given piece of conduct is part of the obligations and trappings

of a role, one shifts it from the sacred category to the profane, from the fat and living to the thin and dead. Sociologists qua sociologists are allowed to have the profane part; sociologists qua persons, along with other persons, retain the sacred for their friends, their wives, and themselves.

The concept of role distance helps to combat this touching tendency to keep a part of the world safe from sociology.²⁷

Goffman argues that human activity cannot be divided up into realms of authentic action and stereotyped or conventional behavior.²⁸ Instead, everything is conventional performance—the “real guy” relaxing at home just as much as the working stiff in the office. Goffman summarily rejects the “sacred” qualities of personal life and individuality, but this passage is more than a rejection of the “values” of humanism (and its religious underpinnings). It is also a statement on method. Goffman refuses to keep the world safe from sociology, which is to say that he refuses to represent people and their activities in the sacralizing terms in which they see them. While this might sound like an act of unveiling, Goffman suggests that unveiling itself is an ideology—like trading in your jacket and tie for a sports shirt when you get home. For him, there is no more authentic reality to get to; his method is not one of revelation but, I would suggest, one of redescription. The world as he renders it is not “fat and living” but “thin and dead.”

Both Latour and Goffman argue against the ideology of humanism; in this sense, they are not all that different from many literary critics working today. What distinguishes them, though, is that they engage in analytical procedures—ANT and microsociology—that are corrosive of humanist values. Their preference for a world in which the human is not primary, and in which sacred human qualities of warmth, intention, depth, and authenticity don’t hold water, marks their difference. In their attempts to keep the social world flat, they read closely but not deeply. This approach leaves no room for the ghosts of humanism haunting contemporary practices of textual interpretation. It also leaves little room for the ethical heroism of the critic, who gives up his role of interpreting divine messages to take up a position as a humble analyst and observer. In the following reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, I want to suggest that this model makes visible the antihumanism of a text that has generally been understood as an exemplary instance of humanist ethics.

Description has had a mostly poor reputation in literary studies, where it has been seen as inferior to narration. In neoclassical aesthetics, de-

scription as a feature of literary texts was often seen as either an extraneous ornament or a dangerous indulgence.²⁹ In Marxist aesthetics, it was seen as a capitulation to a reified world.³⁰ As a feature of criticism itself, description has been discredited through its associations with empiricism and seen as necessarily subordinate to the key activity of interpretation. However, recent questioning of depth hermeneutics across the field has meant a partial recuperation of description. Over the past several years, several critics have attempted to imagine alternatives to what, following Paul Ricoeur, has come to be known as critical hermeneutics or the hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur famously identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as members of the “school of suspicion,” characterizing their key technique as the destruction of sacred meanings through the revelation of “the whole of consciousness as ‘false’ consciousness.”³¹ In an influential article, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Stream?” Latour claims that, in an era of universal suspicion, the project of critical unveiling has reached the end of its utility; he argues that instead of trying to see through the facts we should try to “get closer to them.”³² In place of critique, Latour claims that we need to work toward a renewed empiricism, one that involves the processes of description expounded on at greater length in *Reassembling the Social*.

A return to empiricism is evident also in some recent work in literary studies that makes description—but not close reading—central. Such an emphasis is evident, for example, in the increased reliance on statistical analysis and other forms of data mining in the “new sociologies of literature.” Moretti’s recent work on taxonomy and genre borrows from the natural sciences, and reflects the empirical and descriptive bias of these disciplines. Especially in fields like bibliography and material text studies, a disengagement from critical hermeneutics—and, more generally, from the kind of speculative and abstract thought so common during the heyday of literary theory—is pronounced. The focus on description rather than conceptualization in book history has led one critic to refer to recent developments in the field as the “New Boredom.”³³

A search for alternatives to critical hermeneutics is also underway in other, less empirically oriented branches of literary studies. This interrogation of critical hermeneutics has produced several promising new methods—including, most notably, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “reparative reading” and Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best’s notion of “surface reading.”³⁴ While reparative reading (derived from the work of Melanie Klein) is primarily an ethical category for Sedgwick, Best and Marcus’s surface reading represents an important attempt to develop a mode of reading that departs from a depth hermeneutics and is primarily descriptive in its orientation. In their introduction to a special issue of *Representa-*

tions in which they survey recent departures from critical hermeneutics (“The Way We Read Now”), Marcus and Best describe surface reading as a method that attends to what is most obvious about texts, that takes them “at face value.” They describe this form of reading as literal rather than symptomatic; in reading “with the grain,” it considers what texts do say, rather than what they don’t or can’t. This technique is significant because, like the descriptive method of Latour and Goffman, it is a form of close reading that does not presume depth. For this reason, surface reading might offer critics a way to continue the work of textual analysis beyond the horizon of the “pedagogical imperative.”

In an attempt to test this hypothesis, I now turn to *Beloved*. My sense that Morrison’s novel is an especially consequential site for considering the stakes of a turn to description is derived from a comment that Best and Marcus make about the technique of literal, surface reading. They argue that by refusing symptomatic, paranoid modes of reading, critics might see “ghosts as presences, not absences”; shifting the optic from depth to surface would mean letting “ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts of.”³⁵ Given the profound investment that critics and readers have in the figure of *Beloved*, a refusal of depth hermeneutics represents a significant shift in not only method but ethics. Morrison’s ghost literally incarnates Sethe’s murdered daughter; she has also been understood as incarnating the losses of American slavery and the Middle Passage, the “Sixty Million and More” of the novel’s dedication.³⁶ In reading the novel at the surface, in attending to its use of description and its literalism, I suggest what might be gained—and also perhaps lost—through a renunciation of depth hermeneutics.

Beloved has generally been understood as the richest of literary productions, both because of the complexity, density, and lyricism of its language and because of its moving account of the interiority of the disenfranchised. The literary and ethical significance of *Beloved* is amplified because, responding to the violent erasures of the archive and to racialist science that denied full human subjectivity to blacks, Morrison imagines the motivations, desires, sensations, and feelings of individuals who were meant to have none. *Beloved* has been celebrated for its embrace of other ways of knowing across a range of fields. Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* closes with a tour-de-force reading of *Beloved* that sees the novel as opening a path to an “other sociology.”³⁷ Whether or not *Beloved* can light the way to another kind of sociology, there is no doubt that what are understood as the countersociological elements of the text have been crucial to its appeal to a range of critics, including sociologists.³⁸ These readings have done justice to the richness and imaginative power of the novel. They

have been less effective in coming to terms with aspects of the text that are empirical, descriptive, or “merely sociological.”

As is well known, Morrison was inspired to write *Beloved* after reading a newspaper article describing the infanticide of Margaret Garner. Although the character Stamp Paid articulates a strong critique of the newspaper (“there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear” [*B* 183]), the novel owes its origin to a news clipping.³⁹ One of the few critics to recognize the significance of the documentary impulse in Morrison’s work is Stanley Crouch, who published a scathing review of *Beloved* upon its publication. In the midst of a general attack on what he sees as Morrison’s sentimentality, Crouch singles out her gift for realist description. He writes, “Morrison is best at clear, simple description, and occasionally she can give an account of the casualties of war and slavery that is free of false lyricism or stylized stoicism.”⁴⁰ Although Crouch concedes that Morrison can portray some of the costs of “war and slavery,” he mostly praises her descriptions of quotidian events in everyday life—he cites a passage approvingly where Sethe makes biscuits. I want to follow up on his suggestion—mostly ignored by later critics—that Morrison’s primary gift is one of neutral, detailed description. However, I argue that, instead of merely providing a background for the events of the novel, Morrison’s descriptions are central to her representation of “war and slavery.” I look specifically at Morrison’s first account of Beloved’s murder; in this scene, Morrison lets the camera roll, recording circumstances and actions with minimal intervention.

Many critics have written about the representation of the murder in *Beloved*. This moment when Sethe decides to kill her children rather than see them returned into slavery is arguably the ethical climax of the novel. However, critics’ accounts tend to focus disproportionately on the version of these events told from Sethe’s perspective—an “inside view” that recounts her emotions, sensations, memories, and desires. Few have chosen to write about the first version of the event, which is narrated not from Sethe’s perspective but from the perspective of those who have come to capture her.⁴¹ This account lacks psychological depth and linguistic richness. The point of view in the passage switches back and forth between the slave catcher, the schoolteacher, and his nephew, all of whom cast a dehumanizing objectifying gaze on Sethe. In addition to these discernible optics, the passage moves in and out of another vantage point, a blankly descriptive point of view that is ascribed to no one in particular. The paragraph that describes Sethe’s act of violence combines this exterior perspective with a point of view that can be identified as the slave catcher’s:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother’s swing. (*B* 175)

This outside view follows Sethe’s gestures without making sense of them. The blow-by-blow account—“holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other”—recalls the careful tracking of gestures throughout this scene. The difference between the narrator’s perspective (purely descriptive, neutral) and the slave catcher’s perspective (dehumanizing, rapacious) is difficult to identify in this moment. The use throughout of phrases like “nigger woman” and “old nigger boy” signals the perspective of the slave catcher. But the interpolated phrase “in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at” suggests the presence of the narrator, who, riffing on the earlier phrase “what they were looking for,” indicates the act but stops short of a full description.

Why does Morrison choose to represent the murder first from this flattening, dehumanizing, exterior perspective? In his essay “Sethe’s Choice,” James Phelan argues that, although Morrison leaves the interpretation of the scene open, she nonetheless carefully guides the reader through better and worse interpretations of the act. For Phelan, the perspective of the slave catcher is presented unambiguously as a negative example for the reader. He writes, “After seeing Sethe from the inside for so long, we feel emotionally, psychologically—and ethically—jarred by seeing from what is such an alien perspective, one that thinks of her as a ‘nigger woman’ and as a ‘creature’ . . . Indeed, Morrison has chosen to narrate this first telling from an ethical perspective that we easily repudiate.”⁴² For Phelan, the significance of the passage is pedagogical; what the reader learns to do in this scene is to reject the racist perspective of the slave catcher.⁴³

I want to argue by contrast that this scene asks more of the reader than ethical repudiation. For one thing, the proximity between the narrator’s perspective and the slave catcher’s makes simple repudiation difficult. Although we may be horrified by the slave catcher, his perspective cannot be cleanly extracted from the narration; we are left with the haunting sense of a narrator who looks on this scene and does not care. That this scene cannot be read as merely a negative exemplum is suggested by Morrison’s care in describing the physical realities of the scene. Rather than reading this scene as an object lesson in failed empathy, we might

see it as an instance of a documentary aesthetic in the novel. As Phelan notes, the objectivity of the perspective calls attention to the horror of Sethe's act; however, this objectivity also makes legible material processes of dehumanization. Although dehumanization cannot be understood outside of a humanist framework, Morrison renders it here as a technique, a material process, rather than an ideology. Following Latour's discussion of "flattening out accounts" in *Reassembling the Social*, we can see how close Morrison stays to her objects here as she traces the associations between the human actors and a woodshed, sawdust, wall planks, and a saw. The products of this circuit are ideological—"schoolteacher" and "slave catcher" as well as "nigger woman" and "old nigger boy"—but they are also real. Dehumanization, rather than being a kind of false consciousness that can be exorcised through cultivating an inside view, is a process with real effects: it is a fact, if not a truth.

Beloved aims to return interiority and agency to those to whom it was denied, but full restoration is never achieved in the novel. In the final pages of the book, Morrison suggests that the figure of Beloved cannot finally be rescued: "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (*B* 323). In this moment, Morrison suggests that no one—not even Morrison herself—can reverse the processes that have stripped Beloved of a future and recognition. She also links this insight through a verbal echo back to schoolteacher's reflection at the murder scene: "Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim" (*B* 175). While the narrator suggests that no full recovery of Beloved can ever be achieved, schoolteacher simply means that no further value can be extracted from the human beings in the woodshed. Through such echoes, the ethical and historical distance of the narrator from the scene in the woodshed is diminished. Less a witness than a documentarian, Morrison conveys the horrors of slavery not by voicing an explicit protest against it but by describing its effects.

Such moments in the novel draw us up short, turning our attention to the flatness, objectivity, and literalism in this famously "deep" novel. I would suggest that reading *Beloved* at the surface allows us to see Morrison's project as registering the losses of history rather than repairing them. In the world of the novel, where so much seems to depend on our ability to read deeply, to access the "more" of the dedication, it can be difficult to forego the dream of restoring agency, voice, and interiority to those to whom they have been denied. In her accounting of the

facts of dehumanization, and in her final warning to readers—"This is not a story to pass on" (*B* 324)—Morrison draws attention to what is irrecoverable in the historical record. Sometimes we have to let ghosts be ghosts.

In juxtaposing Morrison with Goffman and Latour, I am not, of course, denying the crucial differences—both generic and political—between literature and sociology, between an African-American historical novel and French theory, between a record of the violence of slavery and accounts of social games in midcentury America or experiments in the laboratory. Morrison's account of dehumanization needs to be distinguished from the decentering of the human that Latour pursues in his object-oriented philosophy, and from Goffman's assiduously neutral portraits of social interactions. The flat description of the murder scene stands out in contrast to other deeper and richer moments in the novel; the blank gaze of the observer in this scene is meaningful in part because of the ethical and political commitments of the novel as a whole. Morrison's engagements contrast with Goffman's observational method, and his strict agnosticism about the social role of the critic, and with the refusal of humanist ethics in Latour's work.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, I have tried to show crucial continuities across these divergent works in order to suggest the relevance of descriptive sociological method for literary studies. In contrast to other recent borrowings from sociological method, such an approach does not sacrifice the close analysis of texts. However, it does suggest a significant departure from the humanist underpinnings of traditional close reading. In particular, by refusing the role of privileged messenger prescribed by hermeneutics and emphasizing instead the minimalist but painstaking work of description, this approach undermines the ethical charisma of the critic.⁴⁵

In recent calls for alternatives to critical hermeneutics in literary studies, scholars have tended to focus on the need to suspend routine activities of unveiling and demystification, to train ourselves out of habits of paranoia and suspicion. There is no doubt that literary scholars are well schooled in the hermeneutics of suspicion. What is often forgotten in these discussions, though, is the fact that, for Ricoeur, the "hermeneutic field" is "internally at variance with itself." Interpretation is defined by a tension between demystification and what he calls the "restoration of meaning." Interpretation as recollection of meaning returns us to the realm of sacred hermeneutics; according to Ricoeur, it is this faith in "a

revelation through the word” that “animates [his] research.” He identifies this tension in all interpretive practices, even in the writings of the masters of suspicion. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud “clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of *interpreting*.”⁴⁶

The “depth” of “depth hermeneutics” should be understood not only as the hidden structures or causes that suspicious critics reveal. Depth is also a dimension that critics attempt to produce in their readings, by attributing life, richness, warmth, and voice to texts. The long history of close reading suggests that we carry a longing for a “new reign of Truth” in our institutional DNA, in the “art of interpreting” that still defines us. It is this hermeneutics of recognition and empathy—originally sacred and now grounded in an unacknowledged but powerful humanism—that defines literary studies, even in an age of suspicion. In the academic division of labor, literary critics still tend to that part of the world that has been “kept safe from sociology.” A turn from interpretation to description might be one way to give up that ghost. But who among us is willing to exchange the fat and the living for the thin and the dead?

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NOTES

1 Cleanth Brooks, “The Heresy of Paraphrase” in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Harcourt, 1942): 192–214, 212–13; Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1008 [1950]), xxi.

2 For Williams, literature is particularly well suited for the analysis of “structures of feeling,” the paradigmatic form of an emergent cultural formation. Such emergent elements of culture (along with residual elements) suggest to Williams that “no *mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention*.” Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977): 121–27, 125. Emphasis in original. See also “Structures of Feeling” in the same volume (128–35).

3 Morris Dickstein, “The Rise and Fall of Practical Criticism: From I.A. Richards to Barthes and Derrida,” in *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Wilfrido Howard Corral (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005): 60–77; Dorothy J. Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century” *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 896–905. As Hale points out, many of those involved in the new ethical criticism are influenced by poststructuralism and do not identify as humanists (Derek Attridge, J. Hillis Miller, Gayatri Spivak).

4 For a discussion of the tension between “critiques of humanism as an academic discourse” and “humanism at the more ‘common sense’ level of values” in the context of an argument about the rise of new forms of humanism in the academy, see Terry Flew, “Creativity, the ‘new humanism’ and cultural studies” *Continuum* 18, no. 2 (2004): 161–78.

- 5 See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 3 and John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 262.
- 6 Ian Hunter, "The History of Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Autumn 2006): 78–112.
- 7 Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 214, 157.
- 8 One might compare Hunter's discussion of the literary instructor as "moral exemplar" with Guillory's discussion of Paul de Man's disavowed pedagogical charisma in the age of theory. See Hunter, "The Humanities without Humanism," *Meanjin* 51, no. 3 (1992): 479–90 and Guillory, *Culture Capital*, 488.
- 9 James F. English, "Literary Studies," *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Tony Bennett and John Frow (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 126–44. English goes on to argue that "neither the 'theory revolution' of the late 1960s and 1970s nor the 'cultural turn' of the 1980s . . . has truly dislodged the framework that was put into place in the discipline's first half century" (133).
- 10 Catherine Gallagher, "The History of Literary Criticism," *Daedalus* 126, no. 1 (1997): 133–53. English supports this point, noting that "scholars trained on the practical/New Critical method took very readily to deconstruction" (135).
- 11 Hortense J. Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date," *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003): 428–70.
- 12 Leah Price, "Reading Matter," *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 9–16.
- 13 See Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (Jan–Feb 2000): 57.
- 14 English, "Literary Studies," 141.
- 15 While in this essay I focus on the potential of observational social science as a model for a renewed practice of description in literary criticism, there are descriptive methods in literary studies that one might look to as well, for instance in narratology and some forms of semiotics. See, for instance, Roland Barthes's discussion of the distinction between connotation and denotation in *S/Z* (as well as the "step by step" [12] reading he performs of Balzac's *Sarrasine*). Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974 [1970]), 6–9.
- 16 François Dosse, *Empire of Meaning: The Humanization of the Social Sciences*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999 [1995]), 149. Dosse takes the term from an article by Quéré, whose research seminar on epistemology at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales he credits with the birth of a "new sociology" (49). See Louis Quéré, "Le Tournant descriptif en sociologie," *Current Sociology* 40, no. 139 (1992): 130–65. For a later account of the descriptive turn, see Odile Piriou, "Le nouveau tournant de la sociologie en France dans les années 2000" *Sociologies Pratiques*, "Agir en sociologie—Comprendre, débattre, concevoir, accompagner" 1, no. 16 (2008): 123–30.
- 17 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 136–37 (hereafter cited as *RS*).
- 18 Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 14. See, for further discussion of this point, Latour's comparison between the antitechnological world of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and "our own intellectual universe" in Latour, *Aramis or the Love of Technology*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), vii–viii.
- 19 Writing in 1992, John Law cites Erving Goffman (and symbolic interactionism in general) as developing a notion of the actor as "a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network." Law, "Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy, and Heterogeneity" *Systems Practice* 5 (1992): 379–93.

- 20 Anthony Giddens, "Goffman as a Systematic Social Theorist," in *Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction Order*, ed. Paul Drew and Anthony Wootton (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 278.
- 21 Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 24–26.
- 22 Erving Goffman, "The Insanity of Place," in *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), 363.
- 23 Goffman, "Insanity," 375–76, n 26.
- 24 The term is Latour's. *Reassembling the Social*, 107.
- 25 Considering the problematic status of sociological explanation, Quéré writes, "La description pure et simple semble alors offrir une position de repli. Mais qu'est-ce qu'une description 'pure et simple,' s'agissant de faits sociaux qui sont médiatisés par des systèmes symboliques? Toute description suppose en effet une compréhension du sens et une interprétation, sans quoi il n'y a rien d'intelligible à décrire." "Le Tournant Descriptif," 140.
- 26 Geertz, "Blurred Genres," 25.
- 27 Goffman, "Role Distance," *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961): 83–152.
- 28 Cf. Latour's dismissal of the distinction between "action" and "behavior" in *Reassembling the Social* (61). Although Latour is more interested in the distinction between human and nonhuman agency than in the difference between authentic and inauthentic human activity, the rhetoric of his denunciation suggests a continuity in the two positions (and also that existentialism is a key, if largely unnamed, object of critique for both). He writes, "A billiard ball hitting another one on the green felt of a billiard table might have exactly as much agency as a 'person' directing her 'gaze' to the 'rich human world' of another 'meaningful face' in the smoke-filled room of the pub where the tables have been set up" (61).
- 29 See Philippe Hamon's account in which he discusses the history of polemics against the hypertrophy of description. Hamon, "Towards a Theory of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 1–26.
- 30 The classic Marxist argument against description is Lukács's argument for the superiority of the horse-racing scene in *Anna Karenina* over the scene at the races in Zola's *Nana*. Lukács's preference for descriptions that are narrative rather than static recalls the classical form of ekphrasis which, as Janice Hewlett Koelb points out, embraces narrative "in its most vivid forms." See Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur D. Kahn (London: Merlin, 1970). Also see Koelb, *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.
- 31 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), 28, 33.
- 32 Latour, "Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225–48.
- 33 David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18.
- 34 "Reparative reading" is a term Sedgwick introduced in her essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You," originally published as the introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 1–37. "Surface reading" is a method described by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their introduction to a special issue they edited of *Representations* called "The Way We Read Now." In conceptualizing surface reading, they draw heavily on the method of "just reading" that Marcus developed in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. See Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21 and

Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

35 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 13.

36 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004 [1987]), np (hereafter cited as *B*).

37 Gordon writes, "This other sociology stretches at the limit of our imagination and at the limit of what is representable in the time of the now, to us, as the social world we inhabit" (150).

38 See for instance Patricia Ticineto Clough, *The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

39 We can also see the importance of documentary forms to Morrison in her editorial involvement in *The Black Book*, a scrapbook that included newspaper clippings, patents, advertisements, and bills of sale. See *The Black Book*, comp. Middleton Harris, et al., ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Random House, 1974). See also Morrison, "Behind the Making of *The Black Book*," in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2008).

40 Stanley Crouch, "Aunt Medea," originally in *The New Republic* 197, 19 October 1987 (38–43), reprinted in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Barbara H. Solomon (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 70.

41 James Phelan's reading (discussed below) is a notable exception. Mae G. Henderson also notes that "the first full representation of the events surrounding the infanticide [is] figured from a collective white/male perspective." Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (London: Routledge, 1991), 78.

42 James Phelan, "Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading," in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2001): 100.

43 Phelan's reading is echoed by Mark McGurl: "As a textbook example of what in high school English classes they still call, after E. M. Forster, a 'flat' character, [schoolteacher's] presence in the novel is all but allegorical, a token not of the complexity of human motives but of an abstract set of values tending toward pure evil. Or rather, it is structural, his simple badness functioning as a dialectical foil for the ethical complexity of Sethe's desperate act of infanticide" (346). Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

44 While Latour's recent work (especially in *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy and Reassembling the Social*) takes up questions of politics, ANT has long been seen as ethically disengaged and as resistant to work on race, class, gender, and sexuality in STS in the 1980s and 1990s. Law takes a strong position against the confusion of sociology and ethics in "Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network," arguing that they should "inform" each other, but that "they are not identical" (383). For critical accounts of Latour along these lines, see Robert Proctor, *Value-Free Science?: Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991) and Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For a recent argument that claims that Latour's sociology is "not a pushing-aside of ethics, but rather an extension of it," see Mariam Fraser, "The Ethics of Reality and Virtual Reality: Latour, Facts, and Values," *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 2 (2006): 45–72.

45 Compare with Best and Marcus's claim that surface reading challenges the notion of "professional criticism as a strenuous and heroic endeavor," 5–6.

46 Ricoeur, *Freud*, 27–33.