

Description

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THE thick description developed by Gilbert Ryle and Clifford Geertz that became the foundation of New Historicism was a method for weaving a complex web of intention and meaning around a small kernel of observation. More recently, literary critics have begun rejecting thick description in favor of thin description—a method that strips away the stuff of phenomenological fullness and interiority and defers interpretive plenitude in order to better reveal the kernel of observed reality underneath. We might then speak of a New Description coming to displace the New Historicism. The proponents of the New Description seek to remake literary study on the model of the “exhaustive, fine-grained attention to phenomena” developed by the more stringently empirical branches of social science.¹ Of course, fieldwork is rarely included in literary study. Working at a remove from observation proper, descriptive critics therefore center their own fine-grained attention on descriptions in literary texts—most typically, novels—that display a similarly painstaking attention to phenomena.² For literary study now, description is thus both a method and an object.

In key respects, the critical turn to the New Description is also a return to questions and methods that emerged during the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, as today, description was a transdisciplinary method, crossing multiple domains from natural history to the novel. By aiming to bring reading as close as possible to observation, the New Description in fact reanimates Victorian debates about where to draw the boundary between verbal and empirical knowledge. The increasing uncertainty surrounding that distinction in the nineteenth century is signaled by the emergence (first appearing in John Grote’s 1865 *Exploratio Philosophica*) of two new epistemological categories: knowledge by acquaintance, which we obtain through the direct presentation of a thing to our senses; and knowledge by description (also called “knowledge about”), which we obtain through a propositional account of a thing. While the difference between acquaintance and description seems fairly intuitive, these categories circulated widely in Victorian discussions of empiricism precisely because of productive disagreements over whether they might distinguish not only between reading about something and sensuously experiencing it but also between the different parts of sense experience itself. William James’s *Principles of Psychology*

(1890) used description and acquaintance to distinguish between what psychologists saw as the two elements of experience, sensation and perception. The function of sensation, he writes, “is that of mere *acquaintance* with a fact. Perception’s function, on the other hand, is knowledge *about* a fact.”³ Sensing a fact is becoming aware of simple qualities, like heat, resistance, or pain; the fact of mere acquaintance is stripped of all its relations, so utterly nude that it lacks a name (James calls it a *that*). The descriptive knowledge instantiated in perception, meanwhile, recognizes that fact’s relations to other facts that we have already or might in future become acquainted with and so ties them together into “the unity of a *thing* with a name.”⁴ The perceptible, James suggests, includes elements of intentionality and reference that reveal unexpected parallels between the direct observer and the descriptive literary critic.

While the New Description tends to be centered on novels, it thus participates in a broader intellectual history that played out across a range of Victorian institutions, observational and reading practices, and literary genres. The modern museum, for instance, develops in the nineteenth century as a space defined by the tension between acquaintance and description. Ruth Bernard Yeazell has recently shown how the picture titles now ubiquitous in galleries and museums evolved from the descriptions in catalogs, ledgers, and prints that allowed the gallery-going members of an emergent art-public to identify and keep track of what they were seeing.⁵ Description thus served as an indispensable aid to the democratization of art, but its supplemental necessity to the museum’s exhibition of objects also occasioned intractable debates about the nature of the instruction that museums are supposed to provide. So, whereas William Stanley Jevons argued in 1883 that “the purpose of a true Museum is to enable the student to see the things and realize sensually the qualities described in lessons or lectures . . . [that] cannot be learnt by words” and proposed that displays should replace “the senseless verbal teaching” predominant in schools, George Brown Goode famously defined the museum only a few years later as “*a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen*” and proposed that displays should be fitted out with descriptive labels, reference guides, and experts trained to give fuller descriptive details to curious spectators.⁶ The Victorian Aesthetic Movement, meanwhile, rejected the descriptive mediation of experts in the service of its own democratizing insistence on the primacy of direct sensuous encounters with art objects. “Is the meaning of a work of art,” Vernon Lee scoffed with representative

incredulity, “to depend on [the classical dictionaries of] Lempriere and Dr. William Smith?”⁷ At the same time, aestheticism itself specialized in descriptions. Those descriptions—perhaps best exemplified in Walter Pater’s famous description of the *Mona Lisa* as a kind of vampire—were often notoriously thick, so much so that Geertz holds up aestheticism as the fate of any thick describer who loses touch with the “hard surfaces of life.”⁸ But aestheticism included other descriptive models, such as the gallery diaries in which Lee and her lover, Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, recorded their physiological responses to art works. It was from these descriptions that Lee developed a quantitative, minimally interpretive method of literary criticism that one recent account identifies as the unacknowledged progenitor of distant reading.⁹

Situating the New Description within this longer methodological history, I suggest, can help us reframe our approach to literature and science. The groundbreaking work on Victorian literature and science by literary scholars such as George Levine and Gillian Beer tracked the circulation between writers and scientists of the ideas, tropes, and narratives that make up, as Beer puts it, “the patterns through which we apprehend experience and hence the patterns through which we condense experience in the telling of it.”¹⁰ Experience, here, is categorically distinct from the language of its description—the patterns of narrative and discourse through which it is apprehended and recounted. In contrast, the New Description, insofar as it conducts empirical analyses of textual descriptions, strives to make the language of description itself into the stuff of experience—an aim it shares with both aestheticism and Jamesian empiricism. For us now as well as for the Victorians, reading descriptively points towards a more robustly empirical account of how we make the world perceptually present in reading, and thus of how we make it real.

NOTES

1. Heather Love, “Close Reading and Thin Description,” *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (2013): 401–34, 404. See also Sharon Marcus, Stephen Best, and Heather Love, “Building a Better Description,” *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016): 1–21.
2. Cannon Schmitt astutely signals this dynamic of descriptive redoubling when he reframes what György Lukács characterizes as the novelist’s dilemma of whether to “Narrate or Describe” as a dilemma for the novel-reading critic in “Interpret or Describe?” See Cannon

- Schmitt, “Interpret or Describe?” *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016): 102–18.
3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1918), 2 (emphasis original).
 4. James, *Principles*, 78 (emphasis original).
 5. See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19–139.
 6. William Stanley Jevons, “The Use and Abuse of Museums,” in *The Emergence of the Modern Museum: an Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Sources*, ed. Jonah Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 290; and George Brown Goode, “The Museums of the Future,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), 433 (emphasis original).
 7. Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), 58–59.
 8. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.
 9. See Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 219–54.
 10. Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6.



Dialect

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AT the weekly meeting of the Manchester Literary Club on December 14, 1874, president George Milner read his essay “The Dialect of Lancashire Considered as a Vehicle for Poetry.” In it, he argues that the Lancashire dialect is not only more appropriate than but also superior to Standard English for use in poetry. In defending this position, Milner cites Alfred Tennyson’s use of Anglo-Saxon diction and Matthew Arnold’s assertion “about simplicity being the supreme style,”