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Elizabeth Bott-Spillius

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Elizabeth Bott Spillius: Erving Goffman in Toronto, Chicago and London

Dr. Elizabeth Bott Spillius wrote this memoir at the request of Dr. Ruth Horowitz and approved posting the present version in the Goffman Archives.

[Posted 03-18-10]

February 2010

Dear Dr Horowitz, I can't discover any lost manuscripts by Erving, unfortunately. All I can do is tell you something of my experiences of knowing him.

I first met Erving in 1942 or '43 in an anthropology class at the University of Toronto. He must have been 20 or 21 at the time, I was 2 years younger. He was from Winnipeg and most of his friends at this time were from the Canadian Film Board.

The class was being taught by an exciting young lecturer from Chicago called Ray Birdwhistell. (He was a welcome change from his predecessor, Reo Fortune.) After the lecture, which in any case was more of a free-for-all discussion than a lecture, we went to the basement bar across the street where Erving held forth on whatever topic took his fancy, usually the social behaviour of the other customers.

Birdwhistell's approach was unprecedented. He gave us extraordinary topics to write essays on. Mine was to do a sociological analysis of the humour of *New Yorker* cartoons. Unfortunately I don't remember the topic Erving was given. Erving told me what to say in my essay, I then wrote it and got A+ and Erving got a D for his. He said to me, '**You** are an exam-passer, **I** am a misunderstood genius!' One never knew whether he was joking or serious – perhaps both. (But of course years later we all knew he was a genius.) After that Birdwhistell refused to give any of us any marks at all, and we heard that he was then had up before the University authorities for non-conformity.

By then Erving and I had become quite close friends. He got me to read Durkheim, Lloyd Warner and Talcott Parsons, among others. I'd already found Gregory Bateson somehow or other, even before University. (I thought Warner was superficial and Parsons was a longwinded bore. How judgemental.) We also read Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. In our last year at Toronto I got a fellowship to the University of Chicago (the exam-passer

again) and went to the department of Human Development, and Erving went to the Sociology Department. I gathered that all of his professors except Everett Hughes (also a Canadian, like Erving and me) were the sort of sociologist who counts things, usually trivial things. I think one of them wrote about social thought – very rarefied and out of touch with how people live. I do remember that it wasn't all so bad – I think there was someone who had done a study of a local community within a city, but I can't remember who. (You'd think I would have.) Meanwhile I changed from Human Development to Anthropology, even though I had greatly liked Allison Davis at the Human Development department, for whom I had done a study of a working class family who lived near the University. I didn't tell them I was observing them, and I decided I would never do that sort of 'under-cover' observation again.

At this time, about 1946 or '47, Erving had a night job as a watchman on a building site although he spent most of his nights playing poker nearby at a friend's flat. I'm sure he made much more money from the poker than from watching over the building site. Various friends used to alert him when inspectors came to the site so that he could appear to be attending to his duties. But in any case I don't think anything was ever stolen from the site.

Erving was rather difficult to have as a friend. If one took him to visit people for dinner, people he didn't know, he would look up and down their bookcases and audibly pronounce on their social class and cultural pretensions – and then he would watch their confused response to this forbidden social infringement.

For me the change to the Anthropology Department didn't work out very well. With the exception of Fred Eggan, all the staff were interested only in 'culture', not in social structure, which was what Erving and I wanted to study. I passed all their PhD exams, as of course Erving said I would, and then Fred Eggan told me that he thought I would never be happy in American anthropology and that I ought to go to England where, he said, everyone thought the way I did. And so I wrote to the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and to my amazement they offered me a teaching job. (I soon realised that there weren't any PhD qualifying exams in the British system – a vast improvement on American procedures.) Meanwhile Erving arranged to do field work on the Shetland Islands – I don't remember how that was arranged. It was 1949.

Every now and again Erving used to come down to London from the Shetlands to visit me and have a bit of a rest. He didn't say much about the Shetlands except that he spent most of his time in the hotel kitchen listening to the way the staff talked about the customers. (Very Erving, of course.)

In the early 1950s I left the LSE to do research on ordinary London families at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. (Not the Tavistock Clinic!) And there I spent the happiest 6 years of my professional life, which ended with the publication of my book, *Family and Social Network*. On his visits I told Erving about this work, but I don't think he influenced it. Later on he used to tease me by comparing it with Michael Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*, but for once I knew this was just teasing.

In any case by this time he was very much engrossed in writing *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Also his personal life was changing). He had met Schuyler Choate sometime earlier. I'm not sure when they married, but it must have been some time in the 1950s after his work in the Shetlands.

Meanwhile Erving presented *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* for his PhD. I heard later that the professorial head counters did not like it at all, and that it was Everett Hughes who helped him get through the ordeal successfully.

Some years later I went to visit Schuyler and Erving in Washington when he was writing *Asylums*. He was working on it at home in their small flat, and Schuyler and Tom used to go out – at least that's what happened for the short time I was there. More groundbreaking work, as I knew it would be. Then they went to Berkeley and I got married (in England of course, though to a Canadian) and went to the Kingdom of Tonga doing anthropology until 1960, and then I was taken up with having a daughter in 1960, a son in 1964, and doing the training to become a psychoanalyst. (I thought that would be easier to combine with having children.) In March of 1964 a friend of Erving sent a dreadful message. Schuyler had killed herself. Erving and I had been somewhat estranged but I phoned and wrote and tried everything I could think of that I thought would help him. As if anything could. I think perhaps it was bringing up his son that saved him, but I don't really know. How could anyone live through that. I knew how he had helped Schuyler when she had a breakdown – there is that extraordinary paper when he describes how the afflicted one enters the room and the carer (he doesn't use that word) looks quickly around to make sure the scissors are out of sight. Oh Erving. And then there was that nasty Californian gossip that Erving had driven Schuyler mad. What nonsense. The gossips had no idea what he went through, how he cared for her and for his son. (I knew how he cared for them from mutual friends who had known us in Chicago and kept in touch with Erving and Schuyler in Berkeley.)

I saw him again later on in London – it must have been in 1972 or so, when I had left my husband and was living in an 1830s house with my two children,

then 12 and 8. Erving kept telling me I should use proper candles in the chandeliers and 18th century coverings for the candlesticks. I thought his old self was still there – any minute he might start a sociological analysis of my bookshelves. But he didn't do that. Instead he gave my 12 year old daughter an interactional analysis of the Charley Brown books. She listened carefully and then said, 'Erving, you've got it all wrong!' She ran upstairs and brought down 5 Charley Brown books and showed him: 'The dog talked to this one and the boy can only talk to that one and as for Lucy –. Erving looked her straight in the eye and said, 'You're worse than your mother!' She was immensely pleased. My son was not, needless to say. But he softened a little later when someone told him that Monty Python had used Erving's ideas in their programmes.

I'd realised by this time that Erving had become a guru – I hadn't kept up with his writings – I was deeply involved in Freud and Klein by this time and busy with children and earning a living, but it was always a delight when Erving visited.

I visited Erving a few years later when he was married to Gillian and living in their lovely house in Philadelphia. And he visited us in London once more, this time with Gillian and the baby. He said he had a stomach pain. The beginning.

There was a last phone call. He rang to ask me to send some silver he had bought in Portobello Market to Gillian, and of course I said I would. And then I said, 'But that's not the only reason you're ringing, I think', and he said 'No'. So we said goodbye as best we could.

Later Gillian visited and told me of the dreadful days of Erving in hospital, and of how they would not let his little girl visit him when he was still himself, and then finally said she could come to see him when he was no longer the father she knew.

I heard a little about Gillian from time to time, and about Erving's son with Schuyler, who, I gather, has become a talented cancer specialist.