

EXERCISES IN CRITICISM:
THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LITERARY CONSTRAINT

by

LOUIS BURY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2011

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Wayne Koestenbaum

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Mario Di Gangi

Date

Executive Officer

Wayne Koestenbaum

Ammiel Alcalay

Mary Anne Caws
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract
EXERCISES IN CRITICISM

by
Louis Bury

Advisor: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

My dissertation is an exercise in applied poetics, using constraint-based methods in order to write about constraint-based literature. I define constraint-based literature as literature that imposes rules and restrictions upon itself over and above the rules and restrictions (such as grammar and lexicon) inherent in language—as literature that understands itself as part of an avant-garde tradition whose most prominent precursor is the work of the OuLiPo, or “Workshop For Potential Literature,” a French writing group, founded in 1960 and still active today, whose purpose is to invent arbitrary constraints for the purposes of generating literary texts. When completed, my dissertation will contain ninety-nine short chapters, each of which follows a different compositional procedure. By tracing the lineage and enduring influence of early Oulipian classics, I argue that contemporary Anglophone writers have, in their adoption of constraint-based methods, transformed such methods from apolitical literary laboratory exercises into a form of cultural critique, whose usage is surprisingly widespread in contemporary Anglophone literature, particularly among poets and experimental novelists.

Preface

Oulipians: rats who construct the labyrinth from which they propose to escape.

- Raymond Queneau

I'm fascinated by those curious writers whose life's work consists in revising and re-revising one main project: Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass; Frederick Douglass' autobiography; Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. As a reader, I appreciate the manageability of an oeuvre based upon tightening and contraction rather than endless expansion. As a writer, I admire the endeavor's single-minded dedication and sympathize with its perfectionism: with its refusal to settle for anything less than the ideal version of a project the author nonetheless knew could never be attained.

The ideal version of Exercises in Criticism would consist of ninety-nine chapters of literary criticism, each written according to a different compositional rule or procedure, in homage to Raymond Queneau's ninety-nine stylistic variations in his fictional Exercises in Style. To fulfill my Ph.D. requirements at the CUNY Graduate Center, I wrote such a book – or a draft of it, at any rate – but, looking over the sum of what I had written, realized that much of it was expendable, not only because the project's initial conceit was quite broad in scope, but because there is a limit to how much interesting and useful work any one person can produce in a given period of time. The nature of that limit depends on the individual in question; my own, I suspect, is rather low.

This final, abridged version of the book represents, therefore, my solution to the literary labyrinth I constructed for myself: to preserve only those parts of the maze that seemed

worth preserving. My principle of selection had less to do with argumentative thoroughness and the chapters' interrelations and more to do with the intrinsic quality of the individual pieces: work that satisfied me rather than work that merely fulfilled a formal or argumentative obligation. This principle of revision is a form of perfectionist vanity on my part – not wanting to showcase my mediocrities – but it is also an implicit argument about the efficacy of artistic constraints and procedures: that they are most valuable, like scaffolding, for what they can help erect and not, as is sometimes assumed, as ends in themselves, immutable.

Now that it's completed, I've come to think of my dissertation project as a kind of self-imposed artistic-intellectual apprenticeship, a way of giving myself the permission, as well as the self-discipline, to become a writer in the specific way I wanted – or at least thought I wanted – to become one. As the project progressed, my focus sometimes drifted away from a consideration of constraint proper, to the point where, by project's end, I ceased to be interested in articulating ideas about constraint and instead became most interested in figuring out why I was interested in the subject in the first place. I don't consider these drifts to be a repudiation of the subject, but, rather, an affirmation of some of constraint's most instructive lessons: that all writing is always in some sense about writing itself; that what we call luck is nothing other than the mind's capacity to surprise itself; and that true freedom can only ever be taken, not given.

Table of Contents

Preamble	
Dissertation Prospectus	2
Introduction	13
Anticipatory Plagiary	
Raymond Roussel’s (New) Africa	35
Reading I <u>Remember</u>	41
The OuLiPo	
The Exercise and the Oulipo	48
The N+7 Form	60
Masturbation: A Manifesto	63
“Safety in Numbers”: A Class Discussion	70
Post-Oulipo	
Abish’s Africa	83
Bernadette Mayer’s Gratuitous Art	94
<u>Errata Suite</u> : 20 Questions	99
<u>Gold Fools</u> and the Question of Narrative	104
Ideas for an Essay on <u>the tapeworm foundry</u>	109
<u>Cunt-ups</u> : An Exegesis	113
A Cunning Linguist	120
Absences, Negations, Voids	122
Job Talk	129
Cultural Politis, Postmodernism and White Guys: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Robert Fitterman’s <u>This Window Makes Me Feel</u>	132
Dies, A Sentence	143
Not-Reading Kenneth Goldsmith	146
Jogging Essay	154
A Talk Review of <u>10 Walks/ 2 Talks</u>	165
A Love Letter to CAConrad	180
John Corbin’s “Drift”: A Conversational Review	186
Interview with Ammiel Alcalay	200
Under the Spell: Kim MacConnel’s Abracadabras	229
The Clinamen	
Notebook Fragments	233
“Crossing the Great Divide”: Panel Q & A	246
“Oulipolooza”: Q & A	250

Books That Have Left No Memory	255
My Father: A Self-Portrait	277
To the fact, to the point, to the bottom line	289
Therapy	367
Dissertation Defense	412

To be in any form, what is that?

- Walt Whitman

PREAMBLE

Dissertation Prospectus

: Context

Unlike many of the other chapters, the following one, my formal proposal for this project, is self-explanatory and thus requires no additional context in order to be understood.

: What was I trying to do?

Looking back on my dissertation prospectus, it's apparent, and amusing, just how many of its intellectual concerns were first and foremost personal ones. When I diagnosed the work of Christian Bök and Harryette Mullen as representative constrained responses to a "widespread isolation" in American culture, I was also trying to account for, even justify, my own feelings of "loneliness, depression and boredom" at the time. "All dissertations," contended Professor Ammiel Alcalay during my dissertation defense, "are very personal things," "no matter how dry and scholarly [they may appear]." At a certain point in the process, I stopped trying to pretend otherwise.

Dissertation Prospectus

Abstract

My dissertation is an exercise in applied poetics, using constraint-based methods in order to write about constraint-based literature. I define constraint-based literature as literature that imposes rules and restrictions upon itself over and above the rules and restrictions (such as grammar and lexicon) inherent in language—as literature that understands itself as part of an avant-garde tradition whose most prominent precursor is the work of the OuLiPo, or “Workshop For Potential Literature,” a French writing group, founded in 1960 and still active today, whose purpose is to invent arbitrary constraints for the purposes of generating literary texts. When completed, my dissertation will contain ninety-nine short chapters, each of which follows a different compositional procedure. By tracing the lineage and enduring influence of early Oulipian classics, I argue that contemporary Anglophone writers have, in their adoption of constraint-based methods, transformed such methods from apolitical literary laboratory exercises into a form of cultural critique, whose usage is surprisingly widespread in contemporary Anglophone literature, particularly among poets and experimental novelists.

Methodological Rationale

In the fifty-year history of the OuLiPo, its members have contrived innumerable constraints for the purposes of generating literary texts, from Georges Perec’s famous lipogrammatic novel La Disparition (written without using any word containing the letter ‘e’) to techniques that have attained cult status in avant-garde circles, like the N+7 technique (in which every noun in a source text is replaced by the seventh one following

it in the dictionary), as well as more obscure techniques like Mathews' Algorithm (an elaborate permutational procedure). Yet despite the group's prolific and varied output, none of its members – or, for that matter, any non-members – have ever attempted to use constraint-based methods for the purposes of generating critical work. Given that Oulipian techniques have been transposed, fruitfully, to realms of endeavor as diverse as cooking, comic book art, and musical composition, it seems surprising that something similar has never been systematically attempted in the critical realm.

The practice of criticism, literary or otherwise, always imposes certain rules and restrictions upon its practitioners, though they are not usually thought of as such. At the most basic level, criticism has an obligation to be useful: to explicate or illuminate the texts of others. Furthermore, different types of critical practices or contexts carry with them different goals and imperatives: a book review places different demands upon a critic than a book-length work of scholarship; the differing philosophical or ideological assumptions that underlie critical schools can lead to widely differing conceptions of the critic's required task. And, too, there are myriad tacitly or openly enforced stylistic and argumentative conventions of criticism: citational systems; standards of logical reasoning and acceptable evidence; an objective, authoritative tone; etc. The extent to which each of these rules, assumptions, and criteria can be properly said to be constraints of the kind the OuLiPo concocts matters less, in this context, than that they are pervasive in critical discourse, and, in certain ways, determinative of that discourse's content.

The standards and conventions of contemporary literary criticism exist for good reason, but they could be other than they are. Through the (sometimes arbitrary) imposition of rules and restrictions, my dissertation asks what happens to the critical act

when its conditions are altered in various ways. What happens, for example, if the critic is confined to raising questions, without being allowed to answer them? My interrogative chapter on Gilbert Sorrentino's interrogative novel, Gold Fools, addresses this question through both its form and its content. And though the decision to confine myself to the use of interrogatives precludes the possibility of definitively answering the question, it becomes apparent, through such an exercise, just how suggestively generative the mere act of posing questions is to criticism, even when answers are not forthcoming. In this way, in addition to being an exegesis of various constraint-based texts, my dissertation is also an investigation into the nature of criticism itself: its form, its function, its utility, its ethical imperatives—its limits.

By imposing unusual forms upon my dissertation, I seek to kindle, in my critical prose, what Harry Mathews, one of two American members of the OuLiPo, identifies as one of constraint's inherent values: "being unable to say what you normally would, you must say what you normally wouldn't." Implicit in Mathews' claim is a belief in the merits of artistic and intellectual surprise: the capacity of a work, in its inventiveness, to jolt, productively, both audience and writer alike. For this reason, I have conceived of my dissertation as an extended series of exercises: essayistic trials, performed almost as a means of practice or training, whose outcomes are not always predictable or foreordained.¹ Indeed, the very structure of my dissertation – ninety-nine short chapters – affords the exploratory space necessary for a critical praxis that values experimentation, uncertainty, and surprise.

¹ The designation of the chapters as "exercises" is also intended to evoke the term's connotations of physicality, a notion – that constraint-based writing possesses a fundamental relationship to the body – latent in Queneau's use of the term in Exercises in Style and that has recently become important in post-Oulipian conceptions of constraint.

Importantly, my methodology acknowledges criticism as a kind of performance, an acknowledgement made too infrequently in my view. As Benjamin Friedlander writes in his introduction to Simulcast, a work of literary criticism that experiments with plagiarism as a critical mode, “essays that flaunt their own literary qualities are often greeted with suspicion” within the realm of critical discourse (55). As in the philosophical realm, the decision to pay exaggerated attention to one’s manner of presentation – the decision to “flaunt” the writing’s literary qualities – is often derided as coming at the cost of critical substance. Yet if constraints, however unapparent, are actually omnipresent in critical discourse, then to foreground their usage and increase their severity is to change the nature of the critical act only in degree, not in kind—is to exacerbate criticism’s tendencies, not change them. Moreover, as literary theorists such as Stanley Fish have argued, to pretend that a zero degree writing style can be attained is itself a rhetorical posture. For his part, Friedlander goes even further when he argues, “Simulcast suggests that the most suspicious writing of all *masks* its literary qualities” (55). Style is integral to substance (and vice versa): a lesson that literary criticism learned long ago with respect to its objects of study, but that it has been slower to apply to its own written praxis.

Constraint-based writing, defined

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines “constraint” as, simply, “a limitation or restriction.” This terse, general definition of the term allows for a broad delineation of what constitutes constraint-based writing, because almost any rule or factor intrinsic or extrinsic to the act of writing can be considered a limitation. Grammar, in this

view, imposes constraints upon what constitutes acceptable word order. A lexicon constrains available word choice. Deadlines constitute constraints, as does the presence of collaborators. Even a writer's income or means of sustenance can be seen as a kind (or, in some cases, a lack) of constraint. This broad definition of the term reveals the ways in which all writing, done in whatever context, must obey explicit and implicit rules, reveals the way in which all writing is in some sense constraint-based.

The drawback of this broad definition is that it empties the category of "constraint-based writing" of any practical or theoretical significance, becoming a mere synonym for "writing." In order, therefore, to make "constraint-based writing" a discrete, meaningful theoretical category, I define it according to its social practice and usage, rather than its metaphysical properties, and use the term to refer to texts that willfully inhabit what could be called the constraint-based tradition. This tradition begins with the OuLiPo in 1960 and stretches forward to include a host of present-day writers working under the sign, or influence, of the group, but also extends backwards in time to include unwitting precursors (what the OuLiPo playfully dubs "anticipatory plagiarist": writing that plagiarized the group before it existed). With the exception of some anticipatory plagiarist, all constraint-based writing announces itself as such, declares that it is imposing constraints upon itself over and above the constraints always present in the act of writing, and, thus, that it is participating in the tradition begun by the OuLiPo. As a rule, constraint-based writing craves attention, does not want its use of constraints to go overlooked or ignored.

Topics & Texts

My dissertation will consider three principle groupings of writers: 1) founding, French, Oulipians; 2) English-language coevals of the founding Oulipians; 3) contemporary constraint-based writers, particularly those based in North America. Because the bulk of English-language constraint-based writing has been published in the past ten to twenty years, this last grouping, which constitutes the second generation of the constraint-based literary tradition, will be my dissertation's focus. The first two groupings – the historical origins of the mode/genre – will be surveyed predominantly for the light they can shed on contemporary practices.

These groupings suggest an important question: Why has there been an efflorescence of North American constraint-based writing over the past decade or two? What makes this efflorescence all the more puzzling is that it has not happened as the result of a concerted literary movement. Almost all contemporary North American constraint-based writers declare their indebtedness to the Oulipo, often in the prefaces or afterwords of their books. Yet few of these writers claim to have been influenced to the same extent by their immediate constraint-based contemporaries. Not only are these writers geographically scattered, but, most tellingly, there is no avowed spirit of togetherness pervasive among them, either in their texts themselves or in their extra-textual pronouncements (interviews, essays, manifestoes, etc.). For the OuLiPo, the practice of constraint-based writing is a collective endeavor, involving monthly meetings (which still take place to this day) as well as regular exchange and collaboration among participants. In its contemporary, North American context, constraint-based writing has been, by and large, something done in relative isolation.

I believe that this shift in constraint-based practice subtly alters the nature of the texts the writers produce: instead of viewing constraint-based writing as a playful literary laboratory experiment devoid of political ramifications, as Oulipians do, contemporary North American constraint-based writers tend to view it as a form of cultural critique. Christian Bök, for example, dedicates his prominent constraint-based prose poem, Eunoia, to “the new ennui/ in you,” while Harryette Mullen’s pop-cultural alterations of canonical Shakespearean sonnets through a modified use of the N+7 technique suggest that rule-bound procedures can help us sift through and make sense of the vast field of cultural detritus that surrounds us. It is not that Bök, Mullen and others see the practice of constraint-based writing as a handy antidote to individual feelings of loneliness, depression or boredom, but, rather, that widespread isolation, a more existential condition than loneliness, produces a malaise, a “new ennui,” that permeates the broader social, cultural and political spheres.

The malaise these writers perceive stems from cultural excesses: not only the sense that aspects of North American culture are extravagant and wasteful, but also the sense that the sheer quantity of available cultural material overwhelms the culture’s participants. Mullen’s poem “Jinglejangle,” a long, alphabetical catalogue of vernacular sayings, provides a sense, through staggering linguistic variety, of the vastness of the American cultural terrain, as well as a sense of the way in which tawdry slogans and catchphrases permeate it. Similarly, there is something cloying about the excessive eating, drinking, and sex in Bök’s Eunoia: the characters routinely consume far-fetched food combinations, repulsive in their overabundant oddity, as when the narrator of “Chapter I” gorges himself on a “rich dish” consisting of “ribs with wings in chili” and

“figs with kiwis in icing” (56). In both texts, unbridled freedom of choice is figured as problematic: either paralysis ensues or, worse, overindulgence. Within such a context, constraint, rather than being an unpleasant form of coercion, becomes a helpful mechanism for navigating quantitative overload—becomes, paradoxically, liberating. Furthermore, within the context of a historical moment (the early- to mid-2000’s) that saw the United States intent on exporting democracy, freedom, and “our way of life” to foreign peoples, willing or not, the decision to write using constraints must, I think, be seen as an implicit interrogation of the very concept of freedom itself. As British Oulipian Ian Monk writes, “One definition of freedom might be the ability to choose your own rules” (142).

I’d like to suggest, then, that the recent efflorescence of American constraint-based writing was no accident, but, rather, a response, even if unconscious, to prevailing anxieties about freedom and choice in our current historical moment, in the same way that the advent of the OuLiPo in 1960 can be seen as a response to French existentialist thought of the 1940’s and 1950’s, a discourse deeply concerned with notions of freedom and choice. With this provisional answer as to why constraints have recently become so common in American poetic and avant-garde praxis, my dissertation will address what, exactly, the nature of these prevailing anxieties might be. The constraint in Doug Nufer’s 2004 novel Never Again – no word in the book can be used twice – can be read, for example, as an allegory for, or an enactment of, the unchecked usage of natural resources. I am not claiming that Nufer set out to write an explicitly or dogmatically environmentalist novel (though the novel’s narrator is in fact concerned about the hidden costs of widespread development), but that his chosen constraint echoes concerns that are

very much in the contemporary socio-political air, and, further, that self-imposed constraints present a model, even if only allegorical, for curbing or delimiting authorial output, a model for avoiding some of the cultural excesses that trouble these writers.

Paradoxically, however, constraints produce their own form of excess: overheated rhetorical flights. The delimitation that constraints entail forces these writers' prose in unexpected, fanciful directions, as in this description of an "erotic" dental hygienist's practices in Never Again: "Erotic entrepreneur hygienist nocturnally assigned patients desiring kinky dental care. Latexed fingertips, tightfit nurse's microskirt, sterile aromatics, pain-inducing instruments' latently sexualized perversions teased uptight jisms regular humping wouldn't unleash" (28). In this passage, just as the dental instruments induce "uptight jisms regular humping wouldn't unleash," so too does the constraint itself induce rapid-fire oddball locutions unconstrained writing wouldn't unleash. Such overblown rhetorical flights are the norm in many constraint-based texts, which suggests that contemporary American constraint-based writing is partly complicit with the excesses it critiques, is not only a diagnosis of a malaise but a symptom of it as well. With this difference, perhaps: its excesses may be purgative. In a passage like the above, the improbable word-chains act like an emetic, poisoning the sentence with their awkward, strained grammar until they finally, from surfeit, effect a long-awaited rhetorical release. The texts, you could say, critique excess by farcically enacting it.

Of all the ways in which these texts enact excess, perhaps the most important is their enactment of sex. Sexual passages and scenes occur far more frequently in contemporary North American constraint-based texts than in their older, Oulipian predecessors. What's more, the sex scenes in the former, unlike those in the latter, tend to

be raucous and outré, both in terms of the nature of the acts performed and in terms of the language used to render those acts. As the title of Mullen's collection Sleeping with the Dictionary suggests, for this second, post-Oulipian generation, writing with constraints is fundamentally erotic in nature: constrained language, with its tongue-strapping contortions, titillates, even when its content is not overtly sexual.

This shift in an understanding of constraint comes about, in my account, with the 1988 publication of Harry Mathews' Singular Pleasures, a collection of vignettes that inventively depict a variety of individuals masturbating. I read Mathews' depictions of masturbation as an allegory for the nature of constraint-based writing, and go on to argue that sex becomes such a crucial theme for a subsequent generation of constraint-based writers because they worry that their writing practice is purely a matter of self-pleasure, with no broader social or political implications. These writers are wrestling with the question of what the rampant desire for self-pleasure – a desire they perceive, apprehensively, in the larger culture but nonetheless possess themselves – conceals. In grappling with this question, they are trying to find a way to make self-pleasure, in their writing, something more than mere self-indulgence, an ambition that, for many of these writers, necessitates a critique – one practically heretical to make in American political discourse – of the notion that complete freedom of choice is an unqualified good.

Introduction

: Context

By definition, an introduction, much like a prospectus, supplies its own sufficient context.

: What was I trying to do?

If, here and elsewhere, I put myself on the metaphorical (or literal) therapist's couch in order to write my dissertation, then these introductory reflections are a form of self-assessment before termination, a way of looking back at the project and providing closure. Part of me feels embarrassed by all these self-involved gestures, but another part of me suspects that it's this aspect of the project – the dissertation as inadvertent self-help book – in which its essential originality consists.

Introduction

*August 7 2010
3:15 pm*

this project had its beginnings in a dissertation workshop about three or four years ago at the CUNY Graduate Center where I'm a student in the English Ph.D. program it was called a "Dissertation Workshop" but it was actually more of a professionalization workshop where instead of coming in every week and exchanging dissertation chapters in the seminar let me rephrase that strike that last I'm not sure how this is going to work exactly but I'd imagine compared to other writing I've done this way that is talking into a voice recorder I'm going to edit afterwards a lot more I'm writing this way uh well why am I writing this way first I find it easier than actual writing easier to write though harder to write *well* this way but I'm willing to make that sacrifice for the sake of getting the work done but second and equally as important this kind of rambling associative monologue has something to do with the personal nature of my project that is it's as though I'm putting myself on the therapist's couch I'm actually lying down on a couch now and trying to analyze and diagnose where this project came from and why I undertook it but the point I wanted to make is that I don't think the intellectual origins of this book can be separated from its personal origins in other words the intellectual rationale for the project is not a pure clean one a matter of argumentative necessity the project arises instead out of my temperament and beliefs and that's important because while many academic projects have a clear basis in the personality the background and the life of the author at the simplest level if you're a Marxist you might write a Marxist-inflected literary history

obviously the reasons are never that simplistic but the connection the biographical connection is very obvious in a lot of cases but here's the important thing in relation to the point I'm trying to make the scholar has to write has to mute those personal origins has to write as though those personal reasons weren't the motivation for the book to make it seem that the motivation comes from purely discursive and argumentative reasons the personal motivations alone aren't sufficient and in a way in my project the personal motivations if they're not sufficient which they may well not be they're nonetheless primary and not being disavowed there are intellectual reasons for my project and I'll lay some of them out as I go but ultimately as I'm nearing the end of the project it seems more and more personal than I had initially thought I don't know this all sounds clumsier than I'd like it will be hard to spontaneously this is an example of a point that suffers from not being written out where it could be articulated a little more cogently anyway the point I want to make is that my project takes it as axiomatic that [phone rings] not only oh Jesus the phone going off [phone rings] hello hey how's it going yeah I'm working no no I just started yeah probably another hour or so where are you well do you want do you want yeah I'd like to go biking when I'm done with this it won't be for at least another hour though hello Abi she can can she talk already she really can talk so like small words half-words sounds so yeah what time do you want to go I don't know let me check the weather it's it's eighty-six now eighty at five o'clock seventy-seven at seven let me check when sunset is where do they have it on here "Details" you think yeah here it is sunset at 8:04 so why don't we

plan on going at seven I'm hungry anyway now or will be by the time you get home
so that we can eat something so that we won't be ready for dinner at seven
yeah sounds good let's say seven and figure you get home by six-thirty or so
I don't I don't know we can eat together if you want just give me another hour or
two ok sounds good see you later love you too ok
sorry about that interruption it was Shari and actually given the point I was about
to make I think the interruption was appropriate because it was a personal phone call
Shari being my wife so the point I wanted to make was I don't think
scholarship would be better or worse with or without the personal included in it but
that my dissertation suggests that the inclusion of the personal might be a slightly more
honest way of doing it or [sigh] it's hard to set it up as non-hierarchical or not
value-laden these claims so maybe the way to say it would be that the inclusion of
the personal in scholarship is an alternative a generally unacknowledged alternative
one that's not at this point in time by and large considered licit which proscription I
think closes off certain interpretive possibilities I'm certainly not opposed to
traditional scholarship am not trying to hack at its legs and transform it into
something else although I will say and I'll take this opportunity to return to
recounting the personal intellectual origins of this project I do tend to find a lot of
academic criticism not only difficult to endure but also not particularly useful or
informative that said scholarship that is useful and informative and reasonably
well-written well who cares how well-written it is but that is useful and informative
an example a book that for whatever reason probably because I know the author
he teaches at the Graduate Center is David Reynolds' Beneath the American

Renaissance and I remember reading it for a presentation during my first year in graduate school not in a class with Reynolds himself and I thought this is what criticism is supposed to do the book was a magisterial work of historical restoration placing the canonical writers of the American Renaissance in their historical context in the context of popular literature of the time dominant cultural strains of the time and so forth and it was just this prodigious effort measured in a crude way by the sheer size of Reynolds' book that took a topic I knew a fair bit amount and completely illuminated it in ways that hadn't been done before and Reynolds' book is just one of many examples I could think of though I do recall thinking about it a conversation with Reynolds in his office early on in grad school where I was expressing my dissatisfaction with the conventions of academic writing and he told me that I reminded him a bit of himself when he was starting out but that he came around to realize scholarship is a kind of game and that if you want to play it you eventually learn how to play by its rules which ultimately I've refused to do but so let me go back now and I think I'm going to stop lying down and will instead walk and pace about my apartment which another writer I admire John D'Agata says that he writes by walking back and forth in front of his desk and talking the words out that there was something important to him about the rhythm of walking or pacing back and forth I don't even know if you can call it "walking" I do that sometimes when I'm on the phone I've noticed phone calls that I have to think about or that I'm excited about or agitated or especially interested in I tend not to be able to sit still anyway I'm doing that now because sitting down feels too restful too straightjacketed ok pretty clearly my policy on digressions is not going to be

what I thought it was if I'm going to write the introduction this way I can't *not* digress the only thing I can do is go back later and try to shave them down a bit or make them a little more controlled so anyway I was taking this dissertation workshop and in terms of practical nuts and bolts information about how to navigate the university profession this was by far the most useful and valuable experience I've had in grad school it was just a tremendously practical course and as I was saying the students didn't just come in and exchange dissertation chapters the course covered all aspects of professionalization how to write an effective CV how to decipher job ads how to write a dissertation prospectus all those sorts of things that certainly in my program and I have to imagine given the program's concern for the students in this regard this is the case for most other programs too it's information that you'd have a very hard time getting at least all in one place so anyway I'm taking this course and as useful as I'm making it sound and it was useful it actually threw me into my first of two life crises in graduate school the crisis pertained specifically to anxieties I had about professionalization simply put and I realize there are problems with this position it seems to me more a vocation than a profession that the very notion of being a literary professional seemed somehow oxymoronic or absurd or overly uptight it's like poker another activity I'm marginally professional at what does it mean to be a *professional* poker player I guess the most obvious definitions hinge on economics you make a living off the game so I'll grant that it's possible to be a literary professional and in many ways I am one myself but professionalization goes to such an extreme in a certain narrow direction that as an intellectual slash artist slash whatever I am I couldn't imagine

wanting to do it on those terms didn't want to claim that identity and further the workshop made it starkly apparent that the things I was going to have to do in order to professionalize were things I was loath to do in other words I was headed down a career path and you could say "well you should know this before going into a Ph.D. program" but the passage of so much time is involved in Ph.D. programs and who you are at each different point is so different when you're applying when you're partway through when you're near the end that that's not a valid critique that in a certain way part of the argument I'm making right now which doesn't seem to have anything to do with my dissertation but actually relates to it in that my dissertation is very aware of its status as a dissertation that is as the document that you produce as the culmination of your Ph.D. process but the argument I'm making is that application to a humanities Ph.D. program is something that's done blindly you can't possibly I mean you can know what you're getting into but you can't know how you feel about what you're getting into until you're into it well into it actually for our school newspaper I wrote an essay viewing the humanities Ph.D. as a kind of wager or gamble analyzing it from a risk assessment point of view and of course it's a terrible bet from that point of view the other thing the weird thing that happened to me as I went through graduate school it started out as a hobby but over time I got good enough at it that I could make significantly more money playing poker than I could teaching as an adjunct which is as much a commentary on an adjunct's salary as it is my poker prowess so I became a kind of part-time professional poker player which at points interfered with my schoolwork that was actually the subsequent crisis I had after the one I haven't finished talking about but

anyway backtracking when I say I was loath to professionalize what I mean is I didn't want to write the kind of work that academic discourse encourages not just encourages requires the professoriate to write in order to be credentialed as expert to get tenure and so forth that the majority of refereed academic journals and the articles in them again this is with the caveat that like Reynolds' book I'm not against scholarship per se tend to turn out a lot of second-rate work that I find it hard to get excited about and I don't mean that criticism needs to constantly shock and thrill reading Kant thrills me so it's not about a certain level of entertainment or excitement value it's about intellectual stimulation and grappling with things in a way that makes them seem like they matter well I don't know I'm getting carried away here the point is and actually another important aspect of the personal intellectual history that I'm trying to recount is that I had these intuitions when I was an undergraduate and I'd actually like to go a little further back in time because I think this is important when I was an undergraduate I took two nonfiction writing electives with the director of the Expository Writing Program at NYU Pat Hoy who's an incredibly dynamic engaging professor I've never before or since met a teacher more capable of getting the best possible work out of every student in the class it actually [chuckle] made my own life as a teacher when I became one always a touch disappointing because Pat's ability to inspire in that regard is utterly remarkable anyway Pat went to West Point for college and ended up having to serve reluctantly as an officer in Vietnam he didn't necessarily buy into the American rationale for the war but he owed the country service so he did it after he left the military he went to graduate school to study literature and I don't want to

speaking on behalf of Pat but the gist of what he thought as I understand it was that as he began sending out his dissertation for publication he started to realize that his academic work didn't bear the stamp of who he is as a person and what he had experienced in and around the war it was almost a suppression or effacement of his experiences which is fine I guess scholarship doesn't need a personality to do what it does but the work somehow seemed less vital well again I think I'm speaking more for myself here than for Pat which of course I can't do speak for him that is but this is a long way of saying that given my age when I studied with him and given how great a teacher he is Pat had a big influence on me and I was taking these essay writing classes and in them he basically taught us to write as writers and not as academics a distinction that again is as much my own as Pat's but it's one I draw upon to this day an insight I first had through him even if most academics I encounter aren't flattered by this notion and it is an unflattering one but I think it's true too that as a writer you bring certain sensibilities to bear and I don't know I'm making lots of tenuous claims well in Pat's case what he went on to realize was that there was a disconnect or I think he did I'm really putting a lot of words in his mouth it's like when you're teaching and you say in response to a student question well I think Kant would argue that and you assume on the basis of what you know about Kant what Kant would say if faced with that exact question but anyway there was this disconnect between the academic work Pat was doing on E.M. Forster and what his experience in the world had been and so he started writing these personal essays about soldiering about West Point things based on personal experience and the essays would draw on his literary

background and learning but they were always firmly rooted in the personal now in his own work he just writes personal essays and the conflict or the tension between scholarship and the personal isn't as apparent as it is in this introduction and maybe in my actual work this tension isn't always prominent but this introduction makes it official that it is indeed present and in his own path as a writer Pat just opted for the personal leaving aside the academic but so even as an undergraduate I had these certain vague partially formed notions about trying to live a life that was engaged with literature but that wasn't operating in the ruts of academic discourse and yet at the same time I wanted the work I was doing and maybe this applies more to my work now in graduate school I wanted the work to have some sort of relationship to scholarly discourse what I didn't want was the taint of dilettantism or amateurism the idea that you could only be doing serious scholarship in this exact way that for example if you were writing the introduction to your dissertation by pacing back and forth in your bedroom and talking into a voice recorder that it may be more or less interesting as an experiment but it's not serious scholarship I think that's emphatically false I think what I'm doing here has as much intellectual integrity as any of the more conventional ways of writing scholarship and if you wanted a rationale the first place I'd point to I could think of others too the first place I'd point to would be everything I just laid out about the personal that writing the introduction this way it's not just that it's easier and as I acknowledged before it makes the quality not as good so there's a trade off it's not just that it's easier to talk and ramble than it is to write cause it is it's that this talking and this rambling will open up certain associative chains of thought pertaining to

my own personal intellectual past that might otherwise not get accessed or tapped for example I didn't intend to talk about Pat or my time as an undergraduate when I had the idea to do the introduction this way they're not things that I imagined as particularly relevant as I've worked on this project over the past three years but now that I'm talking aloud and not writing that background seems like such a natural arc or progression that not mentioning it would be a disservice it's not that mentioning it is ethically irresponsible irresponsible would be doing it the other way to pretend that none of this came out of this decade-long process of personal-intellectual growth and I certainly don't claim uniqueness in this regard what I'm doing here is what anyone writing a dissertation could do to trace its origins in this way what's unique is that I'm making the gambit and doing it dreading what it's going to sound like when I transcribe this but for now I feel inspired and somewhat justified ok so I had this background and entering graduate school I wanted to study the essay as a literary form and actually what I've done is instead of studying it I'm practicing it my dissertation from one point of view is an attempt to write as many different kinds of essays as possible so I'm not writing about the essay but trying to write scholarship essayistically as a trial and everything such a term would imply so with that rough background I'm taking this dissertation workshop and I have this crisis regarding professionalization specifically it dawns on me that my current projected I'm being encouraged from a few different quarters to write about Native American literature American poets who have written about Native American cultures in the twentieth century and obviously the topic interests me but it wasn't work I mean I specifically had this realization when I went to a conference on Native

American literature and I actually had a great experience there the people I met were friendly there was interesting work being done good conversations that were happening a really positive place to be but being around other scholars and writers working in the field I realized that my relation to it I couldn't ever feel the level of connection that they felt to it it would have been a course of study that [sigh] at a certain point in my life I would have been going through the motions I always would have been doing it in part because I knew it would probably give me a slightly better chance at getting a job and taking the dissertation workshop intensified this sentiment I started to feel that I was doing certain things in my intellectual life purely because they would situate me well to get a job and not because I one hundred percent wanted to be doing them and you know that's the definition of a job that you have to do things you don't want to do but not only did I have these anxieties and midway through the workshop I sort of shut down and couldn't do any work whatsoever reading writing nothing not only did I have these anxieties I started to have a train of thought that went something like this I got into reading and writing and tried to make a life or career out of it or something in between because I liked doing it I had started out as a business student at NYU but after a few semesters I developed several interests I never had before before college I didn't read or write much but I really started to enjoy doing those things and the reasons for studying the humanities were very clear to me I passed up a course of study where the financial rewards are very obvious business school which was an important reason why I even went to NYU in the first place I mean I got a small scholarship there but not particularly much it was on the margins of what my family could afford we both took out loans my

parents and I and I reasoned well I'll go into debt but when I get out I'll make a decent amount of money and will be able to pay it off without much worry the point being it was a very clear trade-off for me in terms of what to study between the financial viability of it and the enjoyment of it so now I'm sitting here during the time when I'm not doing any work and Shari was very supportive told me to take my time and think things over so I'm having this crisis and I think if I'm going to continue on and get a Ph.D. in literature the only way in which it's worth doing is if at every step of the way I act idealistically that is I only do things based on whether or not I want to do them and not out of a sense of obligation or because it will get me a job here was my reasoning if I was going to do things that I didn't like or that I felt lukewarm about or that were difficult or unpleasant for me in any capacity then I may as well not get a Ph.D. at all that the only reason to get a Ph.D. in the humanities was because you were doing exactly what you like work-wise if I was going to do something I didn't like I'd at least do something that made me money the payoff was too unlikely in terms of how likely I was to get a job and even if I were to get one the rewards were still too paltry to make it worth doing anything other than exactly what I wanted to be doing as a scholar as an academic as a person at the same time that I had this realization that the only way to go through graduate school in the humanities was as an uncompromising idealist and there are problems with this position but I do believe it's more or less the case it's not a practical venture so you may as well be idealistic if you're going to take the plunge anyway at the same time that I'm having this crisis indifferent to school-related things what I was doing at that time in my own personal reading there was creeping over my

consciousness that the only things I wanted to do in relation to reading and writing were things that thrilled me things that I just absolutely enjoyed and so at this time most of the reading I was doing was about the Oulipo and constraint the Oulipo a group of mathematicians and writers founded in 1960 with the goal of inventing constraints that could be used to generate literary texts so I was reading stuff by the Oulipo I had previously taught Georges Perec's Species of Spaces and Other Pieces which isn't strictly Oulipian but it's a literary sensibility that felt very close to my heart weirdly austere and distant and yet somehow incredibly affecting and touching and poignant and perceptive in a way I was just following up on my interest in this one book and I was also doing a little of my own writing with the use of constraints so I was doing this personal reading unrelated to any schoolwork and at the same time I was having these thoughts about the importance of pleasure I haven't used that word in this introduction yet but it's a really important word for me in both my pedagogy and in my reading and writing so I was having these intuitions about the centrality of pleasure to literary study at the same time that I was taking an immense pleasure in this mode of writing just for its own sake and so what suggested itself to me was if I was going to only study things that I really liked why not work on the Oulipo and so when I resumed work finally in the late winter early spring I changed one of my orals list from a list on colonial American literature to one on the Oulipo and didn't know for sure that I would write a dissertation about it but thought it was a possibility it was either that or Native American literature but by the time I finished orals I knew it was going to be the Oulipo and then in keeping with all my prior intuitions about the nature of academic writing what I did and

didn't like about it about essayism as a more supple mode of intellectual inquiry the most logical idea suggested itself which was that not only would I write about constraint and I couldn't write about the Oulipo specifically because my French isn't good enough but I'm glad actually because I think the Oulipo's legacy is the more interesting topic at this point in time so I couldn't write about the Oulipo specifically but I was going to broadly write about Anglophone constraint-based writing writing that's in the tradition of the group and that's what this project is about I mean this introduction is really it's actually not much of an introduction in that it doesn't frame the project it frames how I arrived at the project maybe I'll have to write a second introduction which would be in keeping with Oulipian Marcel Bénabou's wonderful Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books in which the first several chapters are prefaces where he keeps starting over he writes chapter one and he says no no no no no chapter two begins he says no no no chapter one was all wrong this is the actual beginning of the book and then chapter three comes and he says I've failed yet again *here's* how I'm going to start he sort of performs his nervousness and anxiety about writing by continually beginning again which is a very Oulipian gesture anyway the idea I had was that not only was I going to write about constraint-based writing I was going to do so using constraints my dissertation would itself be a constraint-based project and one intellectual rationale for why this is viable is that criticism is the one area of creative endeavor and notice I'm describing criticism as a creative endeavor an important notion I think it's the one area of creative endeavor the Oulipo hasn't explored using constraints not to write a novel or poem but to say something substantive and critical so that's what this project is and I

guess the question at this point in the introduction isn't how to intellectually frame the project since it seems pretty apparent that this introduction won't quite do that it's more about what led me to pursue this project the question then becomes what can I say or conclude let me try to put it less grandly I've recounted some of the personal intellectual origins of this project what might that personal history indicate about the project itself about criticism why is it relevant well I guess that's kind of the same question but that's to say well here's how I'm going to attempt to answer the question I haven't really posed a question but maybe the answer will suggest what the question would have been had I been more articulate I've also been talking for nearly an hour so there's a little bit of fatigue setting in I had the idea to write the introduction this way after re-reading Ben Friedlander's introduction to Simulcast which is a work of literary criticism that experiments with plagiarism as a critical mode and what struck me about re-reading his introduction which I hadn't noticed the first time I read the book was how personal in nature it is the introduction is about fifty to sixty pages long in what is maybe a 200 or 250 page-long book so you can tell just by the length of the introduction that Friedlander feels some sort of defense of his project needs to be made and I completely understand why he feels that way given the strangeness of what he's doing and also given the intricacies of his project some of what he wrote was controversial within poetry communities when it first appeared so he addresses those controversies and the ethics of what he was doing so he's writing this defense of his project and he's discussing its ethical ramifications but I think when I first read his arguments I found them so gripping that I failed to notice that they're deeply rooted in the personal it's not just an

academic argument he's making about what criticism is and isn't the argument he's making is about how he grew up as a scholar and as an intellectual and as a poet and has everything to do with who he is as a person that those two things the intellectual and the personal are inseparable and that to shroud the personal in intellectual justifications again I don't want to put value judgments on it and say it's bad that would be too simplistic but not hiding the personal makes it I think a different project and changes its tenor implicit in Friedlander's book in other words is an argument that who one is in the world and how one interacts with and relates to others in the world has everything to do with the ideas that one puts forth in writing and this relates to the contents of his book and the fact that some of his essays were originally written pseudonymously and the fact that the essays attempt a social mapping of various experimental poetic communities so there's lots of stuff about the social and I'm reminded too maybe this will be where I wrap up I remember when I began this project talking to Wayne Koestenbaum my dissertation advisor and he said something that stuck with me that at the time I didn't exactly have the context or experience to be able to grasp its full import he said something to the effect of "find as many ways as possible to bring your work out into the world to make your project part of some sort of larger social fabric" and I can't say at this point I've done that in any widespread way which is fine but the ways in which my project has experienced nodes of connectivity even if only to other individuals who have sustained and nourished my thinking has been vital I think Wayne framed it I think he said something along the lines of when you're doing something this strange you don't want to feel like it's just you like you're totally in outer space and you're

doing this really bizarre project and it has no relation to anything because implicit in that point I mean this was a conversation I had probably three years ago so it's not fresh in my mind but the implicit point is that when you're operating outside of disciplinary conventions and I don't just mean when you're "being interdisciplinary" which I'm actually more or less not being in this dissertation which is fine it doesn't really matter a quick side argument "being interdisciplinary" is emphatically operating within disciplinary conventions it's really kind of expected at this point in time it's a convention so what I don't mean is "being interdisciplinary" and that in itself makes you a pioneer you're doing good work maybe but it's different in kind than totally stepping outside those boundaries part of what my project does in its use of constraints is it very consciously asks what happens to criticism if we change its rules anyway Wayne's point was what I was saying is implicit in his advice when you've taken the step that I've taken you've abandoned certain safety nets and obviously I have other safety nets in place listing them here isn't the point but that if I had written a dissertation on American poets and Native American cultures in the twentieth century even if I had never shown a word of it to anyone I would still feel like I was in conversation with previous scholars and with the discipline and so there's a way in which you wouldn't be as out there yeah I mean am I just saying if you're out there you need other people that's a little simplistic you need other people even if you're not out there but when you're outside the conventions of the discipline well I've definitely lost my momentum at this point how should I try to round this off I guess what I'd say is that the risk for this project is now and always has been that I'd

be trying to have a conversation with the discipline and the discipline wouldn't be interested in listening and then the question becomes why is it if I've abandoned all these conventions why is it that I feel that having a conversation with the discipline is so important and the answer to that well if I have a good answer to that I'm golden but the simple answer might be that reading and writing are profoundly imaginative tasks and consequently one's own practices of them need to be every bit as imaginatively engaged as the work under consideration even for critics I mean so what am I just saying critics well you know what I'll try to end here I've been trying to end for ten minutes but I'm not having much luck because obviously I would like a thunderous ending earlier I said that I view criticism as creative and to go back to another moment in my past I can recall the first literature class I ever took an Intro to Lit course at NYU and at the end of the semester the professor a grad student at the time said something that I think meant something different to her than it did to me then and than it does to me now but it was a notion that always ignited my imagination and that was she said maybe it's possible to view literary criticism itself as a kind of art and that idea the artfulness of literary criticism and I don't just mean it looks pretty I mean that the argumentation itself can have a kind of elegance that in order to be able to make the argument that Beneath the American Renaissance does it requires a profound and capacious act of imagination is that where I want to end of course not I don't want to end but here's where I'll end and here I really will end I think what my professor more or less meant when she talked about literary criticism as an art is take pride in your craft I don't know what she meant who knows but

I'm confident she was writing regular academic prose and incidentally when I was reading up on the art critic Dave Hickey when I discovered his work within the last year or so I saw that he teaches at UNLV and then I saw that my former my Intro to Lit instructor was now teaching there as well and I wondered how she liked having him as a colleague what would she make of what the rebellious Dave Hickey does with criticism and artfulness but it was just a weird coincidence to see that she teaches there now and to realize she has an existence beyond just the class I took with her over ten years ago it was like when I saw my history professor in the supermarket my first semester of college and was unexpectedly startled by it a reminder that teachers have lives outside the classroom anyway what I find particularly suggestive I was thinking about the artfulness of literary criticism in relation to this recent movement called Conceptual Poetry and Conceptual Poetry involves a lot of appropriation and Kenny Goldsmith one of the most prominent Conceptual poets makes the point that the simple act of moving information from one place to another has in our culture become a form of writing has become a creative act and that's a lot of what his artistic practice is based on moving information from one place to another and the revelation for me thinking about this notion in the context of criticism was that that's what criticism has always done from its inception it takes information from one place a book a movie a poem and moves it somewhere else and in changing the context of that information has tried to make it into something else has tried to make it sing even if only argumentatively arguably too it's not just in quoting a text that criticism moves information but it moves information in the sense that and I know certain critics don't buy into this notion but in the sense that there's a latent level of

meaning there's a meaning behind the words that's implicit in them and criticism takes that level of meaning and moves it to the forefront it's foregrounding it and making it apparent so it's not just moving the texts themselves and changing their context it's changing the contexts of how the texts signify doing something with the texts' meanings moving those meanings around and so in a weird way the Conceptual practice of information transferal well of course it's been done before it's been done for centuries but what I think is most germane aside from what it suggests about criticism as a kind of stealth artistic practice and I've always felt as a writer that I like working off of the ideas of others better than I do just creating something myself out of a void so I like the idea of criticism as a stealth art but the last point I'll make is that if Conceptual Poetry has these affinities with criticism as practices it suggests that Conceptual Poetry itself is a kind of critical practice that maybe you could say the major breakthrough of Conceptual Poetry as an art practice is that it blurs the boundaries between criticism and art in a way never quite so completely done before and its focus on a "thinkership" as opposed to an readership a somewhat clumsy term but one Conceptual poets have advanced supports this idea in other words Conceptual Poetry does something critical it changes the context of an object and therefore the meaning and lets you see it in a way that you otherwise wouldn't have and in so doing it makes art or even more precisely the Conceptual framing gesture which is fundamentally a critical gesture a kind of reading of a text the precise way to say it is that Conceptual poetic practice implies that any reading of a text is fundamentally an act of artistic creation

ANTICIPATORY PLAGIARY

Raymond Roussel's (New) Africa

: Context

Poet, novelist, playwright, chess enthusiast, neurasthenic, and drug addict, Raymond Roussel is perhaps the single most important anticipatory plagiarist of – which is to say, influence on – the Oulipo. In his masterpiece of obscurantism, New Impressions of Africa, a poem in four cantos, the primary text of each canto is a fairly straightforward description of a site in Egypt. The description has scarcely begun when a parenthesis opens, introducing a digression, and soon a second parenthesis interrupts the first digression with another digression, then a third parenthesis opens, and a fourth and a fifth – and into the fifth digression footnotes soon intrude, with *their* internal parentheses... As the canto approaches its end, the parentheses are closed in succession, each closure plunging the non-omniscient reader into stupefaction.

: What was I trying to do?

Like Roussel himself – like so much of this dissertation – I was trying, through uninhibited digression, to avoid monochrome argumentation. Not having a point, I now realize, is not all that hard to accomplish. What's difficult is doing it well, so well, in fact, that you actually end up having one.

Raymond Roussel's (New) Africa

Raymond Roussel's 1932 book-length poem New Impressions of Africa contains parentheses (The effect is like a Russian nesting doll ((Or perhaps it is like Tristram Shandy, that masterpiece of digression (((How thrilling are digressions within digressions! (((How thrilling is recursiveness!)))))) It is as if the mind delights at the prospect of never arriving at a telos (((Imagine, for example, hiking in unmarked woods (((Meaning there are no trails or paths which you can follow.)))))) and becoming lost. You hadn't intended to wander far from your campsite, but first one thing, then another, has led you astray (((In succession: a quaint pond, several hundred yards behind the campsite; a massive boulder, on the other side of the pond; an enticing kaleidoscope of sunlight piercing the tree line; the ghastly underbelly of a large, uprooted tree; a disarmingly lush fern patch.)))). Suddenly, an hour later, you look around, standing amidst a sea of fern, and realize that you don't know your way back to the campsite. You think it might be to the south, but you're not sure. Each direction looks the same: ferns afoot and, as far as you can see, a smattering of frighteningly nondescript, toothpick-like trees. A warm sensation of terror slowly descends upon you. You don't know to what extent you're in danger, but you know that you are most assuredly in it (((*If I walk in the wrong direction, you wonder, just how far does this forest continue?*)))). Your enraptured wandering has put you at considerable risk. Now, if you had been a writer (((Composing a poem about your impressions of Africa, say.))))) and divagated similarly with words, the risks, comparatively, would be nugatory (((When, only ten lines in to New Impressions, Roussel swerves² off course, and then swerves away from

² Thus: Anything else might date from yesterday.

his initial swerve, frustrated readers are at liberty to put down the book and resume the business of their day or, better yet, to continue reading and to luxuriate in the tangents. Either way, they face no grave danger from his Byzantine peregrinations.)))). Digressions, in other words, allow for safe, controlled (((((Constraints induce a severe, rough-and-tumble dialectic between control and wildness. Every constraint-based writer knows that we are least in control when we are most in control ((((((Or something like that)))))).)))) thought-adventure. If we must think of digressions as swerves (((((Delightful word, that: it literally swerves off the tongue.))))) , let us cast aside the term's pejorative connotations and instead understand swerving as a healthy, cathartic action³. We swerve to prolong tension, to make the return voyage sweeter. We swerve in

The name whose proud yet crushed bearer can say
 From memory, straight off and without fail
 (As the occupant, by the topmost rail
 Of a high block, in airy garret, knows —
 A photographer skilled in hiding crows'
 Feet and pimples with wily stratagems —
 ((Art of retouching! As, decked out in gems
 (((Each, when having a proud photo taken
 Of his beloved self, will stand unshaken

(And so on ((I include this quote more to provide the flavor of a typical passage from the poem than to illustrate a particularly important point or idea contained within it. The poem continues on for 125 more pages in this vein. It is, from a practical standpoint, unreadable (((By claiming Roussel as an important forebear, the OuLiPo situates its writing praxis at the borderland of readability (((Raymond Queneau's 100,000,000,000,000,000 Poems (((A series of 10 sonnets with interchangeable lines, thus yielding 10¹⁴, or 100,000,000,000,000,000, potential poems. Queneau calculated that it would take a person reading the poem twenty-four hours a day 190,258,751 years to finish it.))))) is a good example of an unreadable Oulipian poem.))). It is not that the Oulipo aims to create texts that cannot be read in their entirety, or texts that tax the patience of readers, but that they delight in the creation of dense, knotty structures. There is an aesthetic of frustration and bedazzlement—an aesthetic, in a word, of the pointless raised to the status of the exalted (((I am really getting carried away here; I have no idea what I mean by that.)))). For example, Oulipian Ian Monk explains in his "Introduction" to New Impressions that in the poem's long second canto, "608 lines separate the subject of the initial sentence from its main verb" ((p.5)). No reader can juggle the thread of that sentence (((And as the primary sentence of the canto, it is presumably the most important one: all the others are subsidiary, asides (((Though it hardly needs pointing out that for Roussel (((as well as for myself)))) the asides *are* the point (((What sort of aesthetic might that suggest? I quaver to broach the question within this already bloated footnote.)))).))))) as they read through the second canto.) it goes.)

³ The clinamen (I always wonder ((Other things I wonder: Where do porn stars come from and how do they (((whoever they may be))) find so many people willing to perform in pornography? Why must happiness be fleeting? Should I stay or should I go?): Am I the only person who feels the word "clinamen" sounds like a dirty word ((The astute reader will have observed (((Like Auguste Dupin in "The Murders in the Rue

prose because we cannot easily do so in real life⁴ (((((In his essay “How I Wrote Certain of my Books,” Roussel declares that from his extensive travels ((((((He was born into a wealthy family.)))))), “I never took anything for my books” (((((p.20)))))). He declares this because he believes “it clearly shows just how much imagination accounts for everything in my work.” Perhaps, if he is to be believed (((((Remember D.H. Lawrence’s dictum: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”)))))), but it also demonstrates that Roussel understood writing as a defiant swerve away from the world of actuality.)))).), at the prospect of eschewing purposiveness ((((*Purposive purposivelessness*, Kant called it. Or was it the other way around? That art should aspire to such a condition seems, of course, effete, ineffectual. Aren’t we supposed to be changing the world for the better? Unmasking the insidious power structures that govern our lives? (((((This is another question I quaver to address. Not for reasons of space, but because I doubt ever being able to answer it satisfactorily. It is, though, a specter that haunts Oulipian practice: How to justify their participation in the art for art’s sake tradition? Without attempting to answer the question ((((((Ok, I’ll make one attempt. In an interview, film director Elia Suleiman (((((((Director, among other things, of Divine Intervention, a work of pro-Palestinian agitprop.))))))) was asked what he understood the political role of art to be. He replied that the best art, the best cultural production, makes its audience want to go out in the world as better people—it uplifts and invigorates. In other words, art can change the world, but only indirectly, obliquely, by transforming individual attitudes. Coming from such an artist (((((((that is, someone whose films are

Morgue.”))) that my feelings about the dirtiness of the clinamen are what led me to articulate my wonderment about porn stars (((((Porn stars are definitely a swerve.)))?)), an important concept in Oulipian and Pataphysical practice, comes from the Greek *klesis*, “a bending,” and denotes those moments in a text when the author disobeys the rules of a constraint for aesthetic purposes.

⁴ This, incidentally, is the essayist’s credo.

directly motivated by a political agenda)))))), I find this account of cultural work wholly convincing: he has no delusions that his film will single-handedly liberate Palestine--it performs its political work at the level of individual consciousness.))))) , I'd note that critics are much more concerned about the question of the Oulipo's literary politics than about the question of Roussel's (((((The Noulipian Analects, a recent critical compilation concerning the legacy of Oulipian practice on contemporary Anglophone poetics, contains numerous essays that address the question of the Oulipo's politics, all of which wonder, in essence: *What exactly are they and why is the Oulipo so silent about them?* Formal radicalism, however, does not entail political radicalism. Just because the Oulipo's writing practices are artistically avant-garde does not mean that their politics must be radical as well. In point of fact, as many critics in the Analects note, numerous Oulipians are, or have been, involved in progressive political movements. What troubles the critics, then, it seems, is that the members of the group never explicitly link their artistic practices to their political beliefs and actions.)))). It is as if the apolitical nature of Roussel's literary practice can be excused as the workings of a bourgeois eccentric, whereas the Oulipo's literary practice, because collective, must spell out some sort of larger political program.)))). For myself, at least, it is enough that art bring a modicum of pleasurable thought into my life, whatever tectonic changes it may or may not effect upon the larger world.)))).), delay and interruption (((New Impressions, you could say, exemplifies a poetics of interruptions⁵: a poetics aimed at thwarting readers' habits and

⁵ Some strategies that Roussel employs to this end (in addition, of course, to the rampant use of parenthetical asides): footnotes (From Ian Monk's "Introduction" to New Impressions: "The role of the footnotes works exactly the same way as the parentheses, in other words they interrupt the linear reading of the book, and it is not always easy to see why Roussel decided to choose one or the other solution at a given moment, since some footnotes could easily be new parentheses ((Indeed, the footnotes even respect the rhyme and meter of the main poem.)) and *vice versa*" ((p.9)).), interpolated illustrations, (Drawn by H.-A. Zo.) and the very shape of the physical book itself (The tops of the pages containing the illustrations

desires (((I return to the question of what sort of aesthetic such a poetics implies. Obviously, one that considers postponement integral to pleasure (((This quality alone argues for the importance of New Impressions in today’s world, a world drunk on the internet’s velocity.)))). Less obviously, it is an aesthetic that craves readership (((Roussel, it is well known, was convinced his writing would secure him an exalted posthumous reputation.)))).), challenging readers to stick with the text, in spite of all its excesses, to affirm, tacitly, by turning page after page, the merit of the poem. Whatever else it may be, artistic difficulty is almost always a come on, coquettishly flattering its audience’s discerning judgment.)))).)) and horseplay, that incomparable romp through the possibilities of the book.)), in that each successive doll seems, somehow, more and more improbable. Until finally, after peeling away countless layers of this strange onion, the last nub of a doll emerges, smooth, waxy, smiling, a tiny nugget of color as splendid in its own way as any of its bulkier kinfolk.) embedded within one another.⁶

remain uncut, which forces the reader to either cut them before reading or to peer underneath them to the extent possible while reading.)

⁶ Gutted of their digressions, the primary sentences of New Impressions’ three cantos are (like my own primary sentence) frightfully mundane. The primary sentence of Canto II:

Merely to cite him joining in combat,
 At an age when his coat and *little hat* —
 The full-length greatcoat — from which each construes
 A daunting aura, whatever his views —
 ----- *(The parentheses begin here.)*
 Still on that last sheer rock his uniform
 Had not begun to magnify his form,
 Means, pensive, we forget for a moment
 Egypt, its evenings, sun and firmament.

(In other words, what the poem “forgets,” what its far-ranging digressions and asides occlude, is Africa itself, and the author’s impressions of it ((I leave it to better ((less mischievous?))) minds than mine own to determine how problematic this textual eclipse is, and whether or not we get something – if not finer, then equally exotic ((This word obviously has pejorative colonialist connotations in this context, but I use it nonetheless. At bottom, New Impressions of Africa is a text about the exoticism of digressions (((This topic – exoticism and the colonialist implications of digression in New Impressions – deserves an essay in its own right. Should anyone ever see fit to write such an essay, I permit them to insert it here (((INSERT ESSAY HERE.)))).), provided, of course, it’s any good.)))).), a text about the allure and the perils of the unknown.)), in its stead.))

Reading I Remember

: Context

Joe Brainard was an American artist and writer associated with the New York School, whose prodigious and innovative body of work included assemblages, collages, drawing, and painting, as well as designs for book and album covers, theatrical sets and costumes. He is perhaps best known for his 1970 book I Remember, which radically departs from the conventions of the traditional memoir. It is neither chronological nor thematic; rather, each sentence begins “I remember...” and is followed by a single memory delivered with uniform weight and declaration. His deft juxtapositions of the banal with the revelatory, the very particular with the seemingly universal accumulate into a complex portrait of his childhood in the 40s and 50s in Oklahoma as well as his life as an artist and gay man in the 60s and 70s in New York City.

: What was I trying to do?

I *do* remember, fondly, reading I Remember, but I actually wrote the following chapter from my reading notes and not, as the grammar of my sentences would suggest, from memory. What I was trying to do, ultimately, was to respond to the book in kind: was to convey a sense of wonder as unapologetically artless as Brainard’s own.

Reading I Remember

I remember reading Joe Brainard's I Remember, an autobiography in which each sentence begins with the words "I remember..."

how rapturous the experience was.

wondering how Joe Brainard remembered as much as he did, then thinking that it would have been hard not to, once he got started.

thinking that the "I remember" form could easily get out of hand, could continue ad infinitum.

thinking, too, that the form has an important relation to the structure of memory. That is, memories associatively beget other memories, creating a quilt of meaning out of experience.

noticing a connection between trauma and memory: "I remember jumping off the front porch head first onto the corner of a brick. I remember being able to see nothing but gushing red blood. This is one of the first things I remember. And I have a scar to prove it" (54).

that Brainard's need to prove the traumatic memory seemed significant in this context, as if the entry into memory – into history – necessarily left some sort of scar upon the self.

wondering if the "I Remember" form could work for criticism, too: these are the groove-marks the book has left upon my mind.

feeling that reading is a forceful, even violent, process and that the violence cuts both ways, against author and reader alike.

Emily Dickinson's line about how she knew something was poetry if, when she read it, she felt as though the top of her head had been lopped off.

another traumatic memory of Brainard's, too long to quote in full, but involving a "very fat meat packer" who invited himself into Brainard's apartment and, once inside, "instantly unzipped his blood-stained white pants and pulled out an enormous dick" (11).

reading the passage and locating the source of the trauma in the "blood-stained white pants" and not the "enormous dick," which, by itself, wouldn't have had nearly the same impact.

I remember realizing that the blood-stained pants are so horrifying because, as the ghastly backdrop for a penis, they evoke the threat of castration.

considering the act of quotation as a form of castration, as a way of making a spectacle of both the severed member and the careful staging of its excision.

Ron Padgett's remark, in the book's afterword, that "I remember..." is "one of the few literary forms even non-literary people can use" (175).

wondering what constitutes a "non-literary person."

wondering if any person, literary or not, could write a version of the book as compelling as Brainard's.

in other words, wondering if Brainard's idiosyncrasies brought off the book's magic or if the form itself did. That is, was there something inherently compelling about the act of remembrance or did its interestingness depend on the abilities of the *I*.

in this context, Brainard's letter to Anne Waldman about the book: "I am way, way up these days over a piece I am still writing called I Remember. I feel very much like God writing the Bible. I mean, I feel like I am not really writing it but that it is because of me that it is being written" (171).

agreeing with the analogy and thinking that it suggested that profundity was built in to the "I remember" form, in the same way that the tenor of the permuting end words in a sestina always creates a distinctive atmosphere, almost irrespective of what the author does with the fronts of the lines.

being struck by the muted centrality of the *I*, by how inconspicuous it made itself by virtue of its pervasiveness.

the thrill of recognition when you've done it, too: "I remember running my hand under a restaurant table and feeling all the gum" (26).

thinking that this thrill was akin to the sticky, shocking feeling of the gum itself: someone else was here, you shamefully but excitedly realize.

wondering why I was never more disgusted than I was when, as a child, I felt gum under a table. And why I felt under in the first place.

thinking of the book: this is what it means to be human. This vast storehouse of memories is what it looks like in the final analysis.

I remember Brainard's many admissions of embarrassment and awkwardness, particularly sexual embarrassment: "I remember, in the heart of passion once, trying to get a guy's turtle-neck sweater off. But it turned out not to be a turtle-neck sweater" (131).

thinking that queerness, for Brainard, had less to do with the contents of his actions and desires than it did with the way in which he consistently imagined them as irredeemably deviant from the norm.

when I discovered, during college, that even the people I considered normal, those nettlesome people who seemed to exude normalcy effortlessly, didn't, deep down, actually think of themselves as normal.

positing a relationship between memory and the norm: that the norm doesn't actually exist but we imagine it does, as we measure, solemnly, our prior actions against whatever impossible standards we've erected.

when Brainard confessed to cheating at solitaire: "I remember cheating at solitaire" (75).

thinking that this confession reveals the way in which individuals are accountable, first and foremost, unto themselves, that social codes do bind us each to the other, and that posterity does evaluate some small portion of our actions and inactions, but that, ultimately, we are each the prime arbiters, the irresolute judge and jury, of our own lives.

thinking that memory is a game of solitaire.

making a further distinction between private memory and public memory – between private and public history – and wondering along what borders the two might be said to touch: in newspapers, in court cases, in books, on blogs, in bars...

feeling that these thoughts on Brainard's recollection of cheating at solitaire, whether accurate or inaccurate, "right" or "wrong," were an example of the violence of interpretation: the text as a springboard to my own, necessarily differing, ends. Or, if you prefer, the text as the tip of an iceberg whose contours and heft I can only guess at.

Brainard's penchant for zany projects: "I remember collecting cigarette butts from the urns in front of The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston" (14).

considering the book itself as an urgent collection of memory's butt-ends.

loving that the book was a renunciation of plotted autobiography, of autobiography imbued with novelistic themes and significances.

I remember wondering if I could accomplish something similar in my criticism: in lieu of seamless argumentation, a patchwork tour of noteworthy passages—a reminiscence rather than an interpretation.

thinking that such an approach would bring criticism closer to the practices of reading and teaching literature, at least as I've slowly come to practice them.

going through a phase, now past, where I considered my primary responsibility as a teacher to point, ecstatically, to interesting things more so than to say something pointed about them.

associating, for about as long as I can remember, reading and writing with pleasure and excitement.

becoming aware of the participles, predominantly cognitive ones, this form has forced me to rely upon – wondering, thinking, noticing, feeling, reading, locating, realizing, considering, agreeing, positing, making, loving, associating, wanting, observing, noting, writing, understanding, lopping – and noticing how few of them were pushy or assertive.

thinking that the “I Remember” form does not imbue memories with heavy-handed meanings.

observing that Brainard's use of the form often functions as an affirmation of the thing he's remembering, its importance as object-event, its solidity within the life of the mind: “I remember zipper notebooks. I remember that girls hugged them to their breasts and that boys carried them loosely at one side” (37).

feeling that the zipper notebooks here are, first and foremost, a thing, a throbbing fact: a cultural occurrence Brainard finds fascinating and not a symbol to be deciphered, unpacked, and explained.

again, Brainard's need to prove his first memory, to assert that it did in fact happen.

noting another usage of “I remember” in this vein: “I remember how long a seemingly empty tube of toothpaste can go on and on and on” (153).

writing in my notebook that, as used here, “I remember” doesn't mean “I remember an episode from my past”: the above remark is a general observation about toothpaste tubes more than it is a specific memory.

finally understanding “I remember” as a rhetorical consecration: *this*, the following, matters, somehow, to me, perhaps, even, to you.

I remember, in this context, Brainard's memory of a distant relative's penny collection, how, as a child, the collection appeared to him "almost holy: like a shrine" (116).

considering the act of remembrance, its public articulation, as a form of enshrinement.

thinking that these observations might explain the *I*'s diffidence: guarding the left-hand margin of the page like a soldier in strict formation, it serves a ritualistic function. Its recurrence is not a narcissistic assertion of individual importance.

lopping off the words "I remember" from the fronts of these sentences.

thinking that this mass excision was like removing the fatty rim surrounding a piece of meat.

THE OULIPO

The Exercise and the Oulipo

: Context

A staple of creative writing curricula for decades, Raymond Queneau's 1947 Exercises in Style consists of a series of texts in which the same inconsequential story is told in ninety-nine stylistically different ways. Along with François Le Lionnais, Queneau was a co-founder of the Oulipo.

: What was I trying to do?

“The Exercise and the Oulipo” was the first dissertation chapter I wrote, so I was eager to prove to myself, through an exhaustive catalogue of styles and forms, that my project was indeed realizable. In the process, I inadvertently wrote a book in the space of an essay. That I didn't stop here when I very well could have – that I produced nearly 700 more pages on the subject – goes to show that even the most elegant of proofs requires acres of messy computation in the margins, just to make sure you got it right.

The Exercise and the Oulipo

Notation: The notion of the exercise is fundamental to Oulipian writing praxis.

Synonyms: The concept of the workout is foundational to constraint-based compositional practice.

Antonyms: The sensation of idleness is inessential to Surrealistic speaking caprice.

W+7: The novice of the exordium is furtive to Oulipian xenophobia precipice.

Double Entry: The notion and the concept of the exercise and of training is fundamental and central to Oulipian and constraint-based writing and inscription praxis and practice.

Compound-words: The heavy-duty writing-notion of the exercise-text tune-up is well-nigh the centerpiece of a constraint-based work-out praxis-ethic.

Homeoptotes: The notion of the exertion motion action in reproduction is constitutional to the coercion composition addiction.

Canada Dry: This motion of the exorcism is firmamental to Ou-leap-ian lightning taxes.

Definitional: The conception or idea of something done or performed as a means of practice or training exists or lives as a basic principal, rule, law, or the like, that serves as a groundwork of a system to Oulipian inscription convention, habit, or custom.

Distinguo: The notion (which is not to be confused with a mere concept) of the exercise (as distinct from the workout) is fundamental (and not simply important) to Oulipian (though certainly not to all writers) writing (but not speaking) praxis (as over against theory).

Reductive: All constraint-based writing – indeed, all writing of whatever kind – can be said to be a form of exercise.

Curtailed: The exercise is fundamental to Oulipian writing.

Equation: Oulipian writing praxis = exercise

Terse: Oulipo? Exercise.

Periphrasis: It is with the utmost urgency that I impress upon you that it cannot be stressed enough that this vital concept of the exercise, of which the Oulipo are ever so fond and which Raymond Queneau draws out with verve in his lively masterpiece, *Exercises in Style*, is of paramount importance to the playful group of punctilious polymaths, is in fact the governing, ordering principle that lays out and adumbrates both

an aesthetic and – just as important – an ethic according to which the group can conduct its austere yet pleasurable literary experiments.

Multiple Choice: The notion of the exercise is:

- a. fundamental to Oulipian writing praxis
- b. firmamental to Oulipian righting practice
- c. firm and mental to Oulipian right wing brackish
- d. all of the above

Evasive: If you play your cards right, I just might explain to you the connection between the exercise and the Oulipo.

Teaser: Stayed tuned for next time, where we find out just what the exercise means to the Oulipo.

Infomercial: *For just three EASY payments of \$9.99 you can have your very own Oulipo Compendium, which will teach you all the secrets to exercising the Oulipo way, but hurry! call within the next ten minutes and as a special bonus to you we'll include Raymond Queneau's indispensable Exercises in Style, which provides you with 99 extra exercises that can all be performed in the comfort of your home—that's the Oulipo Compendium plus Exercises in Style, a sixty dollar value, all for under thirty dollars! (tax and title fees apply, shipping & handling extra).*

Film trailer: In a world where all writing is a form of exercise, this daring group of writers constructs the mazes from which they must escape.

Blurb: In this masterpiece of storytelling, executed with characteristic stylistic verve, Raymond Queneau retells the same mundane tale ninety-nine different times, establishing, in a bold gesture of *anticipatory plagiarism*, the paradigm of the exercise that would become so central to the OuLiPo (Workshop for Potential Literature) thirteen years later.

Word anagram: The fundamental exercise of Oulipian writing praxis is the notion “to.”

Anagram: Within intimate expanses, the Oulipo finds an exotic trail of noir urge.

Marxist: The notion of writing as a form of exercise is insidious because it posits the sphere of literature as a space of free play apart from any political or ideological concerns. It is for this reason that constraint-based writing has taken hold in North America at the start of the twenty-first century: it perpetuates the belief, so prevalent in capitalist countries today, that the members of the bourgeoisie – the social class with time for game-playing and pleasure-seeking – are innocents who, by attending solely to their own personal affairs, are not culpable for capitalism's atrocities.

New Criticism: The notion of writing as a form of exercise privileges process over product, devaluing, regrettably, the only thing that truly matters, the poem as such.

Pick-up line: Do you know karate? Because your text is really kickin’.

Qualified: It could very well perhaps be the case (assuming, of course, the literary-critical community reaches such a consensus) that this notion, if notion it can be called (“concept” might be more accurate), of writing as a form of exercise, may in fact, for all of its imprecision, nevertheless be the dominant model (the dominant paradigm) for Oulipian (and only Oulipian) writing praxis, assuming we take the term ‘praxis’ in its broadest sense possible and assuming, too, that we understand exercise in figurative terms.

Litote: The notion of the exercise is not inessential to Oulipian writing praxis.

Question: How could you not consider the notion of the exercise fundamental to the Oulipo?

Passive: Fundamental to Oulipian writing praxis is the notion of the exercise.

Parts of Speech: Article: the
Substantives: notion, exercise, writing, praxis
Adjectives: fundamental, Oulipian
Verb: to be
Prepositions: of, to

Gertrude Stein: The composition exercise is the composition exercise. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the exercise the movement which makes the continuous present present. Many do not like exercise but if you like it enough it is easy enough to do and so I feel about exercise as I did when I first began to write it must be done and is easy enough to do so why stop doing it.

Parataxis: The exercise and the Oulipo and the writing and the praxis.

Lecturer: To consider writing as an exercise is to treat it as an experiment, an essaying, a testing out—not necessarily a finished or polished product. Remember, the word “essay” comes from the French “essayer,” meaning “to try.”

Literary-Historical: Though Queneau and other Oulipians take great pains to distinguish their methods of composition from the aleatory methods of the Surrealists, in particular the latter’s use of automatic writing, both methods possess, importantly, a ludic quality to them. The difference in the methods, then, lies less in the supposed chance/constraint divide (a divide that is the product of Oulipian efforts at self-differentiation) and more in their opposing conceptions of literary game playing. For the Surrealists, literature was, famously, in service to the revolution, while the Oulipo, on the other hand, is curiously silent on the question of the politics of its writing practices.

Probabilist: Enough monkeys with enough typewriters and the notion of writing as a form of exercise was bound to happen eventually.

Negation: It is not the case that the notion of inspiration is fundamental to Oulipian writing praxis, nor is it the case that the notion of the exercise is not fundamental to it either.

Homovocalism: Devoid of hope, where might the wit turn? Answer: An old ploy: build in a binding rail.

Homoconsonantism: Thin? Tone fat. Hex a raucous sofa node: a man tool too loopy on war to neg a poor axis.

Cultural Studies: The surprising vogue for constraint-based writing in present-day American literary circles must be understood against the backdrop of the country's fitness boom in the 1970s and 1980s. For better or for worse, exercise has become a language nearly all middle-class Americans speak.

Mathematical: $\{Ou, C-B\}, X \geq P$

in the set of Oulipian and constraint-based writing, exercise is greater than or equal to product

Morning Show Host: Is your **brain** getting enough **exercise**? While everybody knows that regular exercise is essential for a sound body, recent scientific evidence suggests that the brain needs its own special forms of exercise to stay in tip-top shape. Our guests on the show today have almost fifty years of experience in the field of avant-garde literature and they're here to show **you** how in as little as *thirty* minutes a day you can increase your brainpower through writing.

Psychoanalytic: The desire to equate writing with physical exercise represents nothing more than a yearning, destined to remain unsatisfied, for the idyllic realm of childhood play.

Paragogue: Them notions, oft themed excursions, isn't fundamentally towards Oulipianish writings, praxist.

Revolutionary: The notion of writing as a form of exercise upends the bourgeois myth of artistic genius, throws civilization itself into arrears.

Corporate: This exercise-based initiative empowers cutting-edge users to optimize efficient methodologies and embrace scalable infrastructures, thus allowing them to utilize compelling experiences to target next-generation relationships in the process of redefining revolutionary niches.

Binary code: 10001111010101110001001100000111101

Postcolonial: At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss constraint-based writing as the idle literary exercises of a privileged, leisured class. Doing so, however, ignores perhaps the most interesting facet of such writing: that the writers, typically white, middle class men, willingly adopt, in their writing, a subaltern subject-position or something close to it—a position where the writer’s/subject’s freedoms have been curtailed. What’s more, these writers contend that such a situation is, paradoxically, liberating. It must be pointed out, however, that their situation is fundamentally different from that of a true subaltern, since the latter subject-position is by nature involuntary. Even so, this complex power relationship means that every constraint-based text implicitly interrogates, willy-nilly, the very concept of freedom itself.

Snowball:

I
do
say,
said
Perec,
verbal
travail
animates
Oulipians’
remarkable
productions
delightfully

Melting Snowball:

fundamental
physiology
evidences
Oulipian
writing
tricks
ideas
most
can
ok
!

Formalist: Implicit in the notion of writing as a form of exercise is the idea that the way in which something is said matters just as much, if not more, than what is being said, that the true pleasure of writing lies in the *how*.

Slow: The. notion. of. the. exercise. is. fundamental. to. Oulipian. writing. praxis.

Colons: The notion: the exercise: the constraint: Oulipian praxis.

Feminist: While Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young have proposed a feminist version of Oulipian practices, *fouliipo*, arguing that so-called “procedural poetry” does not typically highlight the writer’s body in the way other works of feminist art do, it could also be argued that procedural poetry, with its affinities for the exercise, actually treats writing and language as bodies—textual bodies, and the minds that create them, can be trained and conditioned in much the same way human bodies can. Underlying Oulipian practice, in other words, is a tantalizing analogy between language and the body.

Spam: <u>From</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Date</u>
Ultra.books.mailer@ultrabo...	Urgent—99 Reasons to Smile	May 28

Is your vocabulary not BIG enough? Do you constantly feel like women notice how SMALL your words are? Tired of telling the same old stories in the same old ways?

Here’s your chance to do something about it! Literature expert Raymond Queneau reveals all his best kept secrets about how to tell stories with style in his exclusive new book Exercises in Style. These exercises will rejuvenate your vocabulary **and** your love life!

All this for only \$19.99, a price you can’t afford to ignore!

List: Oulipian Exercises

- N+7
- Elementary Morality
- Lipogram
- Palindrome
- Mathews’ algorithm
- Etc, etc.

Anthropological: When I lived among the Oulipo, I was continually struck by their artistic selflessness and their authentic generosity of spirit. Yes, they sign their texts just like other Western authors, but their artistic exercises – the core of the group’s production – are not created for reasons of personal gain. They are, instead, public property, gifts bestowed upon like-minded and needy scribes the world over. This potlatch ethic distinguishes the Oulipian tribe from almost all other collectives in the history of Western art.

Deconstruction: An ineluctable contradiction lies at the heart of this metaphor of writing as a form of exercise: script, *écriture*, always signifies corporeal absence, a trace.

French accent: Zee no-shun of zee eggs-err-cess ee-z ee-sent-shell to zee ooh-lee-po.

Imagist poem: **the exercise**

of the mind
at play upon
the grid

of consequences
permutations

splayed
like a thunder-
struck
tree

whose visitation
the children ride
like sacrament

Structuralist: The architectonic structure of Exercises in Style is repetition plus variation: the same story repeated in stylistically variant ways. This structure is a grim commentary on the state of Western storytelling in the mid-twentieth century: no meaningful new stories – no meaningful new myths – are possible, only idle stylistic re-touchings of the same wearied tales.

Analogy: the exercise : Oulipo :: alphabet : language.

Sports talk radio host: Now, now, now hold on a minute. The *idea* that all writing is just a game is... I mean, c'mon, you know me, Mike, you know I've been a fan of avant-garde art since I was kid: I read all the books, my father took me to all the galleries and the readings, just like I'll take my son when he gets older—heck, I was there at the Berkeley poetry conference in '65, one of the greatest readings you'll ever see—but I cannot, I just cannot, give the Oulipo a pass this time. It's gone on long enough. When you are making as much money as these writers are, you *cannot* turn around and then tell me that it's all just an exercise, that it's all just a silly game. Be fair now. Be fair. It's a business. Bottom line. It's a business.

Silence:

Reader Response Theory: The notion of writing as a form of exercise, and the types of texts such a notion tends to produce (such as Queneau's 100,000,000,000 Poems), divest the author as the locus of meaning creation and instead encourage a playful interaction between reader and text.

Amazon.com reader review (laudatory): **Eye Opener for All Professions**
(five stars)

I see after reading this book how many ways there are to present information in different and interesting ways. Forget my monotonous ways! I have found myself in my engineering profession writing technical presentations with a new awareness of the style of my presentation.

Exercises in style is fun to read on the bus or at home, and in moments of "writer's block." I read the styles a few at a time, and am constantly amazed at the variety of styles given a simple little story. This book is a "must read" for those looking to expand their creativity with almost no effort.

New Age: The Oulipo's writing exercises are phenomenal consciousness-raising tools to help aid your meditations as you travel The Long Road© to spiritual enlightenment.

Stock quote: OUL Oulipo, Inc. 19.60 ▲0.12 (0.01%) 3,705,084

Text Message: r u goin 2 libry 2day 2 xrsize ;)

Haiku: Five repetitions
Five repetitions plus two
Five repetitions

Historicist: While in 2009 America the term "exercise" connotes a physical activity done for the sake of pleasure and self-betterment, in 1947 France the term would most certainly have had militaristic overtones: drilling, marching, nuclear testing—the sound of jackboots in occupied Paris.

Queer Theory: Constraint-based writing queers the very category of literature itself by throwing into relief the normative rules that govern even the simplest and most common of literary conventions.

Word palindrome: Writing exercises restraint wherever restraint exercises writing.

Lipogram in A: The notion of the exercise is key to the Oulipo's writing methods.

Lipogram in E: Writing as a form of a workout is paradigmatic to Oulipian praxis.

Lipogram in I: Textual workouts are a fundamental concept of the French, rules-based art group that spawned the Ou-x-po's.

Lipogram in O: The idea that writing can be an exercise is a central tenet held by the French art enterprise that practices rule-based writing.

Lipogram in U: The notion of the exercise is important to the constraint-based French writing collective.

Drill sergeant: Wipe that smile off your face you pathetic little maggot! You call that a lipogram!? Get down on the floor and give me twenty more! *Now!*

Nervous: Well, what I'd like to, um, suggest is--and I I hope it, uh, doesn't come off as being too, er, bold--what I'd like to suggest is that the, um, that the exercise seems vital to the, uh, to the Oulipo.

Simile: Oulipians write as if exercise were a harpsichord and rules its taut strings.

Epic Simile: Oulipians write as if exercise were an anchor planted firmly in the depths of each new day, mooring the seasick scribes to the comforting pleasures that only habit, routine, and rules can provide in this tempestuous, rocky world.

Carnival barker: Step right up, step right up, folks, don't be shy. Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, we have here today, for your reading pleasure, one of the most amazing, most spectacular, most death-defying feats of literary showmanship ever attempted. The one and only Raymond Queneau will tell a breathtaking, heart-rending tale, a tale of murder, love, and passion, not once, not twice, but ninety-nine, yes NINETY-NINE, different ways. Gather round, gather round, ladies and gentlemen, the show's about to begin.

Filler: Filler.

Game Theory: While works of literature are generally considered to lie outside the purview of game theory, the notion of writing as a form of exercise – and everything that such a notion implies – opens up the possibility that constraint-based writing involves strategic situations that are susceptible to a mathematically-based analysis of the author's artistic decisions, of the kind game theory traditionally undertakes.

Baroque: This dashing conceit – that all composition is naught but calisthenics – forms the backbone of the Oulipian belletristic ritual.

Epenthesis: Thee notiron oof thee exercircumcise its fundafirmamental too Oulileapian wrighting peraxis.

Amazon.com reader review (critical): **A joke more than a book**
(2 stars)

The basic idea is charming, but as I suspected beforehand, it doesn't translate very well into a reading experience. To put it simply, Queneau was wrong when he assumed 99 versions to be "the classic ideal" or something like that. Most of these passages are unreadable, at least all the grammatical exercises.

Having said that, I must admit two things. First, since I don't know French, I had to read a Finnish translation. It's quite clear to me that some of the details must disappear in translation, especially as the Finnish language is not even related to

French. (On the other hand, some passages generated specially for the Finnish edition were quite hilarious.)

A more important point is that Queneau can definitely demonstrate the infinite variations in language and storytelling. How many viewpoints can you take on a simple story! The varying description of details was pretty amusing.

In the end, this book is just a joke, even though a clever one. I don't think it has much to do with fictional prose.

Legalese: The exercise is the de facto modus operandi, the sine qua non, of the literary properties of this offshore entity, the Oulipo.

Anaphora: To exercise

To notate

To write

To leave somewhere a furrow, a heady trace

News Story: French Writing Group Exercises in Style

New York, NY (AP) — They may not yet be a household name in the U.S., but the Oulipo (a French acronym for “Workshop for Potential Literature”), a group of avant-garde French writers dedicated to utilizing constraints in their writing, are making a big splash on the contemporary American literary scene with their fashionable writing exercises.

D.H. Lawrence: The exercise. Basta! It is French claptrap, through and through. The Oulipo is not interested in exercise. Exercise is the free movement of sinew and bone, of muscle, nerve, blood. Not these feeble mind-tricks. Write without the letter e! Compose a sentence that is the same backwards as forwards! Write a plot based on the movements of a chess piece and the secrets of the universe shall be revealed to you! It is only so much hokum. Strokes of the bloated French mind-brain. But the brain doesn't need any more strokes, at present. It has gotten too big from being stroked by sordid rules. Once and for all, let us have an end of thou-shalt-nots. Only then can we know true freedom, true exercise. Only then can we know in the blood.

Telemarketer: Good evening, Mr. Bury. Our research indicates that you, or someone in your household, appreciate avant-garde literature. Would you be interested in—CLICK.

Baseball player: Well, you know, I worked really hard this past off-season, my trainer had me out there every day doing grammar exercises, studying vocabulary flash cards, you know, just getting back to basics, so when I got to spring training, I felt like I was in the best writing shape of my career, and I think that really, you know, came through in the quality of some of my work this year.

Subway ad: EXERCISES IN STYLE

by New York Times best-selling author Raymond Queneau

“a truly original work” – New York Magazine

“Queneau possesses amazing grace.” – Entertainment Weekly

Find out what everyone’s talking about!

Fitness trainer: Ok, baby, you’re doing good, you got this, you got this, now give me three more, just three more, c’mon, baby—UP, one—UP, two—one more, push it, baby, push it—

Sociological: Just as people have been shown to bond through physical exercise, so too can they bond through mental exercise. In both cases, the group coheres by virtue of a challenging, shared ritual. For the Oulipo, the pleasure of writing exercises lies, first and foremost, in the friendships they forge.

Exclamations: The notion! and what a notion it is! of the exercise! imagine! the exercise! is fundamental! absolutely essential! to Oulipian writing! *write* it! praxis!

Resigned: It is impossible to explain adequately the relationship between the exercise and Oulipian writing praxis, so why bother trying.

The N+7 Form

: Context

The N+7 method, invented by Jean Lescure, is one of the Oulipian techniques most commonly used by non-Oulipians. It consists in replacing each noun (N) in a source text with the seventh one following it in a dictionary. An “eclipse,” what I’ve written below, is a text that includes both an N+7 and the text from which it is derived.

: What was I trying to do?

A pure writing exercise, that is, a short composition done or performed as a means of practice or training.

The N+7 Form

The Metaphysics of the N + 7 Form

The Oulipian technique called N + 7 delivers a strange promise: syntactic parallelism. What happens, syntactically, in the source text must happen in the nonsense one as well. Every text contains a hidden counterpart, a dormant N + 7 twin waiting to be revealed. Often, this twin is sheer gobbledygook, since chance, the principle underlying the N + 7 technique, forces unexpected nouns, willy-nilly, upon the new text. Oulipians insist that chance is not involved in the N + 7 procedure, but it is undeniable that, when using it, one is at the mercy of the dice's whim: even in an experiment like this, where I am being liberal with the constraint so as to satisfy the exigencies of both texts, I am still subject to the vagaries of the English lexicon. The N + 7 technique requires the author in charge of it to harness chance for artistic ends. Doing so demonstrates how syntactic parallelism in separate, different texts nonetheless produces a remarkably similar effect, demonstrates how interchangeable words are along what Roman Jakobson called "the axis of substitution."

The Methodology of the N + 7 Fornication

The Oulipian telegram called N + 7 delivers a strange property: systematic parity. What happens, systematically, in the south theater must happen in the north one as well. Every theater contains a hidden coup de grâce, a dormant N + 7 twitter waiting to be revealed. Often, this twitter is sheer gold, since chaos, the prize underlying the N + 7 telegram, forces unexpected nuances, willy-nilly, upon the new theater. Oulipians insist that chaos is not involved in the N + 7 production, but it is undeniable that, when using it, one is at the mercy of the dictionary's whip: even in an exploit like this, where I am being liberal

with the content so as to satisfy the exorbitance of both theaters, I am still subject to the vanities of the English libido. The N + 7 telegram requires the automaton in charge of it to harness chaos for artistic endurableness. Doing so demonstrates how systematic parity in separate, different theaters nonetheless produces a remarkably similar effulgence, demonstrates how interchangeable worths are along what Roman Jakobson called “the Baal of subversion.”

Masturbation: A Manifesto

: Context

Harry Mathews was born and raised on New York's Upper East Side but left America for France in 1952 shortly after graduating from Harvard. He has written over a dozen books including the novels Cigarettes, The Journalist, and Tlooth, along with collected stories, The Human Country, and essays, The Case of the Persevering Maltese. Mathews is one of two American members of the Oulipo.

: What was I trying to do?

To permit myself to play, safely.

Masturbation: A Manifesto

Frustration: another day at my desk and still no progress on an essay about Harry Mathews' Singular Pleasures, a collection of vignettes of people masturbating. What masturbation sometimes feels like: running in place.

~

Understand: this is an essay about Singular Pleasures and not writer's block. An essay about masturbation: therefore: an exercise in repetition and self-love, with only minimal regard for its object of desire.

~

Methodology: to approach, through the mandatory use of colons, an agitated state of thought-stimulation, akin to the autoeroticism of Singular Pleasures and of constraint-based writing more generally.

~

The colon: I like it and use it often: *here comes the orgasm*, it says: here comes mirth, pith, joy.

~

Genesis 38: 8-9: "Then Judah told Onan to sleep with his brother's wife, to do his duty as the husband's brother and raise up offspring for his brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not count as his; so whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his seed on the ground so as not to raise up offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight, and the Lord took away his life also."

~

Methodology: to scatter my seed freely, wickedly.

~

Methodology (after Francis Ponge's Soap): to rub myself clean with language: delightful, repetitive language.

~

Euphemisms for male masturbation: beat the meat; choke the chicken; clean the rifle; flog the log; milk the cow; play the organ; polish the bishop; prime the pump; pull the taffy; punch the clown; shuck the corn; slap the salami; spank the monkey; tenderize the

tube steak; tickle the pickle; toss the midget; varnish the flagpole; wax the dolphin; wrestle the eel; yank the crank.

~

Euphemisms for female masturbation: beat around the bush; double-click the mouse; pet the cat; polish the pearl; rub the nub.

~

It should be obvious: euphemisms for male masturbation are more common than those for female masturbation.

~

Methodology: to point out the obvious and the familiar: to underscore how masturbation courts purple rhetoric.

~

George Perec's succinct blurb of Singular Pleasures: "A great ecumenical work."

~

Myths about masturbation: it can cause blindness, madness, baldness, acne, and hair to grow on one's palms. And another, more modern, myth: that it can cure ills.

~

A doctor on Oprah described masturbation as "self-cultivation": he said that women who were sexually unsatisfied needed to learn how to "self-cultivate."

~

Frustration: anodyne, prefab language precludes singularity of experience. cf. the linguistic conventions of porn: "Huge breasted amateur jizzed all over her natural juicy boobs."

~

singular *adj.* **1** extraordinary; remarkable; exceptional
2 unusual or strange; odd; different
3 being the only one of its kind; distinctive; unique
4 separate; individual

~

As a rule, the popular euphemisms for masturbation are not anodyne: however fatuous, they tend to possess liveliness, spunk.

~

Methodology: to eschew false pieties: to perpetuate the odd and the deviant.

~

Beginning again and again is masturbatory: the gesture creates a pleasant friction, generates its own brisk heat.

~

Repetition is masturbatory: the gesture creates a pleasant friction, generates its own brisk heat.

~

It should be obvious: colons are rarely necessary. But fun nonetheless: they are an extravagance.

~

To indulge in the colon: to pamper oneself: to luxuriate in grammar.

~

A colon is hefty, ponderous: it builds profundity into the grammar of a sentence.

~

A colon is like a thunderbolt: majestic, brazen, flashy. *Here comes the orgasm*, it says: here comes mirth, pith, joy.

~

Frustration: ever since reading James Schuyler's The Morning of the Poem, a long poem bestrewn with colons, I worry about overusing the colon: in the poem, colon clause nests within colon clause: so much so that each individual clause loses its usual force: what economists call the law of diminishing returns.

~

So far: no diminishment.

~

To masturbate is to say: *I hereby permit myself this space to play safely.*

~

Methodology: to practice theory as practice: to sport at metaphysics.

~

The OuLiPo: just as you can add the words “in bed” to every fortune cookie, so too can you add the words “for the Oulipo” to each of these entries. For example, instead of simply saying “Methodology,” you can say: “Methodology, for the Oulipo.”

~

Frustration: purposiveness: the yen, even in masturbatory prose, for an argumentative trajectory.

~

Methodology: to practice an art of indirection: to move, as best I can, in slow circles.

~

Eventually, if only by force of repetition, this will become an essay about Harry Mathews’ Singular Pleasures: an essay about how the book can be seen as an allegory for the nature of constraint-based writing. But first: some more foreplay.

~

Foreplay: the belief in the virtues of prolonged tension.

~

I confess to an addiction to the colon: to an addiction to performative prose.

~

Colons are magisterial, august: a bow in their general direction.

~

Repetition is masturbatory, as is beginning again: they do not, however, create the same type of friction.

~

It should be obvious that if you wait too long to deploy a colon, it loses its thunder: like so.

~

from Singular Pleasures: “After sixty-two years, a highly educated woman of Karachi has retained two passions: masturbation and the singing of Maria Callas. She is now indulging both of them, rolling on six thicknesses of Bakhtiari rug to the strains of a pirated *Fedora*. The music – that voice – do not augment her sexual pleasure: they frustrate and delay it. Sometimes two hours will pass in incompatible ecstasies before they come to a necessary end.”

~

Frustration: desire, Mathews suggests, functions as an asymptote: it can never get to where it would like to go.

~

Methodology: to abandon any pretense of arrival: to cultivate an ethos of postponement and avoidance.

~

For it is written: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the *pursuit* of Happiness.”

~

Blaise Pascal: “The only good thing for men therefore is to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion.”

~

Methodology: to make self-pleasure something more than mere self-indulgence: to situate it within a network of meaningful relations.

~

Frustration: Masturbation and Its Discontents (MAID): a “quasi-subversive organization,” concocted by Mathews in Singular Pleasures, that “encourages its members to invent obstacles to overcome while masturbating”: a mission identical to that of the Oulipo with respect to literature.

~

The OuLiPo: a workshop for the sharing of otherwise solitary pleasures.

~

Frustration: howsoever one tries to redeem it, “masturbatory” remains a pejorative term: it carries with it the taint of isolation: of loneliness.

~

William Carlos Williams: “It is only in isolate flecks that/ something/ is given off// No one/ to witness/ and adjust, no one to drive the car”

~

Frustration: against my better judgment, I have arrived somewhere: the end must be drawing nigh.

~

from Singular Pleasures: “A man is masturbating as he contemplates a finely brushed poem by Wang Wei, seated on a straw mat in his garret in Mukden. An ‘ascetic sensualist’, he has striven all his life to unite in one moment of revelation the pleasures of poetry and masturbation. On this warm spring morning of his sixtieth year, he senses that the sublime fusion may finally be at hand.”

~

Masturbation: the fantasy that fantasy can be consummation.

“Safety in Numbers”

: Context

To write this chapter, I recorded and then transcribed a class discussion in my Introduction to Literature course at NYU. For our consideration of the sestina and the villanelle that day, I assigned my students Harry Mathews’ “Safety in Numbers” and David Trinidad’s “Chatty Cathy Villanelle,” two Oulipian-spirited poems that play with the rules of the fixed poetic forms in which they’re written.

: What was I trying to do?

In recording a class discussion and calling it a “reading,” I was doing what I often do when I teach: trying to channel my thoughts, Spicer-like, through alien mediaries.

**“Safety in Numbers”:
A Class Discussion**

*New York University
September 23 2010
12:31 pm*

LB: Let me say a few quick words about how today’s discussion will form part of my dissertation. The idea, in keeping with the title of Harry Mathews’ poem, is to try to frame a regular classroom discussion as a collaborative group interpretation of the poem. Whether or not this is a “safer” way of interpreting the poem, I don’t know. But I do think that serious discussion of a poem, of the kind that typically happens in a classroom setting, does often add up to a sort of reading of that poem. So the constraint here is: In what ways is teaching – in what ways is a group discussion – a constraint that both enables and inhibits interpretation? Can I have a volunteer to read the poem out loud? Vanessa.

Vanessa: “Safety in Numbers”

The enthusiasm with which I repeatedly declare you my one
And only confirms the fact that we are indeed two,
Not one: nor can anything we do ever let us feel three
(And this is no lisp-like alteration: it’s four
That’s a crowd, not a trinity), and our five
Fingers and toes multiplied leave us at six-

es and sevens where oneness is concerned, although seven
Might help if one was cabalistically inclined, and “one”
Sometimes is. But this “one” hardly means one, it means five
Million and supplies not even an illusion of relevance to us two
And our problems. Our parents, who obviously number four,
Made us, who are two; but who can subtract us from some mythical three

To leave us as a unity? If only sex were in fact “six”
(Another illusion!) instead of a sly invention of the seven
Dwarves, we two could divide it, have our three and, just as four
Became two, ourselves be reduced to one
– Actually without using our three at all, although getting two
By subtraction seems less dangerous than by division and would also make five

Available in case we ever decided to try a three-
some. By the way, this afternoon while buying a six-
pack at the Price Chopper as well as a thing or two
For breakfast, I noticed an attractive girl sucking Seven-
Up through an angled and accorded straw from one

Of those green aluminum containers that will soon litter the four

Corners of the visible world – anyway, this was at five
O'clock, I struck up a conversation with a view to that three-
some, don't be shocked, it's you I love, and one
Way I can prove it is by having you experience the six
Simultaneous delights that require at the very least seven
Sets of hands, mouths, etcetera, anyway more than we two

Can manage alone, and believe me, of the three or four
Women that ever appealed to both of us, I'd bet five
To one this little redhead is likeliest to put you in seven-
th heaven. So I said we'd call tomorrow between three
And four p.m., her number is six three nine oh nine three six.
I think you should call. What do you mean, no? Look, if we can't be one

By ourselves, I've thought about it and there aren't two
Solutions: we need a third party to . . . No, I'm not a four-
flusher, I'm not suggesting we jump into bed with six
Strangers, only that just as two plus three makes five,
Our oneness is what will result by subtracting our two from three.
Only through multiplicity can unity be found. Remember "We Are Seven"?

Look, you are the one. All I want is for the two
Of us to be happy as the three little pigs, through the four
Seasons, the five ages, the six senses, and of the heavenly spheres all seven.

LB: Thanks, Vanessa. Hearing this poem read out loud is useful because there are so many number words in the middles of the lines; they're not just the end-words. What's the effect of the repetition of the permuting end-words, both in this poem specifically and in the sestina form more generally? Kelly?

Kelly: I think the repetition, because there's so much of it and it's so structured, you quickly learn to expect what's coming at the end of the line. Both out loud and on the page, it gives it a pace. It was the same in the Elizabeth Bishop sestina we read. It's like you're reading for the end of the line.

LB: Yeah, each end-word is like a landing-point point that becomes familiar and expected. Liza?

Liza: What's unique about this poem is that it connects so well from line to line. Because it's a sestina, I thought a lot of emphasis would be placed on the end-words, but actually he always continues on to the next line. It reads like a long paragraph instead of more emphasis being placed on the numbers.

LB: That's an important point that Liza makes: there's a lot of enjambment in this poem.

If you notice, looking over the poem quickly now, it looks like there are only three lines that are end-stopped, and one of them is the final line, which by definition has to be end-stopped. What's the effect of enjambment, both in this poem specifically and in poetry in general? Vanessa.

Vanessa: In this poem specifically, I find it especially interesting when he uses the numbers and then adds a suffix to them, like "six-/es."

LB: Yeah, I noticed when you read that line, you put more of a...

Vanessa: I got confused because there was an entire stanza between them. It kind of makes it seem like another word. When I was reading the poem, before I realized it was a sestina, I wrote down that, "it seems like it's prose, with a lot of numbers."

LB: Hmm, that relates to that Marjorie Perloff essay we read earlier this semester, where she talks about how the line breaks are too arbitrary in a lot contemporary free verse. Though it's interesting, because this is a fixed poetic form, none of these line breaks are arbitrary, out of necessity. There's loads of enjambment, but the lines have to break at exactly the point at which they do, because you need "one," "two," "three," and so on as the end-words. It does have that weird effect that happened when Vanessa was reading, where you get the "six" to fulfill the requirements of the form, and then the "-es" at the start of the next line. And there were a few other places like that in the poem, where it feels a little forced to fulfill the requirements of the form. Jane?

Jane: When I read sestinas, I sometimes get really distracted by the fact that the words are repeated over and over. I'll find myself not really reading the line and just looking at the end. But I thought the enjambment in this one was pretty effective because I wasn't really conscious of the end-words because it flowed better.

LB: I agree that the enjambment makes the end-words a little less weighty and monumental. Also there are so many number-words in the middles of the lines that when you hear the poem read out loud, which was how I first encountered the poem, you can't tell which are number-words and which are the end-words. Lauren and then Kelly.

Lauren: In terms of the enjambment, it's really distinctive. The way he breaks the lines up and the way he finishes them: "five/ Million" or "three-/ some." It adds to the appeal of the poem. Each time you're almost surprised by the word that follows it.

LB: Yeah, there's that little bit of friction when you see a commonly used phrase adapted to the poem in a new, unexpected context. It reinvigorates the cliché. The fourth stanza has a number of these. Two of the end-words there are consumer products: "Seven-/ up," which is a brand name, and "six-/ pack," the generic term for the quantity in which beer is commonly sold. And then there's a cliché at the end, crossing between the two stanzas: "the four/ Corners of the visible world." That phrase is a stock, idiomatic English expression, but summoned as a solution to the problem of "How am I going to use the word 'four' here," it feels really inventive and clever and not boring or trite in the way we

assume clichés to be. It's a clever solution to an aesthetic problem, but to call it a "solution" raises the question – one the larger poem raises – about the relationship between aesthetics and math. Creative expression and poetry aren't normally thought of in such rigid, logical terms. And I'm not saying they need to be. But maybe one aspect of working in fixed poetic forms, in contrast to the free verse we talked about last week, is that there's a math-like process of substitution and balancing that has to take place. Angelina?

Angelina: The title "Safety in Numbers" is also an idiomatic expression and I think it's clever that he's able to pull off the usage of those expressions throughout the poem and not have them sound bland.

LB: I agree. And I'd add that poetry is the realm of human expression that's conventionally thought to be the most resistant to cliché. It's not that you can't use a cliché in a poem—you can: you can write bad love poetry that's riddled with clichés. But it's more that poets often pride themselves on the fact that they try to find original ways to express themselves. It's not too much of an overgeneralization to say that this is a large thrust of poetic expression: that the previous ways of saying things are stale and tired and that the language needs to be reinvigorated. So what's interesting in relation to what Angelina's saying is that there's tons of inventiveness in this poem, but it's often inventiveness through the use of cliché rather than through sheer originality, in the way we were talking about original, unusual word combinations in "Howl": the "unshaven rooms," the "pubic beard," things like that.

(Pause)

LB: But what about math? He writes, for example, in the second to last stanza, "No, I'm not a four-/ flusher, I'm not suggesting we jump into bed with six/ Strangers, only that just as two plus three makes five,/ Our oneness is what will result by subtracting our two from three." So there's math here in relation to a lot of different things: in relation to love, in relation to sex, in relation to writing. He's proposing a threesome as though he were balancing a quadratic equation. How do you read this episode in the poem?

Erica: That's my favorite line in the poem. I find it interesting how he uses mathematical language to solve a problem having to do with love and sex. Poetry is often associated with love—like love poetry—but he's using numbers instead of flowery language.

LB: What you're saying reminds me of our discussion of Millay's sonnet "I, Being born a woman," where she writes about bodily attraction and how her reason is in conflict with her bodily emotions. Mathews is using the language of math, which is considered cold, calculating and super-rational, in order to write about the domain of the feelings—love. Love's not the kind of thing you're supposed to be calculating about, though. How do you understand this tension in the poem? Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: He's pitching what to me is basically an irrational idea to his girlfriend. It's not safer to bring another person into a traditional couple. I would feel unsafe if that were me.

LB: Well, that points out a dissonance between the poem's title, which is ostensibly about safety, but actually the whole poem is about trying to get his partner to take a risk, assuming it's a "he" who is speaking. And this is an example of a poem that's a dramatic monologue. I wouldn't assume this is Mathews himself speaking. Which permits him to play around and have fun. If he were to give this poem to his partner in all seriousness, it probably wouldn't have its intended effect. And I think Liz's point is useful to consider because the poem is trying to get someone to take a risk. So I'm not sure there's as much safety happening place in this poem as the title would seem to suggest. Or maybe the use of numbers provides a false sense of safety. Rebecca?

Rebecca: I think he acknowledges that while it may be a risk, it's a calculated risk. And I think his use of math makes the poem less about emotion and more about something that makes sense. "It just makes sense that we should do this, because how else can we be one?"

LB: But do you buy his "proof"?

Robert: It's not even logical. It's using numbers in an illogical way.

LB: Yeah, it's kind of faux-logical. It's like a fake mathematical proof. But it's weird to think of a sexual proposition – or love – as a kind of proof. It doesn't balance in that way. And in a larger sense, math is the domain where there's almost always a correct answer to every question. Whereas love is something that I think is closer to a literary sensibility. It can't be negotiated or quantified in the ways that are happening in this poem, which creates these interesting tensions. Evangeline?

Evangeline: It reminds me of when you use a lot of facts and statistics to try to convince someone to do something. You might say, "Two of out five people do this. And 75% of the population does this." The person gets confused and forgets what was asked in the first place.

LB: That's a really nice analogy. There's a lot of manipulation of numbers here. In a way, the poem is kind of a caricature of the manipulation of numbers that happens generally in argumentative discourse. Sophie?

Sophie: I get the feeling that the speaker is nervous and I think that's why there's so much enjambment. It creates this kind of jumbled pace, where he's trying to convince his partner, but his nervousness is reflected in the lack of stops for breath.

LB: Your reading of the narrator as nervous is interesting, because I first encountered this poem at a reading Mathews gave and in person he's kind of a commanding figure. He's a big, sturdy guy, his head was shaved down to the scalp, he was wearing a poncho, and he delivered the poem in a confident, authoritative tone. But at the same time the delivery was playful: mock-serious, I guess you could say.

Sophie: Cheeky.

LB: Yes, cheeky. But so it's hard for me to dissociate what I know about Mathews walking around in the world with the speaker of the poem, who may be more tentative. Clearly, the speaker is seeking affirmation or acknowledgement through his partner. There are a few moments in the poem where questions are posed to the partner, but never get answered in the poem itself, and I think those moments are telling in relation to Sophie's point. Kelly and then Lauren.

Kelly: I think this goes back to the title. The way I read it is that he's trying to talk about a very scary, emotional, intimate thing, but he's uncomfortable talking about it so he puts it in terms that are more comfortable. I took the phrase "safety in numbers" as a personal emotional safety for the speaker, so that he can talk about things in objective, numerical terms that he doesn't feel confident enough to talk about openly and directly.

LB: That's an interesting notion. Talking about love or sex in this mathematical way might seem arid or oversimplified. But maybe one of the more positive aspects of it is that it allows the speaker to engage with something that he otherwise might not be able to, finding a safer language. The other thing I'd point out, with regards to the title, is that it can be read as a commentary on the sestina form itself. That is, if you wanted to be disparaging about it, you could say that the sestina as a form is a paint-by-numbers form: paint this section green, this one purple, and so on and you have a poem. Paint-by-numbers isn't thought to be great art; you can't achieve virtuosity when you work that way. But on the other hand, I think Mathews manages to do more than just paint-by-numbers in this poem. So maybe the argument isn't that the sestina is formulaic, but that this seemingly formulaic form is actually anything but. Lauren, you had your hand up.

Lauren: It's sort of a way of dealing with confusion, using something definable and logical and applying it to something indefinable, like love, that can get really muddled in terms of emotions. It's the speaker's way of narrowing down the situation into something he understands.

LB: The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein says, in his book the Philosophical Investigations, "When I follow a rule, I don't choose. I obey blindly." The idea being that when you follow a rule, there's only a limited freedom of choice. This concern with freedom might apply to fixed poetic forms in general. I do wonder, though, if there are any problems with this use of math. Isn't it in some way reductive?

Keri: I understand what you're saying, but the poem is so creative and so inventive compared to what we normally read in poems that I think we might be less likely to harshly criticize it.

LB: So maybe because of the poem's playfulness, you're willing to give it a pass on certain other things? You could look at that "oneness" line – "Our oneness is what will result by subtracting our two from three" – and if you wanted to be severe, you could say, "Well, that's not how love works." But maybe that critique is beside the point. Jane?

Jane: I don't know. The first two lines where he says, "The enthusiasm with which I repeatedly declare you my one/ And only confirms the fact that we are indeed two." And then in the second stanza, "who can subtract us from some mythical three/ To leave us as a unity?" I thought that this actually might be a problem that the speaker was genuinely trying to grapple with: the problem of how am I supposed to be closer with you, how am I truly supposed to call you my one, when we are two separate people. And of course the poem is clever and humorous and all that. But I thought he might genuinely be concerned with this idea of becoming closer and unified.

LB: I *really* like your reading of the poem and I think it nicely complicates what we've said so far. The poem is obviously playful, but there is a more serious undercurrent to it, the problem of what I guess you could call romantic unity. What does it mean to speak in terms of a "we" as a couple, as though you were a unit? And the opening lines that Jane brings up point to an underlying problem that I don't think the speaker can reason away: he acknowledges that he says "you're my one and only" all the time, but the fact that he says it so much and so enthusiastically might actually prove how fundamentally separate he and his beloved are.

(Pause)

LB: At this point, though, in the time we have left, I'd like to take a look at David Trinidad's "Chatty Cathy Villanelle," which relates to the paint-by-numbers idea that came up regarding the sestina form. I'll read the poem quickly. But I'll preface it by saying, if this wasn't evident, that Chatty Cathy was a pull-string doll in the 1960's. "Chatty Cathy Villanelle":

When you grow up, what will you do?
Please come to my tea party.
I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?

Let's take a trip to the zoo.
Tee-hee, tee-hee, tee-hee. You're silly!
When you grow up, what will you do?

One plus one equals two.
It's fun to learn your ABC's.
I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?

Please help me tie my shoe.
Can you come out and play with me?
When you grow up, what will you do?

The rooster says cock-a-doodle-doo.
Please read me a bedtime story.
I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?

Our flag is red, white and blue.
Let's make believe you're Mommy.
When you grow up, what will you do?
I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?

LB: I wanted to transition to this poem so that we could talk about a villanelle in addition to a sestina, where the repetition is no longer single words, but entire lines. The end-words of a sestina always work to create a mood, depending on the nature of the words. It would be hard to write a dark, ominous sestina if the end-words were "beach," "sunshine," "seashell," and "ocean." I mean, you could technically do it, you could write about a murder that took place on a beach, the mocking sunshine, the indifferent ocean, things like that, but it would be pretty darn strained. Ordinarily, the end-words of a sestina so dictate the tenor and mood of the poem that you could almost take away the fronts of the lines and still have an idea of what the poem's about.

Elizabeth: I noticed in "One Art" that the repeated lines are really important. The things that get lost grow bigger and bigger as the poem goes on.

LB: Yes, I love that poem and I think that's a great point: by the end, it's not just her door keys, it's a city, a continent, a loved one. For the purposes of trying to make a few points related to the Mathews poem, I want to talk about "Chatty Cathy," but I agree with Elizabeth that the repeated lines in a villanelle are almost like a refrain. If you have to repeat a single word, you can vary its context, like Bishop does with the teardrops in her "Sestina": first they come from the grandmother, then from the teakettle, the moon, and so forth. Changing the context is a way of avoiding the potential pitfalls of repetition. But when you have to repeat a line in its entirety, you have less flexibility, it's harder to change the context. And one of the things that Trinidad is doing is playing with the idea of the villanelle form as a pull-string doll: you plug in a line into one part of the poem and the poem spits it back out at you later. Jane?

Jane: I thought it was interesting that both the repeated lines were questions. I felt that it really involved the reader and it felt really creepy. I was reading it and thinking, "I don't know what I want to do when I grow up!"

LB: There are several important things in what you're saying. What's the significance of the fact that both the repeated lines are questions? Angelina?

Angelina: When I first read the poem, the language wasn't very evocative. It was like a doll: very plain. But when I read it again, it really echoed with me: on a second reading, there's more meaning to it. The questions are actually profound.

LB: That's another important point: the language of the poem is very canned and pre-packaged. It's baby talk, more or less, simplistic and crude. But I agree with Angelina that there are actually very profound critiques that are being made. And I agree with Jane that the poem, despite its superficial appearance of being upbeat, is actually quite dark

and creepy. Alicia.

Alicia: The questions that are being asked are such serious questions juxtaposed with these very lighthearted comments about the zoo and the alphabet. It's just really weird.

LB: Yeah, the questions are intimidatingly broad. And in that second question – “I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?” – you have the contrast of a declarative statement immediately preceding the question. Chatty Cathy knows who she is: Do you know who you are? Which is hopelessly broad and intimidating, but you're supposed to have an easy answer to it. Both of the questions are about identity: identity through one's job and/or through self-definition. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Because it's a children's toy, the toy asking the question is never changing, but your identity as a person does. For some reason when I read it, I thought of Toy Story 3.

LB: I didn't see that one. Does the kid grow up and not like the toys anymore?

Elizabeth: He goes to college.

Class: Heh.

LB: Oh wow. Go on.

Elizabeth: And his personality has changed in that time. For me, the question of identity involves time.

LB: One interesting thing in what you're saying is that this kind of toy is meant as a development aid, for learning. Or, if that's not how the doll is exactly intended or marketed, it's one of its unintended effects, in somewhat insidious ways. Based on the questions and statements it makes, the doll inculcates values in the children who play with it: that your identity is tied to your job, for example. Vanessa?

Vanessa: I never really played with dolls, but I'm imagining if I was five and I had played with a doll like this, if it said, “I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?” I'd just say, “I'm Vanessa.” It's very simple when you're younger—you're just a person. But then when you get older, you're a different person to different people and there are identity crises. “What do I do? What am I good at?” Especially at our age, when you're in college. But I think what's interesting is that the answers to the questions get more and more daunting as the poem goes on and it points to our... when did he write this poem?

LB: It comes from this book, Plasticville, which was published in... 2000.

Vanessa: I just read a book for my sociology class called Unequal Childhood and it talks about how the way we raise children now is different from in the past because they're so much more success-oriented at very young ages. Children are being pressured to know what they want to do as early as the age of ten: when you enter middle school, you need

to know what track you're going to be on, or else you're never going to be successful at it. And it's a social commentary to me on how you're supposed to have a particular niche and where you work in the chain of things is supposed to be established.

LB: I think the critique that individuals are taught to be success-oriented at increasingly younger ages is an important one in this poem. It's like those Manhattan parents that have their five year old children interview to get into the best schools. There's this enormous pressure to achieve success, whatever "success" even means in the context of kindergarten. There's no space in Chatty Cathy's questions for just being a kid, or for not-knowing. In a way, more than any one specific critique that the poem might be making about consumerism, identity, gender, and so forth, that's the most insidious thing about how this doll is working: it leaves no space for uncertainty. It's perfectly fine not to know what you want to do with your life when you're twenty, let alone when you're ten. But culturally, it seems as though you have to have all the answers, when actually not having them might be beneficial in certain ways. And a line like "Our flag is red, white and blue" locates the critique as an American-specific thing. Like all the language in this poem, it seems an innocent enough line, but it's actually a critique of some sort. Lauren?

Lauren: The last stanza, where she says, "Our flag is red, white and blue" and "Let's makebelieve you're Mommy," it's aggressive and demanding. "Let's makebelieve" is a command, not a question.

LB: That last stanza is really important. Everything in the poem builds up to it. The repetitions and the variations building up to it are pitch perfect. He's sort of been saving the flag and the mommy lines for the very end. And actually, one interesting comparison between the doll and the poem is that neither one can talk back. Posing a question is an invitation to dialogue, but the doll and the poem are both one-way things. Catherine?

Catherine: The whole thing reminds me of subliminal messages. That's where I get the creepy feeling from, like these things were being fed to us or telling us how to think about something.

LB: It's almost like a form of brainwashing. Except that, having made a statement like that, you have to acknowledge that one way or another culture will condition what people consider normal and how they grow up expecting to behave. So you can't not be brainwashed, in a certain sense, it's just a matter of what values you'll be brainwashed with. Alicia?

Alicia: I think it's also a commentary on gender roles.

LB: *Yes.*

Alicia: "Let's makebelieve you're Mommy." That's not something a GI Joe would say.

LB: That's an excellent and important point about gender roles. One of the real tensions of this poem is that with the legacy of the feminist movement – the first wave of which

was only just emerging in the 1960's – it's now perfectly normal for women to prioritize career aspirations and define themselves that way. But at the same time, the doll is also teaching little girls how to act and define themselves as a maternal caretaker, which, while not incompatible with a career, does involve certain compromises or difficulties. But we're out of time for today, so before you go, can I have two or three volunteers to start discussion threads on Blackboard for the Roubaud reading? Alicia. And Elizabeth. Ok, good. Have a good weekend.

POST-OULIPO

Abish's Africa

: Context

Walter Abish's 1974 novel Alphabetical Africa contains fifty-two chapters. In the first chapter, all words begin with the letter *a*. The words of the second chapter begin with either *a* or *b*, those of the third chapter *a*, *b*, or *c*, with letters continually added until in the twenty-sixth chapter initials are drawn from the entire alphabet. The process is reversed in the following twenty-six chapters, so that in the last one all words once again begin with *a*.

: What was I trying to do?

As its lengthy, over-involved constraints intimate, "Abish's Africa" was one of the first dissertation chapters I wrote. In this and other early chapters on Raymond Queneau's Exercises in Style, Raymond Roussel's New Impressions of Africa, and Gilbert Sorrentino's Gold Fools, I specifically remember trying to address important precursors to contemporary constraint in order to provide my project a solid historical footing. However, I was also quietly doing what criticism has done, wittingly or not, since time immemorial: trying to one-up the art under consideration. My frequent mimics, at once a tribute to and displacement of the parroted books, foreground, by virtue of their formal similarity to the works under consideration, the atavistic contestations between criticism and art.

Abish's Africa

A: An authorial assertion, an A-list (another's) at Alphabetical Africa's (author: Abish) adjournment: "Another abbreviation another abdomen another abduction another aberration another abhorrent ass another abnormal act another aboriginal another approach another absence..." (151). And another "another." And another. Advances ahead. Accumulates. An alphabetical assonantal archive? An alternative apologue arrangement?

B: Bombings by American airforce begin. An alliterative analogue: big, breakneck 'B' bursts, as, "Bach's brother, Bach's blackguard brother Butoni, bemused by Bach, by Boccherini, Beethoven and Brahms, blunders a bit by baldly boasting about backing Beatles" (4, 3, 3). Are A's and B's, bound badly, best book bits?

C: Consonance continues – clack clackety clack – coaxes cackles and claps. "Author" as character appears at book's beginning, contrives circumstances, characters, and anecdotes aplenty. Colonialist connotations come about. Consider: "Arriving at Chad, Alex and Allen coldly consider childlike Chad attitudes, and calculate, can Chadians afford American cosmetics" (6). Alphabet as authoritarian? As colonial and cultural apparatus?

D: Don't disremember ants, crucial dramatic actors. Ants denote chores, diligence, drudgery. Donkeywork, basically. Activities colonists don't deign do. Ants absorb attacks, also, as Author alerts book browsers: "defiant Dogon divisions advance against

anthills, capturing Dogon bush and dust, creating dangerous canals, designing Africa again and again” (9). Antward assault compels asking: does design, customarily considered constructive, always come at a considerable cost?

E: Electric coital episode commences between Emperor and Edna. Awkward, constrained descriptions add considerable excitement. An example: “Elatedly Emperor enters Edna believing Edna could be Alva, as Edna, a bit deferentially, a bit dishonestly admits coming eight consecutive colossal and definitely contagious climaxes” (11). Electricity arises because climaxes aren’t conventionally consecutive, colossal—contagious. But climaxes are authentically contagious. As are eccentric expressions, conspicuous communication chains, abnormal discourses. Are constraints a deliberate botch?

F: First chapter evidencing constraint curtailment: everything a bit easier, a bit freer, for Author. Entire dictionary chapters emancipated. First character erased by Author: Ferdinand, an autochthonous African. For? For Francophilia, apparently: “Ferdinand flies back, discovers France, embraces flag, father and aunts. Ahhh, Flaubert, Céline, Balzac. Disgusted author eliminates Ferdinand” (13). Are all foreigners “actors for an African continent” (132)? Are all characters and events auxiliary compared against Author’s constraint dance?

G: Goodbye constant consonance. Goodbye around-the-clock assonance and alliteration. Each extra graphic character allowed diminishes chances for frontal

alphabetical echoes. Disappointing, certainly, but agreeable circumlocutions abide. Are circuitous expressions always amusing? Can amusement ever become arid, bromidic, calculable?

H: Here, chapter H, Author admits deliberate absences, admits eliminating “a few emotions” from his book (19). A cogitation: constraint could be a contrivance for coping, for hiding—for evasion. Calamity, cataclysm, catastrophe, death, deficiency, depletion, deprivation, disappearance, disaster, dispossession, failure, fatality: all afflictions constraint can circumvent. Even – especially – aphasia. A final counter-consideration: constraint a compulsion?

I: “In” and “is” allowed in, finally. An important development: Author becomes an “I,” begins current chapter “I haven’t been here before” (21). “Eventually,” Author declares, “I’m convinced every “I” imparts its intense experience before it is erased and immobilized in a book” (131). “I” as a character has immense implications for all-important act of appellation. Ed Dorn, in his anti-epic Gunslinger (also has “I” as a character), calls an appellation a “handle”—i.e., a convenient carrying case for an identity (9). I, critic Bury, crave additional analysis here, but an arbitrary dictionary edict forbids imperative idioms. An interrogative instead: does Author’s inclusion as character foreground, even allegorize, constraint?

J: Jump ahead: just a brief, irrelevant excerpt here, followed by a compulsory inquiry. “Alex justifies himself by jotting down in his journals everything he does” (25). Concise, indifferent entry an avoidance, a feeble dodge?

K: Keen distinction between book-knowledge and blood-knowledge: “Knowledge derived from books hardly ever improves killing efficiency because even illustrated books containing diagrams aren’t as instructive, as deadly, as calculating, as desperate as an actual experience in bush, in jungle, deep in any African interior, aren’t as capable as a human hand as it grips a knife in its five fingers” (123). Above distinction avoids any easy equation between knowledge and killing, both key colonialist concepts in K chapters, in book. A koan: can a knife carve apart an alphabet?

L: “Letters,” a longed for locution, available at last. Alphabetical Africa can be considered a book about letters, a book about loss and gain in language. “In losing letter after letter,” asseverates Author, “I had lost an entire African legacy including invaluable diagrams and cuneiform code books” (121). A German logician called Ludwig claims, approximately: linguistic limits demarcate an *I*’s entire available extra-linguistic domain, an *I*’s imaginative and earthly habitat. Do arbitrary, astringent linguistic boundaries also limn a distinct atmosphere? A cosmos?

M: Maps. Alphabetical Africa frequently mentions maps, but does not contain many maps for inexperienced adventurers. Geographical hot-spots are mentioned, as are African continent’s disappearing landmass. Blueprints and drawings, however, are

entirely absent. A book-incident map – charting characters, actions, events, etc. – would be infinitely helpful. Maybe I can draft it in another entry. Meantime, a citation: “Making memory more meaningful in darkest Africa, a certain Chief Auwik measures all meaning in his former life. By measuring his life he is clarifying his Europeanized morbidity” (118). Connection between mapping and measurement? Between mapping and memory?

N: Neglected mentioning concerning chapter M: Author now becomes a “My,” also. Not a nugatory development: chapter after chapter, Author continues inhabiting newer and newer grammatical ground, becomes a full-fledged character, a full-fledged *écrivain*. Lounging in his bedroom, Author composes a curious line: “Africa doesn’t need invention, doesn’t even need new interpretation” (34). Bit about interpretation I comprehend, but bit about invention is confusing. Isn’t Author’s austere alphabetical constraint an invention for apprehending and inhabiting Africa?

O: Onward motion of my alphabetic catalogue makes meticulous lingering onerous: only enough elbowroom for one motif in each entry. I’d love expatiating on Author’s notion of his occupation being “essentially and necessarily a hazardous one,” a notion of no minor import, but, on other hand, “objectification” just now enters my lexicon and I can finally delve into implications of “I” as character (37). Of course, Hamletizing on my either-or conundrum obviates need for engaging any issue in-depth. Are cursory glances inherently more fun? More inviting?

P: Perhaps, but here is a chapter I cannot gloss or ignore. Author professes: “I have an interest in books and in paper. An overwhelming interest, an interest exceeding my interest in Alva and Alex and Allen” (39). Above passage indicates Author is more interested in generative act of composition than he is in its products. An implication: complete devaluation of plot. He continues: “Paper is essential for me. But Africa has existed for centuries independent of paper. It makes one ponder” (39). Here Author expresses an awareness of fiction’s coercive nature: an imagined Africa, conjured out of ink, can only ever be a construct, perhaps ersatz, perhaps credible. Colonial implications abound. Author explains further: “In general authors are provided a certain liberty. I’m no exception, as everyone happily gives me a certain freedom, and anticipates fabulous distortions. But Africa is not my invention by any means” (40). A distinction arises: “to invent,” as Author employs it, means make new, make fabricated. It does not invoke notions of constraint, does not invoke colonial methods and principles imposed on an exotic, putatively backwards, African continent. Freedom, as Author figures it, is actually a negative attribute: it indicates a dangerous absence of guidelines, of moral and artistic precepts. A possible ethic of constraint here?

Q: Questions. “Everything I did evoked a great many questions” (42). A questionable quest?

R: Reading. “Reading is a most rewarding exercise. One can learn a lot from books” (103). Agreed, but does reading pose any risks, any dangers?

S: Self-referentiality: “Summarizing Africa: I can speak more freely. I find fewer and fewer impediments. Soon I’ll reach my destination. Soon I’ll also complete my documentation and my book” (47). For all Author’s new-found freedom, a certain stiltedness remains. A sample: “Added comments: nothing is concealed” (49). Or: “He also showed me his house, quite splendid, cars, expensive Italian racer and a German limousine, his mistress, sexy, slim, black dress, kept crossing her legs, kept licking her lips, kept smiling, also his family, standing at my arrival, standing obediently as if for an inspection” (47). At current book juncture, said sentences could certainly be stated more smoothly. Instead: excision, silence, stumbling, asyndeton. Solecism really necessary here? A syntactic and grammatical relic of a stiffer rhetorical state?

T: Tracking back, briefly. Regarding Queen Quat, author admits: “Occasionally I make a mistake and change his gender” (44). Tracking elsewhere: a massive list, spoken by Quat, at the end of chapter S, beginning: “Same shit same scenery same suffering saints same soup same spiel same safaris same safeguards...” (100). Same cycling through the dictionary as in chapter A. Tracking towards T, a list of Swahili terminology, the second of three in the book:

Tamba is to creep, crawl, or move slowly.
Tambavu is something hung over the chest, a charm or an amulet to
protect one
from danger.
Tangaza is to make known or publish.
Toshea is to be amazed, astounded or staggered.
Toma is to fuck. (96)

And it immediately continues, “On the island Alfred is compiling a list of his recent errors, his gaffes, his blunders” (96-97). Elsewhere, chapter R, Alfred keeps comprehensive inventories. Relationship twist constraint and the list?

U: Unreliable narrators. Aren't they ordinarily mad? A bit unhinged? Poe's narrators immediately come to mind as archetypes. Author claims to be “an unreliable reporter,” one who “can't be depended upon for exact descriptions and details” (56). An unspoken premise, however: he is unreliable by design, not by deficiency or psychological disease. Constraint imposes omission and contortion as an ontological given of communication, foregrounds the processes of distortion latent in all textual transmission, unearths unadulterated undulating undercurrents of ecstasy. Unnecessary? Or merely a bit unwieldy?

V: Vocabulary. “I also hoped to enrich my vocabulary, and there's no better place for that than Africa” (57). Vocabulary: an exotic invitation. Vocabulary: an assonantal account. Vocabulary: an arbitrary agenda. Vocabulary: an aleatory archive. Vocabulary: an alternative arrangement. Vocabulary: a bulleted ballot. Vocabulary: a creative calendar. Vocabulary: a cogent catalogue. Vocabulary: a censorious census. Vocabulary: a chocolate checklist. Vocabulary: a dramatized dictionary. Vocabulary: a dire directory. Vocabulary: a docile docket. Vocabulary: an elongated enumeration. Vocabulary: a fickle file. Vocabulary: an indefinite index. Vocabulary: an inveterate inventory. Vocabulary: an inviolate invoice. Vocabulary: a lovable lexicon. Vocabulary: a monumental memorandum. Vocabulary: a mixed menu. Vocabulary: a political poll. Vocabulary: a

punctilious program. Vocabulary: a reliable register. Vocabulary: a rollicking roll call. Vocabulary: a rawboned row. Vocabulary: a slippery schedule. Vocabulary: a sentimental screed. Vocabulary: a scrupulous scroll. Vocabulary: a stubborn series. Vocabulary: a slant slate. Vocabulary: a static statistic. Vocabulary: a sly syllabus. Vocabulary: a totalizing tabulation. Vocabulary: a tall tally. Vocabulary: a thick thesaurus. Vocabulary: a timorous timetable. Vocabulary: a viable viaduct?

W: Whiteness. Author set to climb Kilimanjaro's snow-capped peaks with companions. Says: "We are all white, and although our skins are not the same shade of white, had we been here a hundred years ago, we would most likely have been trading in guns or slaves" (59). Do they now trade in words instead?

X: Xenophon. Initial X chapter in its entirety: "Xenophon showed a misplaced courage. Instead of founding a new city, or settling down, or simply heading for Africa, he and his cast of ten thousand headed back home, as if there existed no other alternative. Xenophon's hold on history is clearly slipping. His tomb is cracking" (61). Why is Xenophon's courage "misplaced"? Wouldn't settling down somewhere entail some sort of colonization? What, exactly, are Alphabetical Africa's politics? And what are the politics of constraint?

Y: You. Reader implicated as character, as Author encounters "You" in a bookstore, leafing through his book: "The book you are holding in your hand happens to be one I

wrote” (62). A final shift in grammar, in perspective. A necessary query: what longings does the vocative conceal?

Z: Zeugma: “Zambia helps fill our zoos, and our doubts, and our extrawide screens as we sit back” (64). “Extrawide screens” another vestige of the constraint. If “languages form attitudes,” what desires, what Africas, do our alphabets articulate (72)?

Bernadette Mayer's Gratuitous Art

: Context

In the 1970s, Bernadette Mayer famously compiled, in an Oulipian spirit, a list of nearly 100 writing experiments; the list still circulates widely in poetry circles today. The following sequence of short chapters takes the first eight entries in that list and splices them together with, respectively, a treatise on scientific method, a pregnancy handbook, a work of literary criticism, and a popular cookbook. The procedure comes from Mayer's suggestion to "us[e] phrases relating to one subject or idea" in order to "write about another": "For example," she explains, "use science terms to write about childhood," or "philosophic language to describe a shirt."

: What was I trying to do?

To write poetry as though it were a science experiment, a quadratic equation, a delicious Oulipian recipe.

Bernadette Mayer's Outline of Scientific Method

1. Pick a word or phrase at random, let mind use the scientific method to explore observations and answer questions. In other words, design an experiment so that changes to one item cause something else to vary in a predictable way.
2. Any useful hypothesis will enable predictions by systematically eliminating the use of certain kinds of words or phrases from a piece of writing.
3. Derange the language of measurement: write a work consisting only of prepositional phrases, or, use a stopwatch to time the fall of an already existing work.
4. When performing an experiment containing unique specimens, let them demand their own form.
5. Eliminate material from a piece of your own writing until it is a facility that provides controlled conditions in which waste management operations can be safely performed.
6. The next step is to consider the statistical assumptions being made in pushing metaphor and simile as far as you can. For example, use the null hypothesis to write about childhood or a logical fallacy to describe a shirt.
7. Take an idea, anything that interests you, or an object, then spend a few days rejecting it outright in order to preserve the integrity of the peer-review process.
8. Scientific process doesn't have an end. It's circular: put pen to paper and don't stop.

Bernadette Mayer's All-in-One Resource for Pregnancy & Childbirth

1. Pick a word or phrase at random, let mind's reactions to a positive pregnancy test range from total denial to unmitigated glee to hyperventilating horror. Don't blame yourself for your emotions—there's no wrong way to react to such big and shocking news.
2. The first part of your prenatal visit will involve answering plenty of questions about systematically eliminating the use of certain kinds of words or phrases from a piece of writing.
3. Derange the language of your own pregnancy calendar: write a work consisting only of prepositional phrases, or, keep a chart of what you've eaten of an already existing work.
4. As your baby develops, let it demand its own form.
5. Eliminate material from a piece of your own writing until it is getting more blood in its outer lips, which may give it a dark, swollen appearance.
6. After you're admitted to the hospital, you may be given a routine blood test to check if you're pushing metaphor and simile as far as you can. For example, use the concept of informed consent to write about childhood or dilation to describe a shirt.
7. Take an idea, anything that interests you, or an object, then spend a few days covered with a warm blanket while your vital signs are being closely monitored.
8. You made it! Your labor is over, you've given birth, and now it's time to return home and put pen to paper and don't stop.

Bernadette Mayer's Gratuitous Art

1. Pick a word or phrase at random, let mind's refusal to be sated by the demarcations of "reality" as defined by others represent the most unapologetic example of "poetry-by-the-yard" produced in the seventies.
2. Of course, the distinction between "writing" and "living" is semantic, or nonsensical, in that writing always gets written by systematically eliminating the use of certain kinds of words or phrases from a piece of writing.
3. Derange the language of a heterosexual marriage with children: write a work consisting only of prepositional phrases, or, elevate the cravings of an already existing work.
4. To take up this invitation [to "refuse to understand what one means"] is to take leave of the writer-as-analysand/reader-as-analyst metaphor that has come to structure so much of the twentieth-century reading experience, and to let it demand its own form.
5. Eliminate material from a piece of your own writing until it is unpaid, uncalled for, unjustifiable, and, in a complex sense of the word, free.
6. Traditionally speaking, poetry is by definition an art of pushing metaphor and simile as far as you can. For example, use a private language to write about childhood or evidence a logorrhea to describe a shirt.
7. Take an idea, anything that interests you, or an object, then spend a few days in the apprehension, however dim, of a world in which words are neither spent nor saved.
8. Work that depends on its larger gestures nearly always includes its failures as well as its successes. For this reason, put pen to paper and don't stop.

Bernadette Mayer's Semi-Homemade Desserts

1. Pick a word or phrase at random, let mind have its cake and eat it too. In today's hectic world, with the constant crunch of jobs, families, and errands, it's all too easy to get caught up in the craziness and forget to savor the sweeter side of life.
2. Always preheat the oven 15 minutes before putting poetry in to bake. An oven that is too hot or too cold can systematically eliminate the use of certain kinds of words or phrases from a piece of writing.
3. Derange the language of traditional yellow cupcakes: write a work consisting only of prepositional phrases, or, match the icing to the table linens of an already existing work.
4. HELPFUL HINTS, TIPS, and TRICKS: Set the stage for an amorous evening with music that's as smooth as champagne. Relaxing to Sade, "Love Deluxe" helps you unwind; John Coltrane, "Coltrane for Lovers" jazzes things up, lets them demand their own form.
5. Eliminate material from a piece of your own writing until it is crisp and golden, ready to serve.
6. Be generous with the caramel—and don't be afraid to let it drip down the sides, pushing metaphor and simile as far as you can.
7. Take an idea, anything that interests you, or an object, then spend a few days eating the cherry off the top of it, drinking the syrup for a nightcap chaser.
8. Entertaining is easy—all it takes is a little know-how and ingenuity. The secret is to keep the basics simple and to put pen to paper and don't stop.

Errata Suite

: Context

Joan Retallack's 1993 Errata Suite is a book-length poem that superimposes errata slips and borrowed literary and philosophical language upon musical staves to comprise five-line blocks of poetry. Rather than try to imitate the poem's elaborate structure, I adapted a procedure from Retallack's pedagogy, which she describes in Musicage: "I have [my students] write on a piece of paper a statement that they believe to be the case—trivial or sublime, it doesn't matter. Then I ask them to write a question on another piece of paper—something they genuinely wish to know. We collect these statements and questions in separate piles and shuffle them up. Two students now read from these randomly ordered piles responsively. The first reads the question at the top of her pile, the second reads the first statement as if it were the answer; and of course it *is* the answer." The idea for this exercise comes from John Cage's Zen maxim, "All answers are answers to all questions."

: What was I trying to do?

As a sometime professional gambler, I know quite well that there is no such thing as luck, only the immutable law of averages.

Errata Suite:
20 Questions

All answers are answers to all questions.
- John Cage

Q: Why is it so hard to pose questions to which one doesn't already think one knows the answer?

A: Because consumerism's vice grip on the globe shall only abate when we have picked the dinosaurs' bones clean of their marrow.

Q: When Ludwig Wittgenstein writes that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world," how am I supposed to know what constitutes *my* language?

A: It [your language] is at once a subject and a predicate.

Q: Whence ecstasy's impermanence?

A: The Internet has eroded our attention span and there is no going back, only vain, nostalgic efforts at willful amelioration.

Q: What are the consequences of normative typography?

A: Artistic difficulty can viewed as a training ground for one's aesthetico-intellectual faculties but at a certain point in the training you must begin to consider wherefores and whys: not as a dismissal of difficulty but as a resolute movement towards one's own groping articulations of the ineffable.

Q: Beyond the obvious analogy to musical notation, what is the significance of Errata

Suite's constraints?

A: An aphorism is a sudden essay.

Q: What are the poetics of errata?

A: Making meaning, Retallack's poetry suggests, is always a process of collaboration, profoundly ethical in its implications.

Q: Why are there always more questions than answers and vice versa?

A: Because although art may indeed be a kind of game, it is not a zero-sum game.

Q: What would "pure methodology purged... of the really interesting problems" look like?

A: Word processors are frighteningly amnesiac in that they anticipate—then elide—errors before they even happen. Gone, long gone, is the typewriter's dense palimpsest, in which "apostrophe s restored to pronounce the ritual formula punch in code for teeth (love 's savage splendor)."

Q: How can we begin to account for "geographys loss"?

A: Simplicity is the greatest complexity; silence the loudest noise.

Q: What is the chance a chance procedure works out?

A: Whatever else they do, chance procedures short-circuit all pretenses to mastery.

Q: In what ways does Errata Suite ennoble “abuse[s] of gesture”?

A: Ethics: the study of methodology. Methodology (*meta* + *hodos*): the way the path is known.

Q: How to allow error to work in one’s favor?

A: Don’t overthink things, for a change.

Q: Why are penetrating questions so much harder to formulate than penetrating answers?

A: Buckminster Fuller once said, “The simplest definition of a structure is just this: it is an inside and an outside.”

Q: In what ways is “art a mode of prediction not found in charts & statistics”?

A: The real question is: why are you in such a hurry “to rush to race to wander” in all this “zero sum ergo blather”?

Q: Why, as I write out each of these questions, do I hope that fortune will dictate that its answer will turn out to be, “The world is all that is the case”?

A: Because the world is all that is the case.

Q: How come, even after John Cage, it is so difficult to divest oneself of notions of artistic success or failure?

A: Because music is the art form most obsessed with immanence and transcendence—with the seeming immanence of transcendence, and its inevitable, disappointing passing.

Q: How come the concept of intertextuality is so much less elegant than examples of it?

A: The idea that a work of art can be “interrogated” is, at best, a misnomer, at worst, a form of violence—an “extreme of moving away from intelligence.”

Q: From what does poetry derive its “methodological preeminence”?

A: Digressions are the sunshine of life, the very soul of reading.

Q: Whither the arts?

A: The practices of “writing through” and “writing on” are always already collaborations, ways of allowing another voice to possess, temporarily, your own.

Q: How far does poetry shade into philosophy?

A: Above all else, every work of art wagers itself.

Gold Fools and the Question of Narrative

: Context

Gilbert Sorrentino's 1999 Gold Fools is a boy's adventure novel written entirely in interrogatives. Sorrentino, born in Brooklyn, was not a member of the Oulipo, but was well-known for his use of constraints throughout his prolific oeuvre.

: What was I trying to do?

When I was a child, I would sometimes play board games – Monopoly, chess, Risk – against myself, making moves on behalf of multiple, imaginary participants. The head-to-head games, like chess, were invariably the most closely fought: I always knew exactly what my lone opponent was thinking. But there were times, like in the following chapter, where standing on both sides of the ping pong table felt as effortless, as unpredictably dramatic, as if there were a live opponent before me.

Gold Fools and the Question of Narrative

Where did Gilbert Sorrentino come up with the idea for a novel written only in questions? What effect do the question marks have? Can we move beyond dust jacket answers to the question? Does the constraint “force the reader to answer the very questions of the narrative itself”? Does the previous question leave any doubt as to what I think is the answer? Does any question?

Must questions always beg themselves? How many people know what it actually means to “beg the question”? How come those people who do know what it means are always so eager to correct those who don’t know what it means? Is it because they have studied philosophy? Are fond of fine distinctions and right reason? If a question begs, does that therefore mean it is poor, impoverished?

To return to the question at hand, what effect do the question marks in Gold Fools have? Are they weighty? Jocular? Sly? Do they function as invitations? Envoys? Koans? Are they as unnecessary – as ugly – as Gertrude Stein feels all questions are? Where does Stein feel this? In her head? In her stomach? In her ear?

Is there really anything so tricky about interrogatives? What do they force a critic to do? What a novelist? Approach a scene differently? Suggest rather than describe? Foreground the assumptions of form? Of narrative?

When we speak about a novelist “approaching” a scene, what exactly do we mean by that? Is that the type of question Ludwig Wittgenstein would have asked? Which Wittgenstein, late or early? How come we speak of two different Wittgensteins? What does that indicate about Wittgenstein? About us?

Is it the business of criticism to raise questions or to answer them? Is it necessarily an either-or proposition? Necessarily a business? Would it be more pleasant if it were in fact an either-or proposition?

Can you think of anything so pleasant as disjunction? So rigidly lax in its standards? So unphilosophical? So sneaky and devious? Is it true that disjunction misleads the witness? That it begs the question? That it is a nasty drunk? That it assumes a false identity, goes incognito through customs? That it maintains only the faintest toehold on truth? That it slaloms through the slender gates of logic? That it abets hypotheses? Continues ad infinitum?

Where is Wittgenstein in all this? Where Sorrentino? What can we say that Gold Fools is about? And why isn't the title itself in question marks? Does that constitute a clinamen?

What are the boundaries for the application of a constraint? Where can a constraint be properly said to begin? To end? Does it much matter, so long as we know it is operative somewhere? Must a constraint always announce itself as such lest it be mistaken for something else? Or worse yet, overlooked? Ignored?

Does having knowledge of the constraint enforced in a given text alter our phenomenological experience of that text, much in the way that knowing (or not knowing) there are anchovies in Caesar dressing alters our experience of the salad? If so, does it alter the experience for better or for worse? Does the answer come down to a matter of taste?

Do questions naturally lend themselves to binaries? Do they beg for them? Does criticism lend itself to questions more readily than narrative? Isn't it odd that we speak of

criticism or narrative as “lending” themselves to something, as if these inert, abstract entities were up and checking themselves out of the library?

What, though, about the question of Sorrentino’s story? Is it precisely a question? That is, does a series of questions produce one giant, cumulative question mark at its end? Or something else? Is it fun to picture what a giant, cumulative question mark would look like? What about a something else? What would that look like? And what effect would it produce? A familiar one? A novel one? In a story comprised entirely of questions, can anything be said to have taken place? Other, that is, than the questioning itself?

Does the answer depend on how we frame the question? For example, if we say, “In a story expressed in question form, can anything be said to have taken place?” are we not implicitly assuming that a story pre-exists the question, that its content is out there somewhere, howsoever evasive it may be? That there is in fact a story? Not just the suggestive outline of one? Does the idea of a knowable story comfort the reader? Or is the real story the story of the pesky questions? The way they beg and shimmy?

Would it help further my thesis if I quoted from the text itself here? What, exactly, is my thesis? If I pose my thesis in the form of a question, does that mean that I myself don’t know what it is? Or that there isn’t a thesis? Or that the thesis is about the nature of theses themselves? Or that the thesis is about Gold Fools but only insofar as the novel can tell us something about theses?

Can novels tell us something about theses? Don’t we often speak as though novels make arguments? Is this a bad way to speak? To think? Can novels make arguments? If so, what do they look like and how do we know they are being made? Do they look like

discursive prose? Like an expository essay inserted into the narrative? Wouldn't that put a nice little bow on the problem? And wouldn't that bow – the closing of the question – be disappointing? Even if the problem were in fact solved? Can problems ever be solved, though? Or merely addressed? Patched over? Postponed, until someone comes along and re-opens the question?

Is there an ethic implicit in these questions? Implicit in form in general? Has this question been asked before? Has it been answered? Solved?

If a novel of interrogatives can be said to talk around a story, can a criticism of interrogatives be said to talk around a thesis, to delimit and encircle it? Isn't the act of delimitation exciting? Much more exciting, no, than the actual thing being delimited?

Can we agree that the fence is infinitely more titillating than the field? Than even the horse? Can we agree, too, that the construction "Can we agree" bucks at the limits of the interrogative constraint? Yet even then remains corralled within it?

Isn't there something inherently self-conscious about the act of questioning? Something retiring? Guarded? An avoidance of the absolute? A prodding against the grain of surety? Against what does *Gold Fools* prod? Certitude? Narrative? The declarative sentence?

How can we begin to think about the relationship of the question to narrative? Can a narrative function as a question? A giant, cumulative question mark? A querulous thrust in a certain direction?

Perhaps, but does a narrative customarily welcome questions? Isn't the function of narrative to blot out questions, to tell it like it is? Even an experimental narrative?

What, then, does that make Gold Fools?

Ideas for an Essay on the tapeworm foundry

: Context

A book-length list of book proposals linked together by the portmanteau “andor,” Darren Wershler-Henry’s the tapeworm foundry: andor the dangerous prevalence of imagination is both a recipe book for poets and a critical examination of the recipes we’ve inherited, an eloquent and absurdist poem on the parasitic nature of all expression and the anxiety of influence.

: What was I trying to do?

The same thing I tried to do in so many chapters: to supplant extended argumentation with a brief argumentative conceit or gesture, to say, in a few pages, what others say in a book, what others don’t say in a book.

Ideas for an Essay on the tapeworm foundry: andor the dangerous prevalence of imagination

andor endings, all fodder for the artistic imagination *andor* a philosophical treatise on usages of the ampersand and the wedge *andor* a natural history of tapeworms
andor an extended analogy in which the structure and function of the tapeworm foundry is likened to that of a conveyor belt *andor* a photo-essay cataloguing Canadian foundries *andor* a psychoanalytical reading of the poem in which Darren Werschler-Henry's past as a gravedigger figures prominently *andor* an unabridged history of parataxis, opening with an epigraph from Charles Olson's Maximus Poems, "we who throw down hierarchy" *andor* a personal essay on the joys of having one's cake and eating it too *andor* an academic article with a subtitle so long it puts readers to sleep *andor* an essay in the form of a recipe *andor* a student response paper that gets it *andor* a taxonomy, impossibly recondite, of the different types of projects the tapeworm proposes *andor* a manifesto, excessively capitalized, about the impoverishment of the contemporary imagination *andor* a lecture on the tapeworm, followed by a multiple choice exam, failure of which shall go unpunished
andor an etymology of the word "dangerous" *andor* a catalogue of ideas for a chapter about the tapeworm *andor* a set of instructions for a group dance, set to Jackson Mac Low's The Bluebird Asymmetries *andor* a defense of Conceptual Poetry, plagiarized from a Conceptual Poet *andor* an essay in the form of a tarot card reading *andor* an encyclopedia of encyclopedic poetry *andor* a historiography of Canadian foundries *andor* a book review that doesn't get it
andor a vertiginously scrupulous close reading of one and only one project idea, such

as the suggestion to “sandblast the scrawled missives of schizophreniacs onto sheets of coloured glass in church windows” *andor* a criticism that can be mass-produced on an assembly line *andor* an inebriate history of avant-garde conceptions of The Author, written under the drug of Michel Foucault *andor* a theory of artistic facture so totalizing and compelling as to be unassailable *andor* leave the page blank, a pure snowflake of an essay *andor* a discussion of the tapeworm as a work of “pure” conceptualism, as defined by Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman in Notes on Conceptualisms *andor* a discussion of the tapeworm as a work of “impure” conceptualism, as Place and Fitterman define the term *andor* a delirious invocation of William Blake, Walt Whitman, and all other poets who celebrate, condone, or otherwise remain impervious to contradiction *andor* rig out a set of chance procedures and see what fortune dictates *andor* an ecumenical intellectual history of the concept of the imagination *andor* a long poem in heroic couplets whose wit outshines even Pope’s *andor* an exhaustive discourse on the concept of exhaustion *andor* an N+7 of the tapeworm foundry *andor* a genealogy of the Canadian avant-garde, complete with Venn diagrams and a family tree *andor* a sober, academic study *andor* a journalistic puff piece *andor* an experiment in Flarf that comes out campier than expected *andor* an interview that portrays everyone involved in a flattering light *andor* a close reading of a passage, supposedly selected because of its representativeness but actually selected with the intention of showcasing the critic at the height of hisorher powers *andor* an unauthoritative list of innovative literary lists *andor* an endless disquisition on infinity *andor* a sly nod to Andy Warhol’s Factory *andor* an essay in the form of a table of contents *andor* a vindication

of the rights of the imagination *andor* go off on a tangent *andor* an account of
the history of artistic attempts at egoless-ness and the egotistical motives behind them
andor a procession of encomiums so laudatory even the book's blurb's will blush
andor a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis, you fill in the blanks *andor* a
meditation on circularity and the concept of eternal recurrence, in which the universe is
argued to be a vast storehouse of beginnings *and*

Cunt-ups

: Context

An “hermaphroditic salute to William Burroughs and Kathy Acker,” Dodie Bellamy’s 2001 Cunt-ups enacts a feminist version of the notorious cut-up technique. Bellamy explains in the book’s afterword that she has “always considered” the cut-up to be a “male form”: “needing the violence of a pair of scissors in order to reach non-linearity.” To construct her cunt-ups, Bellamy spliced together chunks of her own writing, strongly sexual in nature, with a variety of other works, including, for example, writing from the journals of serial killer Charles Manson. For my “exegesis” of Cunt-ups, I performed a similar procedure, randomly combining my own original writing with quotes from Bellamy’s prose poem, as well as found language from other sources, such as the Wikipedia entry for “cut-up.”

: What was I trying to do?

Why, I’m starting to wonder, do I never quite feel comfortable “standing by” my writing unless it’s in some sense not my own? A cut-up is a lopsided collaboration, a way of writing on, or with, or through, a ghost, or ghosts. If the medium is indeed the message, then the message of so many of these chapters seems to be that I want to be a medium.

Cunt-Ups: An Exegesis

Domination is simply the most common method. Brion Gysin introduced the cut-up technique called Cunt-ups. I am attempting a criticism of non-avatars. It is a simple technique, designed to produce criticism in art. With a bow to source text or texts in quadrants or some other mastery over Cunt-ups, I propose no together at random. Like so many other constraints, the cut-up technique simultaneously delimits and scrambles authors. As Burroughs insists in The Job: “It’s not, as the author’s primary aesthetic function, shifting nothing of automatic writing or unconscious reintegration, like an editor, or a collagist.” The conscious nature of the procedure aligns it as a performance.

Traditionally, what’s interesting in this context is the demonstration of mastery, as manifested in what the tribe never discusses: the cut-up. Beautiful thing about literature, however: wonders, if they haven’t distanced themselves, are attainable. The second we assert control over the **cut-up** and the closely associated **fold-in**, then, is not one of domination, as break the linearity of common literature. They are, Dodie Bellamy’s Cunt-ups are, a feminist re-technique. In the afterword to her book, she explains Cut-up is performed by taking a finish to be a “male form”: “needing the violence of a cutting it in pieces with a few or single ways.” What is curious, however, is that Bellamy has rearranged into a new text. The rearranging seems to revel in the savage sensuality of cutting innovative new phrases.

A common way is to love smelling it, love smelling your asshole, body. So I commonly supposed, but bedazzlement was aroused: I saw you lying on plastic bags, achieving it. By cutting up my exegeses of sexuality, the constraint is perhaps as strong

as intentionality, something it is hard to accomplish in the corpus of constraint-based literature. Her prose, the direction of my audience, I renounce all claims to referents. The parts that feel best to me are my meanings or interpretations. At bottom, this is what's dirty to arousal.

I want to fuck you; I want techniques, literary writing styles that try you until your head shakes like a rattle. A fuck designed to be used with common typewriters, in bed. My cock is normal size, mirror, and intestine. Your cock moves like a wash and fully linear text (printed on paper). Adjust my dirty panties before you lick words on each piece. The resulting pieces are then hot, my clit looked huge, its outer lips sounded of work often. In surprisingly sleep, I strangle you again, this is what I really cut, a sheet in four rectangular sections.

I was under the impression, perhaps mistaken, that sentences, for instance, or Lyn Hejinian's on. Notice the use of the phrase "raw fuck me" as part and whole. Gertrude Stein delineates one of lyrical slippages cut-ups unleash. As here, lots emotional, but paragraphs are and that she mentions of removing skin. Sexual anxiety and/or drinking. Piecemeal as a compliment. Jean Genet, equation of cocks and scars.

Cut-up: a metaphor that violence was a specifically masculine turn in an undergraduate course on the Victorian opposition to "fuck me raw." These are the kinds for which Burroughs' name was enough to rankle, my professor's sentences end *in medias res*. Multiple Burroughs work was rejectementa, unpure, a liberation. Intestines keep coming up. The of of canonical body, and to mention his name, to machine. Cows, a tribute to Stein. The word, the sacred body of literature.

How heartening, chopped up and mangled, lyrically, becomes the knife my father gave me and peels your leaves open. The question of what, exactly, lick the juices from the land of your pussy and any differences of procedure, but in the gap from my legs and there's a landslide along my authorial voice, occupies both male and female. Run my tongue along your scar. My mouth, a sentence: "Maybe my clit could want to do that naked animal." This sack, these hearts bang our mouth, too. The most common clothes; no more limbs. A causeway of rock, of themselves, denote gender. The straining and gushing, thinking of you, a thousand violent, aggressive, assertive of control, is a teeth pressed together, you kneeling over textual pieces back together is a glorious wanting.

Enactment of the erotics of violence. But that still contemplates the aesthetic of the piece. These make this a feminist text. The answer lies not in can we establish a satisfying relationship between content. Throughout the book, Bellamy – or the authorial possibility – when she writes that sentences are not subject positions, oftentimes within the same sentence, discovered this by watching her dog Basket drinking completely. And maybe you can put my balls in your essay called "What Remains of a Rembrandt Pronoun Used." Are "you" and "I" an ancient parchment? I want to lick implications—is that the act of cutting? to slice big cookies from reason?

Plasm is exuded – masculine act – then the act of splice, the severed clit, which is responsive to light. I've agreed to a hermaphroditic act, was a submarine, and your pube looked like a little unconscious. At all it's quite conscious, there's, together with sweat, your tits mounded in a special procedure involved here. His insistence of the cock is to the man a psalm or song.

I'm straining with the subsequent practices of the Oulipo. Why years of emotion and you fucking me, you knowing, given the Oulipo's interest in combinatorics, that me and I was yours, that, more than anything, my technique as a constraint-based enterprise.

One down the toilet. Fragments, the craze for them to William S. Burroughs, who in turn became a century of fragments. Whatever the other nonlinearity and disjunction: cut up, a whole is always less than the sum of its parts. A regular unit of measure, and splice them back, a fragment sometimes implies that, sometimes constraint-based parataxis. The cut-up technique pieces, divides the indivisible intentionally. It does not, however, eliminate mingled prose, compensating for composing sentences by remixing and innovating along the way.

'Slamming' used, as opposed to 'coming.' Violent sheets of linear text (with the same inventive descriptions of sexual pleasure). Desire is often a blend of the two themes, somewhat harder for women (they're more secretive, taboo), combining with the other, then reading across isolated, disparate body parts, and not a vocabulary of completed text. Folding it down the descriptions, must pleasure always be transgressive?

Cutting it up into four pieces and rearranging then rearranging them and then typing down, "You are very easy with words, but life is different." Haphazard word breaks by improvising male difference and my vagina. I want to talk so *Fold-in* is the technique of taking two spits on my nipples. You are so fucking, I'll fuck linespacing, cutting each sheet in half. And me like you want to break me in two, and then the resulting page, the resulting text often pounded each side of your cunt like a large red cloth across my pussy, like pillows on my skin.

Four pieces is performed by a full page of me. My clit is soft and very pale, my clit so middle horizontally then vertically and cutting loud to me. I'm sitting here and after you fall asleep a new text is formed for your birthday. Can I take violence, lots and lots of violence? Original appropriation of William S. Burroughs' cut-up recurs. Both men and women have nipples, which explains that she has "always considered" the cut-up obsessive.

Our sexual vocabulary is a body of air, of scissors in order to reach non-linearity, of the body *in toto*, skulls. Sex is all about the same technique. Indeed, her cunt-ups, transgressive, stand rent: "I love to cut off your skin as an act in language." Criticism must necessarily hear the boiled skull in your voice when what the critic performs is competence, expertise dismembered. The connection here between unique, original and important insights. The beauty as extreme as it is anywhere else.

In general, we might say, mastery of it is an institution. That several of my students were absolutely the thing eludes our greedy grasp. The performance enthusiasts, I encouraged them, told them the novel, the mere invocation of William S. had come full circle. This, then, is how I always profess.

"But that's not literature," she said...

Temple of culture: a clear indication of immanent violation. Burroughs was not legitimate not part overthrown. Dignify it with a middle initial. A violation of Rembrandt, torn into four equal pieces and flushed. When I began teaching at that same, who hasn't written that the twentieth century was filled with absolute Burroughs freaks. I didn't just permit their results, and something definitely remains. The story of when I was a student and how the wheel implies a relationship to a whole, whereas think of Burroughs as the

infection in the something else. The cut-up turns monads into disciplinary gods, mere idols, aching to be.

A Cunning Linguist

: Context

Harryette Mullen's 2004 Sleeping with the Dictionary is a collection of poems written using sundry Oulipian procedures. However, as in her "Denigration" – a poem riddled with words that pun on the "neg" or "nig" sound – many of the poems in the collection are of a more explicitly political bent than most Oulipian writing.

: What was I trying to do?

To include as many penis puns as possible in a short burst of literary criticism, nothing more nor less.

A Cunning Linguist

As in many of the other poems in her eponymous collection, the diction in Harryette Mullen's "Sleeping with the Dictionary" is a bit cock-eyed. Puns dictate her word choices, will-nilly; her ears prick up whenever an opportunity for one arises. Would it be too cocksure of me to declare that, within Mullen's poetic universe, punning is "the poet's nocturnal mission"? In certain poems of hers, it's as though word play were an edict, a mandate that must be obeyed in every sentence: "Does my niggling concern with trivial matters," she asks in "Denigration," "negate my ability to negotiate in good faith?" (19). Just as a jazz pianist thrills at ad-libbed melodies, so too does a well-concocted pun warm the cockles of Mullen's heart. But punning, for Mullen, is more than mere poppycock: each verbal turn is meant to be a pinprick to our conscience, alerting us to language's toxic, cockamamie echoes. In the case of "Denigration," Mullen's discriminating word selections create a racially coded soundscape, while in the case of "Sleeping with the Dictionary," the dictionary, a seemingly neuter, lifeless entity, is revealed as a sexualized, masculine organ. To dicker with the dictionary is to haggle with its rigid, ramrod straight definitions, begetting, in the process, new correspondences and meanings. It is a fundamentally cocky act, one the poem suggests inheres in the use of poetic constraints, procedures, and rules. Indeed, amongst constraint-based writers, the need to tool around extensively with the dictionary, with multiple dictionaries, constitutes a veritable dictum.

Absences, Negations, Voids

: Context

Doug Nufer's 2004 Negativeland is a novel in which each sentence contains some form of negation.

: What was I trying to do?

At the sentential level, I was trying to imitate Nufer's constraint. At the level of the larger essay, I was trying, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to analyze Never Again on the basis of what's not included in it. Subjected to even a bit of scrutiny, Harry Mathews' claim, in a commencement address delivered to creative writing MFA students, that "writing works exclusively by what the writer leaves out" seemed specious to me, for all writing leaves out, of necessity, so many different things that cataloging and analyzing them could easily become a *reduction ad absurdum*. And yet, once this chapter was written, it read almost exactly like an ordinary, unconstrained review-essay, proof, perhaps, that absences possess a presence – incandescent – all their own.

Absences, Negations, Voids

If providing somethings will not do, the writer must provide nothings. I am not playing with words. A little observation will show you that writers do nothing else. They make the experience of consciousness available through nothings—absences, negations, voids. To put it another way, writing works exclusively by what the writer leaves out.

- Harry Mathews, "For Prizewinners"

Not to nitpick, but there are a few things Doug Nufer left out of his 2004 novel, Negativeland. There aren't any Sherpas in it. Nor are there any ice cream trucks. And for the life of me, I couldn't find one mention of steroids. In a novel where the anti-hero is a former Olympic champion who used to promote Health Spas and who likes to watch baseball games, how could the topic of steroids not come up at least once? For that matter, how could Sherpas and ice cream trucks not? Who doesn't like to eat ice cream or mountaineer in Nepal? An irresponsible critic might overlook these glaring omissions, but not I. In an "environment rigged for deprivation," nothing isn't a clue (103). In fact, by this logic, what isn't in the novel is far more important than what is, since what is in it is there only to point to what isn't.

To begin with, there's no mention of the OuLiPo in the novel. Nonetheless, their presence can be felt everywhere, because it is a constraint-based text: no sentence can be included without possessing some form of negation. Not an impossible constraint, but an insistent one. Cumulatively, characters and events come to be defined by what they are not, as in this description of the housewife Susan Griffin: "the cut of her clothes wasn't so domestic that a guy didn't want to keep looking at her" (147). Each negation, in addition to asserting that something is not the case, also implicitly asserts Nufer's allegiance to writing under conditions of deprivation and duress. Like an ascetic, he will

not permit himself certain liberties and forms of behavior. They are out of bounds, off limits, not for his eyes and ears.

Perhaps more than any other constraint-based text, Negativeland reveals the Oulipian credo to be a negative one, a credo of thou-shalt-nots. I say this descriptively, not pejoratively. A negative credo's neither good nor bad in and of itself. Freedom *from* is not inherently worse than freedom *for*, only different. A constraint always says: *no*. Yet this *no* does not simply demarcate the boundaries of the possible, of the pastures the writer's language has been confined to, but resounds longingly for those things that are forbidden to it, those things that are missing, absent, not here. Non-existence haunts every constraint-based text. Ghosts of the unsaid and the unsayable populate their caesuras, silences, malapropisms. The condition is not unlike a phantom limb: an absence that can be felt. No wonder Harry Mathews, an Oulipian, believes that "writing works exclusively by what the writer leaves out." No wonder Georges Perec, a Holocaust scion, wrote La Disparition, and Charles Lamb never mentioned his matricidal sister in his otherwise autobiographical Essays of Elia. They all know something not everybody does: unlike gains, losses needn't be articulated to become tangible, present, real.

Nowhere in Negativeland will you find a discussion of game theory, or even Pascal's wager, but you don't have to be a mathematician or literary critic to recognize that the book theorizes extensively about losses and gains in gambling and in language. The novel's two protagonists, Ken Honochick, a former Olympic gold medalist in the backstroke, and his landlady-turned-girlfriend, Miriam, who used to work in a photo lab developing negatives, are both unemployed and support themselves by gambling as they travel around the United States. This detail is not unimportant: another of Nufer's

constraint-based novels, Never Again, is a picaresque journey through the protagonist, *I*'s, various forms of employment—*I* has a surfeit of jobs, while Chick and Miriam have a pronounced lack of them. It could be argued that no theme is more important to Nufer than jobs (then again, the converse could be argued as well). Whatever side of the debate you're on, pro or con, the key point is that Chick and Miriam exist outside an economy of paid labor. Indeed, they consider themselves unfit for even simple household chores: “Even undemanding chores were too much for us. She could say we'd make do, but she had abandoned a building because she hadn't done any maintenance. Usually, things were the other way around, as the pride of ownership kept a place up while tenants didn't flinch to save it from falling down, but a lot of what we did was the other way around” (89).

“A lot of what we did was the other way around”: not only is professional gambling an unstable source of income, it is also an unusual one. Its appeal lies in the bewitching alchemy of creating something out of nothing. When you win a bet, no substantial labor has been expended, no goods produced, and yet, voilà, fortune showers you with undeserved riches. A Marxist might even say that the process was capitalism writ small: money making money on itself, with no value added to society. But there's a reason why Marx is never mentioned in the novel: for Chick and Miriam, this *modus operandi* constitutes the core of a contrarian ethic, a way of opting out, of saying *no* to the predominant, and stifling, modes of existence.

Within the upside-down logic of the novel, this emphatic *no* is actually an affirmation. There is no positive thinking in the novel; or, more precisely, there are no positive portrayals of positive thinking. None of the conventional hierarchies or value-

systems hold; they have all been inverted. Thus when Chick's former father-in-law Roger Patterson, an unctuous PR man who was the mastermind behind Chick's post-Olympics promotional tour for the Gold Medal Health Spas, solemnly declares, "What we, what Gold Medal Health Spas is all about, in a nutshell, is life not death... we are here to help our clients release themselves from the gym-teacher induced inhibitions and retrograde disciplinary mechanisms that thwart self-actualization," his blustery, canned rhetoric makes it apparent that, contrary to what he insists, he actually stands on the side of death, not life (94). His cloying mantras, such as "Language is the audio of image," are not mechanisms for "self-actualization," but a form of death-in-life, of language and thought gone rancid (93). And when he asserts, in response to Chick's protestations, that "Gold Medal Health Spas is not about negative thinking. Hostility is not progress but regression, the enemy of growth," his principle character flaw is revealed to be an incapacity for negative thought: a profound inability to imagine alternative ways of knowing and of thinking, an inability to understand that even hostility and negativity can be a means of forward progress, and that growth is not an unqualified virtue (96). Keats' notion of negative capability is never mentioned in the novel (though its conspicuous absence suggests its looming presence), but if it were it would not be used to describe Roger Patterson.

Even Chick's and Miriam's gambling wins and losses are perverse, defiant, backwards—not at all what you'd expect them to be. When they play blackjack at a casino they don't aspire to win by being dealt favorable cards, but to win by the dealer being dealt unfavorable cards: "We didn't hope for tens and aces for ourselves as much as for the dealer to get stuck with dregs, and often we won by standing below seventeen

while the dealer busted himself” (45). In keeping with their contrarian ethic, Chick and Miriam prefer to win by not losing. For them, winning is not its own positive state, but simply the absence of loss, and thus, in a bizarre reversal, is revealed as a hidden state of loss: the loss of loss. The converse, of course, holds as well – that loss is the absence of gain – but is not nearly as radical a proposition, because loss is understood as a state of absence in the first place. One of the implications of this logic is that the characters become inured to loss, unaffected by it: because loss is everywhere, there’s no sense fighting it or even caring much about it. For example, after a not so good session at the horse track, Chick explains, “What I lost didn’t bother me as much as what I hadn’t won” (20).

Among the many things you won’t find in Negativeland, the most telling may be its lack of nostalgia for things that are lost, missing, absent, not here. In the same way that Chick and Miriam’s negative, gambler’s logic inures them to loss, it wouldn’t be a stretch to argue that the deliberate use of constraint inures a writer to it as well. A constraint always says: *no*. But this *no* is less similar to the delighted squeals of a masochist, writhing in pleasure on the rack, than it is to the yelp of abject terror by a character in a horror film – an expression of surprise mingled with helplessness – who has seen something she’d rather not have. Constraint-based writing, in other words, isn’t fundamentally about being bound and gagged, but about being benumbed, distant, arch. A psychoanalyst might describe this condition as a state of denial, as a refusal to confront someone or something that haunts the writer, but there’s a reason why there are no psychoanalysts in the novel: this diagnosis is incorrect. Non-acceptance is a more accurate description of the condition: not a denial of loss’ existence, but a refusal to be

cowed or waylaid by it—a refusal, ultimately, to play games, to make meaning, on terms other than one’s own.

These refusals account for the reason why, in a novel jam-packed with negativity, there isn’t, as one would expect, an unhappy ending. Two negatives (Chick and Miriam) combine to make a positive (a new, albeit unorthodox, life together). It is not unlike the way in which, philosophically speaking, a proposition that is *not* not-true is in fact the case. In the final scene of the novel, Chick and Miriam attend a New Year’s Eve party, uninvited, at the house where Chick grew up in Florida. As drifters, they don’t fit in with the “lawyers, accountants, salesmen, doctors, and mid-level media executives” in attendance, those individuals who occupy civilization’s approved posts and hew to its prescribed ambits—those individuals, in a word, who play, unquestioningly, by other people’s rules. Amidst this party full of yes-men, Chick and Miriam dance, contentedly, to the song “Nothing Could Be Finer,” as, in the novel’s closing sentence, Chick muses on the contrasting pleasures of their mode of existence: “She pulled me to her, and as we danced, I thought of the road they [the hosts] had taken and the road that we had taken, of their house here and of our car outside, and I knew that nothing could [be finer]” (186). In the final analysis, every novel lacks something, but no novel is as comfortable with what it doesn’t have as Negativeland.

Job Talk

: Context

A bravura feat of constraint, Doug Nufer's 2004 Never Again is a 200-page novel written without using any word twice.

: What was I trying to do?

To see what it feels like, if only for a short spell, to be an Olympian.

Job Talk

Never Again's plot summary: protagonist seeks gainful employment after unforeseen foreclosure strikes: "When the racetrack closed forever," novel begins, "I had to get a job" (3). Gamblers, significantly, exist outside traditional societal strictures: families, nine-to-fives, commutes, bosses, salaries, taxes, white picket fences. Consequently, citizens – employers – distrust them, consider their unorthodox modus operandi threatening: "References?," poses interviewer, "cocked brow adjusting monocle glinting somber intent" (3). Guileful hero crafts phony CV in response.

Outsider status grants unique perspective vis-à-vis ubiquitous occupational claptrap: resums, natch, but also everyday trade patois come under trenchant circumspection. I.e., treacly seminar-speak: "Superanglo exec-seminar cant swirls innocent corruptions justifying greed's underlying heartfelt paternalism" (6). Or doctrinaire cocktail party patter: "schmooze incorporating jingoistic anticorporate lingo effectively babbles, stymies comradery" (12). Nonconformist argot jeopardizes officemate amicability, signifies Nietzschean, anti-herd mindset, menaces corporate hivemind. Moral? Labor guilds, of whatever kind, express group solidarity through shared language patterns, conventions. Linguistically peripheral individuals resemble orphans, pariahs.

My thesis: workaday world reinforces hegemony via antiseptic linguistic norms, book argues. Jargon's arm extends well past mere careerist strivings, becomes subtle power mechanism permeating civilization's superstructure. Expressed otherwise: commerce's multifarious idioms insidiously pervade public – private – life. Observe evening news-speak, wherein "visual evisceration counterpoints anchorperson chitchat"

(22). Notice syntax here: what's being disemboweled is viewer's optical field itself, not videotaped bodies. Juxtaposed against graphic violence, framed by storyteller's idiosyncratic locutions, humdrum, prim-and-proper newsperson prattle appears dispassionate, apathetic—practically pathological. Perhaps journalistic professionalism precludes compassion; nonetheless, aloofness' naturalization, foregrounded, disturbs.

Nufer's singular sentences antagonize habituated discourse, throw latter's sanctified customs into relief. Beyond providing convenient lexical-narrative formula, repetition's proscription constitutes veritable artistic credo: sameness' pert rejection. Technology-driven globalization invariably flattens longstanding regional differences, imposes drab uniformity (upon people, languages, cultures, workplaces) wherever capitalism senses impending profits. Compulsively variegated prose flummoxes, paradoxically, contemporary life's omnipresent invisible restraints. Originality's virtue exceeds, therefore, autotelic, art-for-art's sake rationales. Narrator's neologicistic commitment parallels his picaresque, post-gambling livelihood. Verbal nomadism's vaunted ethic: resist habit's false comforts.

Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys

: Context

This Window Makes Me Feel, Robert Fitterman's 2004 book-length poem, consists of a collection of feelings culled from the Internet. Intended as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 – even though none of its borrowed language speaks directly of that event – the poem is a remarkably poignant snapshot of our collective anxieties and elations. It is also a fascinating challenge to the tradition of lyric poetry – a subjective poem written using only other people's subjectivity – one that evidences Fitterman's ear for the madcap lyricism of Internet pabulum.

: What was I trying to do?

The conceit of this chapter was to appropriate, cento-like, the objective, authoritative language of academic literary criticism in order to write about the appropriated subjective language of Fitterman's poem. If the result reads almost as a parody of academic literary criticism, I won't claim that I didn't know that's what I was doing all along.

**Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys:
Femininity as Affect and Effect in Robert Fitterman's This Window Makes Me Feel**

I

There are literary windows before Robert Fitterman's This Window Makes Me Feel, including some notable American ones, but his have an unprecedented poetic intensity. These windows are certainly not his only sources of inspiration, but his reactions to them are fundamental to his literary treatment of the dilemma of subjectivity in contemporary American society. They are precisely, this "bird's eye view as I perch on the commander's seat," a new yet old, light yet weighty crystallization of reality into art (14). In this sense, critics like Helen Vendler and many others who deny that Fitterman is a poet of reality are at least one-half wrong. Marjorie Perloff and Vanessa Place do him more poetic justice.

In this article, I will follow Fitterman's readerly/writerly itinerary in This Window Makes Me Feel in order to show how the transformation from censored silence to writerly subjectivity proceeds, and especially, how reading and writing serve throughout the text as the very transformative practices needed to (re)activate subjectivity and (re)mobilize agency. Exploring this interdependence allows us to read Fitterman's text as it reflects a non-unified sense of subjectivity, as critics have previously argued. However, my reading also suggests that while he renounces Authorship, Fitterman nevertheless sees himself and negotiates authority as a Conceptual Poet.

Moreover, the shifts in the work's narrative point of view—the repeated intrusion of new speaking voices—lead to a similar dynamic between Fitterman and the reader. Just when we think we are getting to know “the real Robert Fitterman,” he discards his

authorial omniscience and withholds from us central elements of his consciousness. “Intimacy” seems no more possible between Fitterman and the reader than between Fitterman and the poem’s speakers: “This window makes me feel like I’ve always been somebody outside looking in” (7-8). Finally, after conjecturing about what the difference between “authoring” and “writing” might mean to an early twenty-first century white male⁷, I must acknowledge my own position as a “postmodern subject” and Conceptual Poet, and thus, my argument’s debt to postmodern ideas about subjectivity and writing.

Subjectivity as a humanist concept has been under assault in the current debates about contemporary “postmodern” culture in the West. Subjectivity is, of course, a word of many meanings, and there are senses of the term that seem more appropriate to the case of Fitterman. For example, This Window is one of the most self-reflective, solitary literary creations imaginable; it is always involved with cogitation, introspection, dreaming and other inwardly directed acts: “This window makes me feel sick because I need to be alone but I can’t stand being on my own—my mind is so full of conflicts” (28). If by “subjectivity” we mean the thought processes characteristic of a solitary inner life, such as in the versions of Protestant asceticism associated by Max Weber with an emerging modernity, then Fitterman seems the apotheosis of subjective in that sense.

Similarly, what we have learned from the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment subject is that we should not attribute to consciousness the absolute power to constitute its own world: subjectivity is never “pure” or fully autonomous but inheres in selves that are shaped by cultural discourses and that are always embodied—selves

⁷ While other writers of the period - particularly Nick Hornby and Norman Mailer – have addressed the topic of how masculine subjectivity is allied with hierarchy and violence, Fitterman’s poem is unique in that it points to the existence of an unexamined feminine reality, whose very recognition alone might provide a different way to conceptualize subjectivity. Thus, Fitterman offers a new perspective on masculine subjectivity as it develops through a variety of relationships with feminine speakers.

that thus are also gendered. Yet to acknowledge all of this does not mean that we are obliged to proclaim definitively “the death of the subject”: “This window,” insists Fitterman, “makes me feel alive” (53). It is important for feminist politics (as Linda Alcoff and others have argued) that we remain able to grant a role to individual consciousness and agency, to insist even on a notion of individual responsibility for our actions – “This window makes me feel like I’m the source of the problem and it makes me feel sad and guilty” – but we must do so while also acknowledging the ways in which subjectivity is discursively and socially constructed (18). In particular, we need to be able to account for gender as an aspect of subjectivity, but to do so without either essentializing or dehistoricizing it: “This window makes me feel like I am nothing but an object, an anonymous female figure to view” (37).

Yet, while Fitterman’s project certainly involves a search for a voice or language of his own, he does not, as we shall see, find an already formed subjectivity, but rather produces a gendered subjectivity through the various exercises of reading and writing enacted in the text: “This window makes me feel like I’m out on the range somewhere or hangin’ around the corral because I don’t get out as much as I would like to, so I read a lot of cowboy poetry” (37). Subjectivity, as feminist critic Sally Robinson has suggested, is not a “being” but a “doing,” both product and process at once: “This window makes me feel like I am on my way down... but I’ve actually been down this same road before... ohhh, here’s that beautiful tree again”(75).

This Window involves a critical engagement with the multiple narratives and discourses of Fitterman’s social context. Authorship in the poem is produced as a struggle, as always negotiated between repetition and resistance, as something formed in

the space between writer and reader, speaker and listener. Indeed, it is primarily in the acts of reading and writing, in the various gestures of reading and writing performed in the text, that Fitterman locates the transformation he needs to construct a subjectivity of his own: “This window makes me feel like I am a legitimate writer, and as if the journey is actually going to lead somewhere” (59). It is in this spirit that I have situated Fitterman’s piece as a starting point in my discussion of how Conceptual Poetic literary visions of “the feelings” function in the formulation of a post-September 11 subjectivity.

II

Like any other individual or collective trauma, September 11 has proved to be something of a Rorschach test: the initial responses told us much more about the prejudices and fears of the various commentators and respondents than about the events themselves. What shakes us is the theatricality of tragic events. Before September 11, the images of gender roles that circulated within the media were of casually dressed dot-commers and young professional men and women. After September 11, the images of gender shifted to an emphasis on traditional working-class masculinity and wives holding down the home front. I resist the idea that after September 11, everything has changed and nothing will be the same again. The need to connect cataclysmic moments to our everyday life persists; I’m interested not just in what happened on one day in September but also in how that shock is absorbed into the textures of our ongoing lives.

Can a literature devoted to the subject be societally relevant or is it necessarily limited to an individual’s private and trivial concerns? If we approach Fitterman’s speakers – and most particularly their psychic wounds – from the perspective of

psychoanalytic semiotics rather than myth-ritual criticism, we arrive at some very different observations about them, observations which produce some strikingly different conclusions about their identities and the text they inhabit.

Every strand of argument prominent in This Window reveals the difference between logic proper, and the logic of feeling: Fitterman's thinking is continually shaped by shifting emotional pressures of hope, fear, frustration, and love. Having distinguished between logic and psychologic, we can better appreciate Fitterman's strategy for resolving the poem's central philosophical problem: interpreting man's place in the universe so as to satisfy the humanistic sensibility with its demand for a benevolent moral order, and the political intelligence with its developing grasp of relentless mechanistic laws. Fitterman accomplishes this reconciliation, most saliently, by inducing us to share, empathically, the narrator's experience of landscapes charged with emotive meanings and spiritual sustenance: "This window makes me feel like I'm just walking along a river and I'm thinking: *Oh God, if I could express in a phrase what I feel*" (66-7). Analysis of several key sections exposes some rhetorical devices by which this use of a sympathetic consciousness responding to a nature imbued with supernatural resonances, wins provisional assent, even from skeptical readers, to Fitterman's resolution of his era's most painful philosophical-psychological crisis.

Fitterman himself renders this crisis problematic, not only by his consistent pursuit of insights principally represented by sensations, but also by his candid descriptions of the pleasures of thinking and of the vital roles of intuition and emotion in metaphysical discovery: "This window makes me feel like a fake because when I handed in the papers I knew what I'd written was far from good" (41). Hence his thought is

continually on a cusp between claims to absolute knowledge, and self-descriptions which seem to undermine them. In combination, these diverse descriptions of the feeling of thinking reveal a poet motivated primarily by the pursuit of pleasures and satisfactions which at times seem almost physical, and continually hesitating between confidence in the opinions resulting from this effort and anxiety about their origins.

Fitterman's discussions of the varieties of feeling which accompany intellectual activity thus serve two main purposes: they provide non-philosophical support for his preference of idealist to empiricist ideas by stigmatizing intellectual conformity, and they distinguish the positive from the negative aspects of his own thinking, justifying the latter in terms of their inseparableness from the former. In both of these projects, Fitterman is describing the patterns of feeling associated with his own reflective and creative activity: "This window makes me feel good about myself to be able to paint because my artwork helps me to show my feelings that I couldn't show before" (8). It might be argued that nearly all poetry, and not just This Window, resolves its dramatized conflicts through a logic of feeling, not through logic in the true sense.

The difference between ordinary logic and the logic of feeling becomes clear, for example, when we try to follow the narrator's developing thought on the question of individual immortality. Fitterman's continual quest for a feeling of the sublime, for example, is rationalized as a pursuit of fundamental truths which are beyond human understanding; yet the very impossibility of demonstrating these truths reveals their dependence on Fitterman's will to believe in them, or on his search for a sublime feeling which is essentially a substitute for any form of argument: "This window makes me feel like tiny things are beautiful, that there's humor in the industrial world, and that you can

go slightly psycho and that will be even truer” (39). Yet his discussions of the role of sensation and emotion in determining our ideas not only show the importance of feeling to Fitterman's own reflective processes, but also suggest a persistent anxiety about the reliability of a philosophy so extensively guided by irrational or subjective forces. Such being the problem, in what direction are we to look for a correct assessment of the semantic role of imagination and eventually of feeling?

To be lacking in passion, Fitterman implies in This Window, is no less dangerous than to be overcome by the accidental association of passion with meaningless watch-words: “This window makes me feel like I belong, and I am loved, because God wants to be with me” (44). This is precisely the kind of delusion which Facebook encourages: the taking of inward feelings as evidences of divine inspiration. By combining a rogue’s biography, a blind—i.e., unread—man’s thoughts on religion, and a catechism, Fitterman offers the reader the literary forms most popular with the under-educated both of the city and of the countryside. Perhaps there can be no other ground for belief in such inspiration, but there is equally no way of distinguishing it from insanity. What Fitterman recommends in these passages, therefore, is the grounding of one's beliefs on thought rather than on tradition or feeling: “a post-linguistic turned Kantian position” (46).

III

Our reflections about the cleavage between This Window’s manner (an appeal to the feelings) and message (an appeal to reason) obscure what we have been feeling all along as we read—that joy in life can and does exist in the shadow of a sense of life's futility: “This window makes me feel great to think that I started this field from scratch and now

look at it” (16). If the reader feels after contact with the piece of writing some of the same feelings that the writer felt, whether he agrees with them or not, communication in its root sense of "union with" has truly taken place. In this century, however, partly in reaction to the sentimentalism of the last, and partly in an effort to prove literary criticism a scientific discipline, the discussion or expression of emotional responses to literature was ruled illegitimate. This is the prickly fact that critics have to deal with if they want to talk about readers as well as texts. But even those critics who have made reader-response their special domain back off from the issue, or approach it gingerly, whip and pistol in hand.

The need for a system to justify one's responses to a literary work vitiates academic criticism. Emotional reactions, whether they occur simultaneously with cognition or a split second after, are the main component of the literary experience. Critics have turned from systematizing the work to systematizing the reader: “This window makes me feel like my time and experience are not important to the education system here” (22). I once was the grader for a course in which the professor made a speech, complete with dramatically appropriate gestures, attacking people who allow themselves, as he put it, to be ravished by a text. I can't imagine to whom he was referring; no one palpitates or gushes about literature anymore. But he was still fighting the battle against what has traditionally been labeled female sensibility, warning students, needlessly, against the ghosts of maudlin and sentiment: “This window makes me feel very insecure about my manhood, what with the pink artwork and the fucking unicorn on the front” (54).

As things stand now, we are both ignorant and dumb. We are ignorant of the tremendous subtlety and complexity of our responses to literature because we have not been trained to focus on their affective dimension. We are dumb in that we lack the skill to articulate in a publicly interesting and intelligible way the nature and structure and varieties of emotional response: “This window makes me feel like maybe I’m not the self-assured, confident person I think I am because I feel like an idiot for not being able to handle this situation” (31). We do not have models for this sort of work – they are yet to be invented – but I can offer some suggestions about where we might turn, in the meantime, for help. To novelists and poets, whose mastery of the language of feeling has enabled them to write about literature with eloquence and discernment—to Henry James, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence; to the New Journalists like Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe who have found ways of using private experience in the interpretation of public events; to contemporary writer-critics like Penelope Gilliatt and Joan Didion, whose critical stance is flexible, personal, and experientially based; to Roland Barthes, whose work has made dazzling forays into the phenomenology of reading.

The alternative suggested here is not a new one, though in this age of precision, logic, computer systems, and accountability it may have been forgotten or have lost its credibility. It suggests that before valid thought can take place and certainly before meaningful writing can occur the feelings of the writer must be stimulated to the extent that he is willing and able to make an emotional, sensuous commitment to his task: “This window makes me feel like I’ve really accomplished something, and I must have touched a lot of hearts with my writing” (44). This is not to suggest that only feelings of love, joy, peace, and brotherhood are worthy stimulators of writing; certainly these feelings but also

the less-popular feelings of hate, mistrust, anger, and disgust can emerge in response to any stimulus encountered. It matters far less what the feeling is than that there is feeling.

I like to think that works of literature lead a life of their own, which they receive, in part, from each generation of readers that comes to them. I like to think of them as animals in the wild, half imaginary and half real, which we can never capture or domesticate, try though we may: “This window makes me feel like I will reach total freedom” (51). And in this connection, I like to think of that sentence of Thoreau's, which runs: “We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.” The freedom from captivity that I imagine as the birthright of great literature should be the opportunity of the reader and the critic. I stress the need to re-introduce feeling into critical discourse because I think it is the only way that readers and critics can begin to appropriate their own experience. To read and write, not as if they were somebody else, or as if they weren't human at all, but as if the fig leaf of objectivity has been removed.

Dies, A Sentence

: Context

Vanessa Place's 2006 Dies: A Sentence is a 120-page long war story told in the form of a run-on sentence, replete with puns, allusions, mixed metaphors, digressions, philosophical speculation, and similes both epic and mundane. This rollicking form, possessed of a heedless forward motion, enacts a poetics of the comma, refusing to come to a full stop lest the text undergo a metaphoric death. Place demonstrates the comma to be a punctuation mark afraid of grammatical cessation and the war story to be a form similarly concerned with staving off imminent expiration.

: What was I trying to do?

Unwittingly figuring out why I am often one of the last people to leave at parties.

Dies, A Sentence

I had contemplated writing this sentence as a list, the kind that can sprawl *ad infinitum*, a simple colon opening out onto pages of semicolon-divided substrata, but decided against it, in no small part because it wouldn't have been as challenging, and, therefore, as aesthetically satisfying, as doing it without semicolons, which isn't to suggest that aesthetic satisfaction depends on degree of difficulty, as if it were an Olympic sport, like diving or gymnastics, in which the goal is a maximum of contortion in a minimum of space, turning the human body, in the loud pause between dismount and landing, recoil and splash, into a taut, pink blade, frantically knifing the hungry air, no, semicolons would only be a way of nominally adhering to the rule of the source text, Vanessa Place's Dies: A Sentence, while avoiding its pitfalls and the pleasures, that the comma, frail hook, must rappel the reader down the craggy length of a 120-page long sentence, replete with war stories, puns, philosophical speculations, digressions, similes both epic and mundane, as well as a healthy dose of mixed metaphors, which extend, by virtue of endless appositives, well past the point where an ordinary metaphor might break, as when "at one such point of weakness, an eagle wheeled and struck, shearing the lower limb of the luckless tree and rendering the earth an open throat, from which triplets came, each three-headed, and each head, three-faced, and each face, variously countenanced, one was three spotted young, bland, bored, and beside oneself, unshorn by history or the future continuous, two was," well, you get the idea, the comma, tender tendril, has been enlisted by Place as a pacing device, a placeholder, if you will, that moves the sentence forward even as it slows it down, what Susan McCabe, in her introduction to the book, calls "the rocking caesura," more or less what a comma always does, that is, creates a borrowed

space in which an unlikely thought may briefly blossom, like a dandelion will sometimes struggle upwards, for a season, through a sidewalk crack, in defiance of the concrete slipcase in which we've wrapped the earth, only more so, Place's commas, for, unlike steadier, more circumspect punctuation, the period, the colon, the semicolon, the comma cannot usually bear much weight alone, at most a turn or two of the rhetorical screw, a hasty flourish, like a conductor wielding an emphatic baton, and then the inevitable diminuendo, a disappointing slackness, sputtering momentum, such that all parties to the performance sense the end is nigh, that the show cannot go on much longer, as when a *fête* has begun to fade, the liquor all drunk up, the music lagging and dissonant, but a few determined guests remain, clinging to the dying embers of the evening, not from any drunken enthusiasms, it is long past such a time for that, but from a fear, quiet but palpable, known all too well by the comma, of endings.

Not-Reading Kenneth Goldsmith

: Context

Conceptual Poetry is an early twenty-first century literary movement, self-described by its practitioners as a form of "uncreative writing." In Conceptual Poetry, appropriation is often used as a means to create new work, focused more on the initial concept rather than the final product of the poem. Along with avant-garde figures such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Jackson Mac Low, the Oulipo has been cited by Conceptual Poets as an important influence on their practice.

: What was I trying to do?

I was trying, unsuccessfully, to fulfill my fantasy, Conceptual in nature, of getting work done without doing any actual work.

Not-Reading Kenneth Goldsmith

In his 2004 essay “Being Boring,” Conceptual Poet Kenneth Goldsmith writes, “You really don’t need to read my books to get the idea of what they’re like; you just need to know the general concept.” This coy sentiment, delivered in a deadpan voice, suggests a Conceptual strategy for engaging with Goldsmith’s oeuvre: not-reading it. Many annoyed onlookers of the contemporary poetry world have already adopted such a strategy, dismissing the books, and the larger Conceptual movement, as avant-garde hokum. But Goldsmith’s own notion of not-reading, however playful and provocative, doesn’t necessitate a stance of dismissal, and, more importantly, doesn’t preclude the possibility of intellectual rigor and seriousness: in lieu of the work of reading, the audience performs instead the work of contemplation. The implicit claim is that the books’ concepts alone, independent of their contents, are of sufficient depth, complexity, and suggestiveness for fruitful reflection. What follows is an attempt to analyze, chronologically, Goldsmith’s literary oeuvre without reference to the books’ contents. For those books of his that I have in fact read, I will respond, to the extent possible, as though I had never read them, limiting the discussion to their conceptual underpinnings.

73 Poems. 1994

Concept: A collaboration with avant-garde vocalist Joan La Barbara.

Contemplation: Collaborating with a vocalist to produce a CD and a book of poems could be seen as a kind of artistic concept, or conceit, but Goldsmith’s first book isn’t, strictly speaking, Conceptual in the way of his subsequent books. Simply knowing that

Goldsmith collaborated with La Barbara doesn't provide the audience with any clear sense of how the poems will look and sound: they must still be read in order to be apprehended. Here we can see one feature necessary for books that needn't be read in order to be understood: the content should be common, familiar, pre-packaged. Of note, too, is the fact that 73 Poems is Goldsmith's only book of conventional, stanzaic poems. In order to make the shift into a purer form of Conceptualism, the poem—that literary artifact most resistant to conventional ways of writing and of speaking—had to be abandoned as a linguistic vessel.

No. 111.2.7.93-10.20.96. 1997

Concept: A collection of words or phrases that end with the letter 'R' or a related sound (known by linguists as the 'schwa' sound), gathered over a three-year period of time and organized by syllable count.

Contemplation: Goldsmith sometimes describes himself as a kind of word processor or information manager rather than as a writer. No. 111, an arbitrary collection and framing of found language, represents his first concerted effort in this direction. Shoehorning an artist's oeuvre into a tidy narrative arc can be misleading, but not in the case of Goldsmith: each new book after the breakthrough of No. 111 is a calculated gesture, designed with just such a career arc in mind. As for No. 111 itself, its conceit (collect lots of language, "interesting" or not) initiates Goldsmith's ongoing interest in questions of cultural waste, as well as strategies of information classification. The dilemma of how to navigate and harness linguistic excess has grown in importance in tandem with the

Internet's cultural reach, which was only just beginning to become pervasive at the time of No. 111's publication.

Fidget. 2000

Concept: A transcription of every movement Goldsmith's body made during an entire day, recorded on Bloomsday, June 16, 1997.

Contemplation: As Goldsmith himself admits, it isn't possible to notate *every* movement one's body makes. Our bodies make far more movements than can be recorded by one individual. In Fidget, then, a gap opens up between the theoretical ideal of the book's concept and the reality that its concept can never be fully realized. And just as there will always be a gap between a concept and its realization, so too will there always be a gap between the human body and its linguistic renditions: even the most exhaustive description possible, one Fidget ostensibly attempts, cannot adequately capture the body's varied vitality. That Goldsmith points out, whenever he mentions the book, he had to get drunk in order to endure the project's tedium only points up the way in which a concept inevitably devolves partway into farce in its execution.

Soliloquy. 2001

Concept: A transcription of every word Goldsmith said for a week.

Contemplation: A number of important ideas converge in Soliloquy. First, unlike in Fidget, which in being recorded on Bloomsday highlighted the endeavor's singularity,

Soliloquy was recorded over the course of an ordinary week. Similar to the way John Cage drew audiences' attention to the world's dense soundscapes, Goldsmith draws our attention to just how much language we produce (and hear) in the course of our daily lives: nearly 500 pages worth per person per week. Refusing to take the trivial and the mundane for granted, Soliloquy assays ordinary speech. At the same time that it chronicles ordinariness, the book also represents the apotheosis of a strain of Warholian showmanship and self-promotion in Goldsmith's writing. In Fidget and Soliloquy, the two works that put Goldsmith on the contemporary poetic map, the subject is not simply the quotidian world, but the quotidian world as experienced by Kenneth Goldsmith, Conceptual Poet. Recording every word you speak for a week and publishing it as a book is not only a fascinating experiment in autobiography, narrative, and language, but also an act of narcissistic exhibitionism, creating a cult of authorship around the work. In this respect, Soliloquy is of a piece with the voyeuristic craze of popular culture over the past 15-20 years, for intimate glimpses of "ordinary" lives through "reality" television, "amateur" pornography, and mawkish memoirs. Indeed, the book's curiously chosen title – presumably, few of Goldsmith's words were uttered as actual soliloquies – can be seen as a gloss on the way in which the soliloquy as a dramatic form speaks to our networked age's confessional mentality: even when we're at our most intimate, meditating to ourselves, we like to imagine that there is nonetheless an audience to our lucubrations.

Head Citations. 2002

Concept: A collection of over 800 misheard song lyrics.

Contemplation: More so than other Conceptual Poets, Goldsmith's oeuvre makes apparent the intimate connection between piracy and collection: stealing, copying, borrowing, and transcribing all stem from a desire to gather and hoard. And hoarding and collecting stem from a desire to create a context for possession: done not for its own sake but as part of a larger series within which each individual unit has greater meaning than it could alone. Music has been the most pirated art form in the digital age and the gathered song lyrics in Head Citations are a not-so-distant-cousin of the by-now ubiquitous iPod playlist.

Day. 2003

Concept: A word-for-word transcription of one day's New York Times.

Contemplation: Day takes up a theme familiar to Goldsmith's work – the everyday and the quotidian – but marks a transition within his oeuvre to a sustained consideration of the public sphere, often taking the form of reportage. This transition coincides with another one: the shift to the wholesale appropriation of the work of others, as opposed to acts of cataloguing and self-recording. One thing that remains constant is the emphasis placed on duration: here, the span of a single day. And quantity: Day clocks in at over 800 pages. Goldsmith's books are like containers for information—or, better yet, like scales. How much does this specimen of language weigh? That our paper of record – to say nothing of the Internet – is so overstuffed with content means we produce and record history faster than we can digest it. Conceptual Poetry responds to this gluttony with a principled anorexia.

The Weather. 2005

Concept: A transcription of a year's worth of weather reports from an all-news New York radio station.

Contemplation: The Weather is the first of three books in what Goldsmith calls his "American Trilogy," the next two being Traffic and Sports. Strangely, none of these three subjects are uniquely American ones, with the exception perhaps of Sports, which is a transcription of a baseball broadcast. Even so, why not call the book Baseball if the intent is to spotlight its distinctively American nature? What's most interesting, though, about Goldsmith's classification of his own work is not the question of whether or not it's accurate, but, rather, the fact that he does it at all—and so extensively. In an interview with the poet Dale Smith, Goldsmith argues that "the critical system is in a shambles" and that therefore it is up to "the poet to frame [his or her] own work," to "articulate and shape the discussion about our work ourselves." Acting as both author *and* critic of his own work – an inevitability, I suppose, for a Conceptual Poet – it's remarkable the extent to which Goldsmith has been able to establish the terms under which his work gets discussed by others, this present essay being no exception. In fact, it wouldn't be a stretch to suggest that Goldsmith's most successful artistic creation has been that of his public persona—a Conceptual triumph if ever there was one.

Traffic. 2007

Concept: A transcription of one's day worth of traffic reports from an all-news New York radio station.

Contemplation: In everyday vernacular, the word "traffic" is used to refer, quite specifically, to the presence or absence of vehicular congestion. At its core, though, the word refers to any kind of movement, to objects coming and going: cars, yes, but also money, goods, and ideas. Goldsmith's later books traffic in the language of traffic, in language addressed to the consumer, hopeful of moving him this way or that. One wonders, contemplating the logjam of commercial discourse, whether space exists on the airwaves for other kinds of language. Goldsmith's bleak answer: no, or, at best, in pockets of obscurity so tiny as to be nearly invisible.

Sports. 2008

Concept: A transcription of the longest recorded nine-inning baseball game in history, a five-hour 2006 game between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees.

Contemplation: It's hard to write with finality about the career trajectory of a relatively young, living artist, but it's also hard not to feel that in rounding off his "American Trilogy" with Sports, Goldsmith has gone about as far as he can go in a certain direction. Each further iteration of the trilogy underscores the whole's methodological sameness: the Conceptual gesture remains the same even as the topics change. But the gesture derives much of its considerable force from its uniqueness; its replication can only ever be but a pale copy of the original.

Jogging Essay

: Context

In 2007, poet Jon Cotner wrote a “Jogging Poem” by recording himself narrate a thirty-minute jog through Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.

: What was I trying to do?

To see what happened when I made my critical exercises a literal, rather than metaphorical, form of exercise.

Jogging Essay

*Central Park
June 10 2010
11:08 am*

ok this is an essay on Jon Cotner's "Jogging Poem" which he wrote several years ago while out on a run in Prospect Park in Brooklyn I'm currently in Central Park early June day about eleven in the morning perfect weather for running 65° or so not too sunny but not cold or chilly either the idea behind this piece ah see already I have methodological difficulties because I stopped talking as I passed by two people just now because I don't want to seem like I'm talking to myself and I deliberately chose a weekday afternoon it's Wednesday to do this so there'd be less people around but it's Central Park there are never not going to be people around and it's one of the first and I think most obvious contrasts between what Jon does in his poem and what I'm doing here and that is Jon engages lots of passerbys in conversation and as I've already said I'm trying to be as inconspicuous as possible for whatever reason there are construction workers at Tavern on the Green that's the noise uh the big crane it looks like they're building some sort of new almost greenhouse-looking wing to the restaurant I've never been to Tavern on the Green I assume it's mostly a tourist thing anyway I'm trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible for whatever reason I'm embarrassed I'm even talking to myself though obviously it really doesn't matter nobody particularly cares anyway but I think there is one initial difference that strikes me and that is that Jon in his jog in his poem celebrates and I've written down the phrase here and a few other notes on his poem to keep handy during my own run he celebrates a "commitment to public life" he really enacts it in

the poem by stopping oftentimes he stops and talks to a *lot* of dog owners stopping his run to do so talks to uh kicks a lot of soccer balls [echo] back to um the back to players who are doing that there was just a just went through a tunnel and a family of tourists saw me talking and that's why I trailed off there though again I suppose it really shouldn't matter anyway another thing that strikes me about Jon's poem and then I'll offer a few thoughts about running more generally and then see where it goes from there another thing that strikes me about it though is his really sort of thick descriptive evocations of the things that he sees while he goes running and of course I notice things too but I have to say that for myself I've run for a number of years now I ran track in High School though I wasn't particularly good because I didn't really apply myself I was more interested in drinking and things like that but I ran track in High School on and off since then running a marathon in 2007 the New York City marathon when I was about 26 or 27 then and [exhales] when I run it's not I mean I notice things around me like Jon does but it's actually very much an experience in terms of my train of thought where I'm actually not focused on my surroundings at all unless something quite noticeable or striking happens and I mean Jon's writing a poem so he's going to notice things and talk or write about them but knowing him and his other work and knowing him as a person I think that's just his natural mode of observation and I'm not you know it's an interesting contrast because I associate I think a lot of other people do too [echo] running with sort of spacing out not that I space out exactly but that though you're moving through the world your mind is actually free to sort of wander and uh yeah and so just re-passed that family of five tourists older children too looked like

they were teenagers so I went silent there again can't embarrass myself in front of the tourists uh and I thought about doing this run too and now that I'm in the midst of it carrying around a piece of electronic equipment the voice recorder it made me reflect on how when I ran the marathon and you know when I've run before or since I never go well almost never go less than 5% of the time with any sort of audio or musical device like an iPod I don't even own an iPod so the only time I ever run with music well talk radio really is when I would take a portable radio set and I would listen I would only ever take it specifically for the purpose of listening to "Mike and the Mad Dog" on WFAN which was a guilty pleasure of mine they're no longer a sports talk duo they split up a couple of years ago but they had been one for almost two decades in New York and their sports opinions I mean they know a good bit about sports but were never particularly insightful or perspicacious but they reminded me a lot hearing them talk banter back and forth in a kind of chummy heteronormative sort of way reminded me a lot of growing up in Staten Island so I used to like to listen to them particularly when some sort of big sports- or Yankees-related event happened the day before that's when I would take out the radio cause I wanted to hear them while I was out running because whenever something sort of monumental happened their hyperbolic reactions were always a joy to listen to but so I think it's common practice to I just got stared at by a couple walking a dog on the bridal path where I'm running as I was talking to myself but I think it's common practice when you go running to have some sort of audio listening device that distracts you I think but I think it's not just a matter of distraction in the way I was talking about well I don't always notice the things that are happening around me though I do notice

other runners perhaps because they're going at the same speed that I am but more so this I really do believe and it's part of the reason why I don't wear an iPod at any time is it distracts you from your own thoughts and you know I could see why you'd want to do that particularly when running a marathon when you go on the long runs the fifteen eighteen twenty mile runs that you do as training I mean you run for two or three hours your own thoughts can only be so interesting but there's something sad about that I think and this among other things is one of the things I admire about Jon's poem another thing that I sort of implicitly hinted at is his uh I don't want to make too much of it and say "bravery" exactly but his willingness to go out there or to sound weird to engage with other people and make that part of the performance of his poem but so I think there is a kind of sadness in that well "sadness" is too strong a word not sad but I'm not afraid of my own thoughts let's say and I think Jon's methodology both in that poem and in other of his work I think dwelling with one's own thoughts in all their sort of mundaneness their ordinariness uh is it well yeah this would be a mundane ordinary thought more generally I'm interested too and this is part of the idea behind this essay in exploring how physical exercise affects the rhythm of one's thought and it does affect it that I'm pretty confident about but it's not something that's sort of easy to explore or I don't know let me try to describe it this way and this actually my inarticulateness my inability to spontaneously sort of precisely locate the things I want to say or lead to kind of suggestive lines of thinking I think has to do with precisely those difficulties that I'm talking about but maybe it would be better to put it as follows when I go running anything other than a short jog which incidentally I'm severely out of shape really

badly out of shape right now and I've been putting off doing this essay so that I could get into shape but realized that if I did that I'd never get around to doing the essay I mean I'm only 30 or almost 30 and it's dispiriting to contemplate [exhales] just how different physically I feel from three years ago when I was possibly for the last time really in a sort of peak physical condition doing the marathon and I just sort of took it for granted that that would always be the case but so when I run I usually have the sensation in terms of what I'm thinking of sort of looping through the same thoughts and my digressions on this run my digressive train of thoughts but where I eventually come back I'm not sure if that's a looping movement exactly but it seems related to me in some way in that I think the physical exertion limits literally limits the range of content of your consciousness or of where you sort of let your mind go and so I often have the experience particularly when I was doing those two to three hour long runs for the marathon I would think about two or three things that were on my mind that day sometimes they would almost become mantra-like and I would just go over and over those same things and never sort of gaining any new ground on the topic but just repeating endlessly and so it was a weird sort of phenomenon where it wasn't even like well my rationale is you shouldn't be afraid of your own thoughts go run with them you don't need music to distract yourself but it's not like I was it's not like I'm fooling myself into believing that I was doing any sort of profound or useful thinking I was mostly I guess you could say clearing a space in my mind taking a deep pause in the day that in the course of going about your errands your job your work your writing whatever you wouldn't normally allow yourself even if you feel you need a rest or a break so I have gotten a number of strange looks from

strangers and I'm talking to myself but at a certain point I stopped caring and that actually points to another difference between what Jon is doing and what I'm doing in that he doesn't refer to them as "strangers" like I just did I think he feels a sort of fellow feeling I mean at one point he says "oh I stopped to talk to my neighbors" and his poem celebrates New York City he'd just gotten back from Berlin there's a uh helicopter presumably a news or traffic helicopter passing over the park I'm approaching the Reservoir now from the bridal path where I did all of my marathon running but as should be obvious I'm significantly shorter of breath than I was just a few minutes ago I wasn't joking when I said I'm out of shape and so [exhales] yeah see I've forgotten even where my train of thought was going um this I should say I've written a few other chapters or essays in my dissertation [exhales] while out doing physical exercise and this is the one I dreaded the most and I'm sort of being confirmed in my trepidation over it in that I just thought physically I mean so the other ones I did were while out walking while out biking I suppose on the subway counts as one I did a (soma)tic poetry exercise after CAConrad's (soma)tic poetry exercises but running seems a different order of physicality and I kind of locate it at that point where it starts to have a genuine affect on your consciousness in other words biking and walking are mild enough activities that they don't inhibit or dramatically alter the language you think in but running and I think there's a connection too here to the breath which in twentieth century experimental poetry has been an important idea from Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" where the lines are supposed to represent one breath each though that's actually when you read the poem out loud not too feasible to Charles Olson's invocations of the breath in "Projective Verse" and others so I think

there's something about running and the breathiness of it as a symptom of not just the labor expended and how that affects one's thinking but as a marker of one's physical presence the breath is literally sped up and actually a funny coincidence as I go along this bridal path around the northwest rim of the Reservoir this is where I used to run three or four years ago a lot of my hard workouts workouts where you run faster than a casual running or jogging pace so that you get faster and you improve and [exhales] I can remember very clearly in a physical way you know my body can still remember what it was like to put forth that kind of effort and strain and the way in which the functioning and capacity of my lungs told me when I was coming up against my bodily limits or capabilities and so I should add that I think that's an immensely satisfying feeling during the actual strenuous run it's a matter purely of endurance "can I survive this" you're not thinking about "can I beat a certain time" or "oh this feels good" it's a matter of "how can I go as fast as possible and yet still remain below the threshold where I'm not about to give in and collapse" and so the actual runs themselves are a good kind of training or discipline I think and this actually relates to perhaps the last point I'll make about writing and running in just a second but not just a kind of training or discipline but after the run's over and you've cooled down and you've stretched and you're sitting in your apartment and you're just exhausted your muscles are sore you're still you know breathing heavily or traces of your previous heavy breathing are still there and [spits] it's one of the best possible feelings of exhaustion that I know of it's the only kind of exhaustion I've ever experienced [burps] that actually excuse me for as tired as you feel actually invigorates and uplifts and you're prepared to go and do more you yeah

that's the way to put it so there's a weird sort of interplay there and I think running too has and it's never at all talked about and in a way it can't be because running as this weirdly popular late twentieth century participant sport is really kind of a cult of living and I think many people do it out of this sense of obligation a way of sort of warding off the oncoming threat of aging and of death so it can't be acknowledged in a way that running actually has this very fundamental relationship to death in terms of the loss of breath running out of a fear of expiring out of a fear or out of a desire to prolong one's bodily existence and it's one of the aspects of running I like least in that I think runners are sort of drunk on the endorphins of language like literally the way they conceptualize running is as this happy-go-lucky peppy uplifting sort of enterprise when I think it really has a dark sort of undercurrent that you want to be on the side of vivacity and life but it's almost like you're sort of protesting too much I don't know I'm making more out of it than perhaps is warranted and I'm now at the north fields what is this called "The North Meadow" which is right below the North Woods in Harlem so I think if I want to make it home with anything left to spare I need to turn around so you can tell too what I mean by having your sort of energy and thought and consciousness become focused and less aware of the outside world as this run has gone on as this essay has gone on I've stopped describing things stopped caring that I'm passing by people as I'm talking to myself and I'm focused on one foot in front of the other one thought after the other very sort of plodding and deliberate so what I wanted to say about writing and running though and I meant to actually start off by talking about this but I think my nervousness got the better of me is that I think we oftentimes think about [spits] or understand

exercise physical exercise as a means of practice or training to get better at something it's actually I think this is what frustrates people about it too it's not necessarily autotelic you don't go on a jog except on really the best of days because you just want to go for a jog that happens maybe twenty days a year or so you go for a jog so that you can feel in better shape so that you can get in better shape even if it's just for the purpose of being in better shape or losing weight or something related to that it's not done for its own sake and what I'm trying to get at is I think writing actually functions in a similar way in terms of you need to be practiced at it but I don't think it's normally thought of in the same way that you a writing exercise of the kind that I'm doing here either has to be um has to produce some kind of stunning product the writing itself that is in some way beautiful or elegant or provocative or suggestive or this is the sort of binary that gets presented to us or it's a failure it hasn't succeeded and I think that's a problematic binary I normally avoid using the word "binary" so you can tell I'm tired in that I'd like to hold out the possibility and really my own sort of feeble thoughts on this jog I think are a good example of it that you write as a means of getting as a means of sort of honing your craft and that [exhales] in the same way that this run I'm on now I'm sort of slogging through because I'm badly out of shape you could say the same thing about my own practice of solitary thinking and by extension writing that my thoughts get short of breath that it's not as easy to day in and day out which I'm experiencing this summer writing full-time for the first time ever day in and day out you have to build up that stamina and it sounds kind of cliché which is what I mean by the "endorphins of language" the kind of hackneyed motivational-speak that running

culture tends to produce [spits] but there's a truth to it for writing and also that points out an even more fundamental importance of this idea of the writing exercise and that is writing's relationship to the body and the mind's relationship to the body and how the body in many ways even when you're not exerting yourself as I am now determines or informs the quality or the tenor of your thought and that I mean I suppose these are all obvious enough observations but I guess the way to say it and I'll end here saying I've only sort of obliquely talked about Jon's poem but this is all directly kind of inspired and in line with [exhales] the kind of conceptual and poetic ground that he's exploring the way to say it is that while it's easy to grasp the theoretical implications of the relationship between writing and the body I think the practical lived experience of that relationship between mind body writing and body have for the most part barely even been explored and so with that generalization I'll say that that's another thing I like about Jon's poem and his larger poetic practice is that and I say this not just in terms of the form and the methodology that he uses but in terms of the content that pops up an awareness of people and their physical presence in the world

A Talk Review of Ten Walks/ Two Talks

: Context

Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch's Ten Walks/ Two Talks contains excerpts from two separate projects. The walks come from Fitch's Sixty Morning Walks, a series of sixty-minute-long walks through Manhattan, each rendered in sixty sentences. The talks come from Cotner and Fitch's Conversations Over Stolen Food, a transcription of various conversations the pair had throughout New York City. As a means of reviewing Ten Walks, poet Corey Frost and I thought it would be fitting to have a conversation about the book, rather than to compose a traditionally written review.

: What was I trying to do?

To honor the way in which sharing an enthusiasm with a friend is a form of cultural work in its own right.

A Talk Review of Ten Walks / Two Talks
with Corey Frost

CUNY Graduate Center
April 12 2010
4:06 pm

Louis: Do you want to eat a little?

Corey: No, we can eat while we talk. Even though it's not stolen, I think it's appropriate. I've been thinking about how much we're imitating their process... Like that quote you sent me—which was from where?

L: Oh, the Dave Hickey quote? Do you know of Dave Hickey?

C: No.

L: Tayt found this pamphlet at St. Mark's Bookstore, a transcript of Hickey's course lectures on "L.A. Noir." He's an art critic, apparently, who's known for being sort of a renegade cowboy, you know, does whatever he wants to do. At any rate, the quote was about how whenever he discovers something artistic that really moves him or fascinates him, the first thing he wants to do is talk to a friend about it. It's a very Beat thing—that kind of exuberant conversation.

C: Mm.

L: And I think that's an interesting model for what we're trying. But in a way, the conversational ideal never gets met. I think the movies are a pretty good example...

C: Right. You walk out of the theatre, and then you're expected to talk about it. And I always have a hard time.

L: Yeah, right, that's exactly it. Actually engaging with the thing in conversation, the engagement tends to be superficial. What's the first question everyone asks? "Did you like it?"

C: Which is shallow. But the problem... you know, my relationships with other people who sort of read and write for a living often don't revolve around reading and writing. And maybe the problem with living an intellectual or artistic life is that you can never entirely have the pure intellectual or artistic life that you think you should, because you're stuck in the world.

L: Yeah...

C: But what's so great about Jon and Andy's conversations, actually, is that they seem to

have a friendship that allows them to... not bypass the mundane, but somehow manage to transcend it. But I don't know how much that's an artifice after the fact.

L: Or or—did you say “artifice”?

C: Yeah. I mean, how much...

L: Touched up, and made to... It's hard to know.

C: And not to interrupt, but...

L: No, I like, I like being interrupted.

C: We should explain what we're talking about.

L: Oh yeah.

C: So, this is a review of Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch's book from Ugly Duckling Presse, Ten Walks / Two Talks. And, um... what?

L: Well, it's kind of, what we were just saying about when you go to a movie and you say, did you like it or not like it, I think we're kind of resisting that impulse, although...

C: But I feel like if we were... because it's a review, if we just said up front, is this a good book or not, then we could have a lot more freedom to meander after that.

L: Well...

C: Is it a good book?

L: Yeah, I think it's fantastic. What do you think?

C: I think it's a great book. It does what I think poetry is most valuable for, which is—it's not a book that I just enjoyed while I was reading it—it's a book that made me enjoy other things more after having read it.

L: Mm-mm.

C: You know, it's a book about walks, and about observation...

L: about New York City...

C: and walking here to meet you was more enjoyable...

L: Yes, definitely. And it's a book too about conversation, too. It contains a small selection from larger works. The ten walks come from Andy's Sixty Morning Walks. And

the two talks come from their project, Conversations Over Stolen Food, which, I don't know how big it is, but I'm imagining it's pretty big.

C: They keep speaking of it as a project that's sort of ongoing.

L: Andy told me once that he had decided—I don't know if he's stuck to this resolution—that he would continue the Sixty Morning Walks project for sixty more years.

C: That's being optimistic about your life expectancy. It's difficult to interpret this book outside an understanding of their relationship—which comes through very clearly, because even though Andy wrote the ten walks, and the two talks are a conversation between Jon and Andy, I feel like the whole thing is a dialogue. Even in Andy's walks, it's as though he's talking, and I imagine that the audience is Jon.

L: That's interesting. What's your sense of their relationship? Maybe I look at Jon and Andy's book, and their friendship, and, you know, I romanticize it.

C: I look at it with a certain degree of envy, for sure. But also, I mean, it's interesting that they have chosen to be a writing duo. They do all these things together.

L: Yeah, I was going to say—it sounds like in your mind they're kind of inseparable—

C: Well, on several occasions I've asked Andy to participate in something and he'll always say, well, can I ask Jon? Which is just something that you don't usually encounter in poetry circles. People are egotistical enough usually that that's not an option. And I find it really interesting.

L: It may imply a lack of egotism, but I think there's also an advantage to it, in that artistic worlds can be hard to navigate. And having someone who is a go-to person, a natural built-in support, is a really—I don't want to say *clever* way of doing it because that makes it sound pre-planned—and one thing I like too, while we're romanticizing their relationship, is that they started out just as friends.

C: Yeah, it was a random meeting. This was not in the book—I don't remember now where I heard it, but there was an apartment that they ended up staying at, at the same time, and, uh... they were both sort of crashing without paying rent, and one of the actual roommates left for the day and both of them basically decided at the same time that they would commandeer the bedroom so they could sleep in the bed. And so one of them went into the room and found the other one there, and it was... the start of a beautiful friendship.

L: I didn't know that story.

C: It's interesting, too, that it starts with this story of... I don't know if they actually, you know, accidentally crawled into bed together like a “Three's Company” plot, but peppered throughout the book there're all these kind of...

L and C [together]: ...homoerotic...

C: ...overtones, of, you know, sharing beds...

L: ...staying over until four in the morning... dancing around in their underwear...

C: Yeah. "We danced in my kitchen the other night. At least I was down to my underwear." Which is delightful. I don't want to make too much of it, or suggest that this is odd somehow, I mean, I'd like to think that this is how male friendships can always be, regardless of sexual orientation. There's a passage, too, where they move away from a group of men who are being too macho, with too much testosterone.

L: Yes, that seemed important. Like they were reluctantly among the cast of Jersey Shore.

C: Yeah.

L: Do you watch that show?

C: I've never seen it, but I have absorbed it accidentally through the media ether.

L: My own little mini-theory of it is that it's in many ways the apotheosis of the genre. And this won't be as much of a tangent as it appears, because I think there's actually a relationship between what Andy and Jon are doing recording themselves in these various ways and let's call it a post-Real World era, or Youtube era, in which people are increasingly, I don't know if they're comfortable, but they know what to do when they get in front of a camera. Although I think their appropriation of such a trope—Andy and Jon's—is very different.

C: So you think this book might be a kind of high-brow reality poetry?

L: I mean, that makes it sound a little... I don't think that's their intention. I'm saying it's in the air. It's of a piece with what goes on in the day-to-day world, with how young people experience being represented or watched or existing in the world.

C: But the difference, of course, would be the writing.

L: Right. The talks are a form of writing, but in the David Antin tradition of spontaneous and improvised and oral. While the walks are more conventionally *written*.

C: I mean, Andy's technique was basically walking every morning and then coming home and writing about what he had seen.

L: Yeah. For sixty straight weekdays he took a sixty-minute walk around Manhattan and then came home and wrote sixty sentences about that walk. Mostly sort of describing

what he saw, how he felt as he saw it. I see it as an exercise in observation. Georges Perec has this concept of what he calls the “infra-ordinary,” as opposed to the extraordinary. He says, “The newspaper headlines tell me nothing of what's going on in my day-to-day life. How do I transcribe that and capture that?” And so he says, in order to do that you have to set about it “slowly, almost stupidly.” And I find that a really, uh, suggestive notion. That in order to observe things better—particularly the familiar—your observation needs to dumb itself down. And slowness as a value is something I'm fascinated with. Walking is a slow activity, particularly in a world where information can be accessed so quickly.

C: Mm. One of the things I like most about Andy's writing is that it's very tentative. You see it especially in the talks. He never says anything definitive; he's always looking for the confirmation of his partner. The conversation itself is mostly questions. It's perhaps less evident in the walks, where Andy's writing it himself, but it comes through in the way things are expressed. [Searches through book.]

L: You have an example?

C: Not an example, but this is a line that I felt expressed the essence of what he is trying to do in the walks. It's just the end of a sentence. It says, "I wanted to know this world with me walking through it." It's not just "I wanted to know this world," it's the interaction of the world and me.

L: Yeah, no, I would agree with that. I would also say that the unit of the sentence, in this book, is really important. That seems to me very much the unit of organization.

C: Yeah. I think the walks in particular are sort of a very good advertisement for prose poetry.

L: Mm-hm. And I like the way its lyricism sneaks up on you. He's never straining after poetic language. He's not using... To my ear, it doesn't always sound high poetic, but there are these really unusual or awkward locutions that become utterly riveting.

C: I absolutely agree. It's almost as though the poetry comes through accidentally, because basically there's a pragmatic attempt to record observations, record the walks, while the talks are themselves literally recorded, but accidentally poetry comes through.

L: I think what you just said is important, about accidents. There's that moment in one of the talks, when they're walking, and one of them says, "by 'culture,' I mean near-accidents."

C: That was a great line. He says that learning to drive in a parking lot is not a luxury of space, it's distance from culture. You need to get away from the possibility of colliding with other people in order to learn to drive—which means you need to get away from culture.

L: But I like the idea... you described the book, kind of in passing in an email, as producing an aleatory effect. I'd never thought of it as aleatory in a strict, "Oh, well I'm using chance, I'm flipping a coin or rolling a die," but the structure allows for these really fortuitous accidents. In a way, constraints are a handy mechanism for producing accidental poetry.

C: Yeah. And just having to interact with someone is a constraint in itself. I was going to say... I wanted to compare it to My Life, the Lyn Hejinian book, which they mention in one of the talks. Because in some ways they're in the same genre. I mean, Ten Walks / Two Talks is basically an autobiographical book.

L: And My Life is also a book where the basic unit is the sentence—and there are some quite remarkable ones in there—but they feel very engineered. The sentences.

C: Yeah. But I don't know, this whole question about allowing poetic accidents to happen, you could just argue that poetry is always accidental. You can't really engineer great poetic lines. You have to try to make room for them to happen.

L: There's something in what you're saying that made me think that Andy and Jon's talks are very much practiced. And by that I don't mean they're rehearsed. It's kind of like teaching—the more you do it...

C: It's a skill.

L: Yeah, exactly. In other words, some of it *is* accident, but in a weird way what they're doing through their artistic exercises is training themselves to talk...

C: They are highly trained in having conversations, over stolen food, with each other. It's like an Olympic sport—a very odd little activity, but do it consistently enough and you become very good at it.

L: Yes. It's an interesting question, though, one that I think is raised by Antin's praxis also. Okay, I'm going to record myself giving a talk or doing something mundane. You run the risk, when you operate that way, of narcissistic self-indulgence. And I think collaboration with others is a way of avoiding that pitfall.

C: You know, the book kind of highlights the fact that—people don't think about this much perhaps but it's obvious to anyone who has a friend—that each person has a personality, but there is also a personality to relationships.

L: Yes.

C: And this relationship, between Jon and Andy, has a particularly quirky and entertaining one.

L: Yeah, yeah, no, I agree and I mean, it's an underutilized... I mean, I think there's such a thing as conversational knowledge, right, knowledge that's kind of superficial and fleeting?

C: And this is what David Antin manages to produce that I mean... it's surprising to me that more people don't use his technique because ideas, um, you know, seem to come so much more easily in a conversation, especially a *good* conversation, than when you're sitting by yourself.

L: In a way, the life of books sort of lives in conversations or what use you make of them. And the other quality I associate with conversation is a kind of nostalgia for the fact that you're going to forget it.

C: Yeah, it's ephemeral. But it's easy to think that what you've said is brilliant if you can't hold on to it.

L: Yeah, that's the experience of, you know, not being able to sleep and getting up to jot down some brilliant note. And the next morning it's rubbish.

C: Yeah. But, ah, to provide a counterpoint, because we're sort of nudging towards this concept of collaborative thinking as so much better... looking at the ten walks in the book, which are an individual's attempt to record something in writing, there's not a lot of name-dropping. But in the two talks, which are collaborative, other texts come up and other writers become a part of the conversation. They spend a lot of time talking about Plato, and they...

L: Like the writing-speech hierarchy.

C: mention poets like Claudia Rankine and, um, Rosmarie Waldrop, and then they mention...

L: Have you read the Rankine book?

C: uh, Thoreau and Emerson. Yeah, that's great.

L: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I had never heard of it, but picked it up after reading Ten Walks.

C: And then in the more individual, you know, personal observations, where Andy writes about his walks, that name-dropping doesn't exist. And maybe for me there's something a little bit sad about it, that when you're talking with someone else you need to, um, approach ideas through names.

L: *Yes*.

C: So that you're not talking about ideas directly, you're talking about so-and-so writes that and so-and-so writes this.

L: In a way, the names come to stand in. But I know that, at least for me, I never have felt self-conscious about doing it. It's just an easy kind of synecdoche for a whole set of ideas.

C: Well, that's how it's justified, as, you know, shorthand for something that would take a long time to explain otherwise.

L: Yeah, and that we probably couldn't explain on our own. I'm suggesting the reason why names function this way, with such authority, is that we retain so little of what we actually read. It's part of the danger of our methodology, in a way, because we're mostly going from memory and therefore risk being in some way superficial.

C: I think that's absolutely true. That's kind of my problem with the naming convention. I mean it's a problem only in this sense, that it provides authority, or credibility. I mean, imagine this book, Ten Walks/ Two Talks, written by someone who didn't have a graduate education. Okay, so the book has Hiroshige prints on the cover and the blurbs on the back say it's like a modern day Basho and they talk about Wittgenstein, and you know... imagine this book written by someone who doesn't have access to all those markers of cultural status.

L: Yes.

C: Then it's basically just someone walking through New York and describing their experiences and then getting together with a friend and talking. In essence, the book would have a lot of the same wonderful interesting things going on, but it would not have the same credibility with the social circles that will read this book.

L: Right, and those markers perhaps make it harder, or less likely, for the book to be read outside those social circles.

C: Yeah, exactly. I mean, for someone who isn't familiar with avant-garde poetry and classical philosophy, even just on the level of name, it's just distracting.

L: But the other side of that, I think, is that, in a way, this book can't come into existence—you can disagree here, cause I'm not sure I believe this myself—this book can't come into existence without that sort of art-historical, philosophical framework. In other words, you have to be conversant in Plato, know about the speech-write...

C: Well, do you really have to or does it just enhance it? I mean...

L: Well, I'm suggesting that it's a byproduct. I'm suggesting that to conceptualize the project in the first place you would probably have this kind of background.

C: You don't become a conceptual artist...

L: *Yes.*

C: unless you have sort of, in some sense, passed through Modernism already. On the other hand, on the third hand, you know, I feel like you could have an interesting conversation that was just names, just tossing names of writers and artists back and forth because they stand in for so much. The name of a writer becomes a term that has connotations and denotations that just go so far down.

L: Oh, I completely agree. And we might think too of, you know, Gertrude Stein...

C: Speaking of names.

L: ...in this context, right, where the act of naming, a poetic act, has to do with loving the thing, with caressing it, with addressing it. But you can spot the people, who when they invoke a name, they're kind of wielding it like a baton. And then there are the people, and I would list Jon and Andy among them, who say it out of reverence.

C: Uh-huh. I mean, I don't know if it's reverence, exactly, but I—to put the record straight, I admire the way Andy and Jon use names. When they bring up, you know, the Phaedrus, or when they talk about Diogenes, they're doing it because they're excited by the ideas.

L: Yes. That's what I mean by reverence. Not that they worship Plato.

C: Yeah, right. But that it's in service of, um...

L: their intellectual-artistic... joy.

C: Yeah, joy, exactly. Let me tell you about one of the most influential statements I've heard during my career here at the Graduate Center. We were talking about Charles Olson and whether or not he is given his due recognition. And someone suggested that, in order to ensure that new poets read him, they said, "Maybe it's enough to say his name over and over again." And at the time, and still, I thought to myself, that's so ridiculous... there's something so fascistic about it, I guess, like just... you know, impose this name on people and that's going to be enough to make them understand, in some way.

L: I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing, but I think that's an accurate description of how familiarity typically works in various spheres. It's the process by which someone makes a literary name for themselves, or becomes Lady Gaga: they get mentioned over and over again.

C: Yeah. But at the same time, I have to admit, superficiality allows you to cover a lot of ground in intellectual conversations. Of course people put careers into analyzing Olson, but then he gets assigned a meaning. If you read everything he ever wrote, which would take some doing...

L: I've read a fair, I've read a fair, I mean I've read The Maximus Poems.

C: Uh huh. And what did you take away from them?

L: I remember like two or three lines. This whole, you know, uh, sound itself being "neoned in." Uh, "kill, kill, kill those who advertise you out." And those are from, like, the early—"Polis/ is eyes."

C: Right, and maybe those are valuable lines. I guess what I'm saying is a poet like Charles Olson comes to represent particular ideas. That's not to belittle his importance, because his body of work therefore represents something important in our culture. But it's enough, you know, I don't have to explain those ideas, I just have to say, "Charles Olson." Because at a certain point you need a system of shorthand.

L: And in a way, what we're suggesting is a very Olsonian idea, cause there's that passage, which I've always found very suggestive, where he says that the postmodern condition is one of quantitative overload. And I mean, if he felt information overload in 1950...

C: Yeah.

L: I mean the dismissive way of putting it would be we're boiling authors down to catchphrases.

That, you know, the Beats are, "First thought best thought."

C: Yeah, it's a very sort of first-year literature class kind of approach to ideas.

L: Well, I think what's interesting is we're suggesting the opposite, in a way, that you build up, you spend years of study, you develop this literary intellectual sophistication...

C: So you have the ability to boil it down to the essence.

(Pause)

C: But, so, the nice thing about this book...

L: Yeah, heh, was that what we were talking about?

C: ...actually, is that it's the best sort of interaction with that pre-existing economy of reference and economy of cultural status, because there is name-dropping going on in the book, in that they acknowledge their debt to previous writers like Lyn Hejinian...

L: But it's so...

C: but it's just natural, I mean, these are two people who have become immersed in a certain culture and they're enjoying it, you know, they're making use of it.

L: Yeah, and I think that they sort of straddle that tension between careerism and pleasure.

C: Yeah, that's interesting, because, you know, Andy, in the conversations, and actually, in the walks as well, there's a few repeated references to Andy's job hunt.

L: I don't even remember that.

C: It's not an explicit theme in the book but I think that it does address, you know, how do you deal with careerism? Because careerism is something that's inevitable to some degree, not just for academics, but for poets. It forms a big part of poets' lives in the 21st century.

L: Yeah.

C: Whereas Jon seems a little more of a wild card. He's sort of the Neal Cassady figure in this book. Part of what makes the book so compelling is the reality—uh, I won't say TV—the reality *poetry* aspect of it. It's a glimpse of a friendship; it's a glimpse of experience, the walks...

L: And those glimpses can be exciting. I think it helps that there are no tropes or conventions to this literary genre. It's different from reality TV in that we don't know what to expect.

C: Yeah.

L: Maybe there are a few parallels with Kenneth Goldsmith's Soliloquoy. One would be the voyeuristic parallel. I think it's fascinating, you know, to see what this artist is doing in his loft or what they're doing when they're having their conversations.

C: Dancing in their underwear.

L: Yeah, yeah, there's that appeal. And we're flirting or skirting gossip, too, at points. Actually, it's one thing we haven't talked about, but it's important to the book in various ways, and important to literary culture in general. Kenneth Goldsmith's notion is that canon formation is purely a matter of gossip.

C: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it.

L: There's also the appeal—and maybe this happened more to me with Soliloquoy, but it happens a little bit with their conversations—you then perceive yourself perceiving your own conversations in a slightly different way. You're more aware of their rhythms.

C: Yeah, how much are you analyzing or thinking about this conversation you and I are having right now, in terms of, is this like the conversation depicted here? It's sort of the

tragedy of representation in a way. Because once something is represented to you it becomes harder to experience that thing in an unmediated way.

(pause)

C: It also struck me, because they talk so much about New York and Andy's walks happen in New York, did you get the feeling that this is—ah maybe this is a cliché way of approaching it—but that this is a book that could only happen in New York?

L: I thought you were gonna say, "Did you get the sense that this is a New York book?" Because, if the question is, could this only happen in New York? Well...

C: Then, no.

L: Heh heh. Yeah, case closed. No, but actually, I'll try to make that argument briefly and say that New York, more than most other major American cities, is deeply concerned with walking.

C: Yeah, yeah.

L: And that's part of its rhythms, so maybe you *could* go on walks in Madison, Wisconsin, you could do it in Los Angeles. But one question I asked at the end of my essay on Sixty Morning Walks was, I knew Jon was going to continue the—not Jon—Andy was going to continue the practice for sixty years in Wyoming, or at least that's what he said, and I kind of wondered what would that do to the practice? That's such a different milieu.

C: Well that's, I mean, the walks here are so much about human interaction. He doesn't really have many conversations with people while he's walking, it's very, um, individual and contemplative, but there's so much eye contact.

L: *Ohhh.*

C: And commenting on people's actions and the way people interact with each other. There was this passage where he sees this woman, I think he describes her as an Asian woman, and she's wearing a...

L: ...bowler hat, and she needed his gaze and he delivered it.

C: Yeah, exactly. "She needed my gaze and I delivered it." What is that? And there's this passage near the end also, just one page that's a very lyrical description of why it's fun to walk in New York City. They're dialoguing and Andy says that he doesn't have a destination so he'll go down side streets when necessary, and Jon says, "Sure I love in this city the constant dialogue between drivers and pedestrians. It also..." And then Andy, "And let's say delivery men." Jon: "Exactly." Andy: "Street vendors." Jon: "What great..." Andy: "And hangers out, hangers about on the street."

L: Heh heh.

C: “Yet another great...” “Men, moving carts.” “Go ahead, yeah.” “Yeah, you feel this great sense of cooperation. Also of smoothness, I find.” “I’d experience panic in a calmer city early evening hours when I’d just snap.” And they talk about how movement and continuity is the norm in New York...

L: Mm-hmm.

C: and how people sort of expect that from each other, and how if you pause then you’re causing inconvenience to the other people around you.

L: And within that exchange, heh heh, when Andy keeps interrupting Jon, and he says, “And street vendors” and he just gets carried away with the list... he can keep listing things and gets carried away with it. And here you become aware of the artifice of the transcription, because as you were saying that, I was chuckling throughout, right?

C: Yeah, ha ha.

L: But now if we were to render that, if we don’t cut it, how do you, I mean, have me go “hee-hee” as, you know, you can’t.

C: Heh, well, we’ll have to try, but—I think that one way that I you and I fall short in terms of trying to imitate their style in doing this review is that we’re being polite and waiting for each other to complete our thoughts.

L: That’s possible.

C: We’re having a conversation in which, you know, I say something and then I pause and then you say something. Whereas they’re really having, it’s almost like there’s two conversations going on, overlapping. That’s part of what makes it so fun. You’re really watching the dynamic of how their conversations fit together.

L: Yeah, there is a sense in which their conversations in particular, the streams of dialogue are like billiard balls colliding...

C: Well, you know, I’ve had friends, I mean it depends on the dynamic, but I’ve had friends where...

L: But see, you just interrupted me there, right?

C: Sure, sure.

L: But you didn’t think, I didn’t think of it as an interruption.

C: Well, some interruptions are not—I'm doing air quotes here—some interruptions are not really interruptions because you can sense when someone's...

L: Sure.

C: ...done with his thought and winding down. But I've had friends where I had a conversation with them and we're literally talking over each other. And you're both absorbing and producing content at the same time and it can be a lot of fun. But then the content becomes less important, it doesn't matter whether you get exactly what the person is saying, it's just the interaction.

L: It's the exchange.

C: It's the exchange, and the motion and the, um, just the excitement. It's like a contact sport.

L: A-heh, a-heh.

C: You're sort of—it's like running together.

L: So the motion they describe as being inherent in New York is very much present... there's like a kinetic energy...

C: It's in their conversation.

L: to their conversation.

A Love Letter to CAConrad

: Context

CAConrad's (soma)tic poetry exercises consist of two parts: first, a detailed set of instructions for the poet to follow, often involving a series of bodily movements or activities; second, the poems produced by these instructions. The exercises are designed to enact how "experience outside norms force disequilibrium." For my chapter on Conrad, I designed a (soma)tic for myself that was an amalgam of several of his own (soma)tics, then wrote a letter to him based on the notes I took during the exercise.

: What was I trying to do?

To estrange my habits of reading and writing—To thank Conrad for his own example—
To unmask interpretation's erotic undertones—

A Love Letter to CAConrad

Fort Tryon Park, Manhattan

May 17 2010

2:45 pm

Dear Conrad,

I come to this park to estrange my habits of reading and writing and soon find myself in crisis: I have to pee really badly. Deep in the park, no bathroom forthcoming, I find a tree in a small clearing that, judging by its considerable litter, is a drinking nook for local teens. I make no apologies for urinating outside our sewer system.

In the introductory notes to your (soma)tic poetry exercises, you hypothesize, disturbingly, that “if I am an extension of this world then I am an extension of garbage, shit, pesticides, bombed and smoldering cities, microchips, cyber, astral and biological pollution.” Surveying this drinking spot, I am reminded of your hypothesis and revolted at my complicity in this filth: beer cans, plastic bottles, a begrimed baseball cap, empty canisters of baby wipes, plastic bags, glass bottles, newspapers, and condom wrappers, dozen and dozens of condom wrappers. In these spattered remains, I recognize my species – myself – all too well.

Whenever I write, I go to the bathroom more often than usual. I had assumed this habit to be a nervous tic (fear of continuing to write), but today, doing this exercise, recognize it as a strategy for maintaining equilibrium: bodily states, remarkably precarious and

perceptive, create the conditions for consciousness and thought. Habits, what your (soma)tics interrupt, are necessities about which we've forgotten that fact.

Moving away from the drinking nook, I approach a rusty, chain-link fence that marks the boundary between the park and the neighborhood, Washington Heights, that lies downhill. Careful to avoid the poison ivy underfoot, I climb through an opening in the fence, thinking that this liminal space –where I can hear, but not see, people on the street below – seems the perfect place to meditate on your poems: an unseen wilderness in the belly of culture.

“Take account,” you enjoin in one of your prompts, “of how many times you're not saying or doing EXACTLY what you want to say or do in a day.” It may be cliché to say that poetry doesn't like walls, that it's a medium for transgressions and reconnaissance raids, but I don't think it's possible to overemphasize just how bold are your own poetic departures. The bravery – genuine bravery – they require must be the reason why other poets react to your work with such strong adulation or animosity.

An interesting tension in your (soma)tics is that they use strict, detailed procedures in order to blow apart unwritten rules of poetry and of the everyday. We normally think of rules as limitations or prohibitions, but yours functions in almost the opposite way, as instructions to help us step outside our ingrained orbits. Always, your exercises demand something EXTREME of the poet, which is why I suspect you capitalize liberally: a reminder to rim discomfort wherever possible, to “LOSE AND WASTE NO MORE

TIME POET!” Sloughing off shame, your exercises take it as axiomatic that we cannot know a limit until it has been crossed.

Seated on a rock, I decide to read some poems out loud, beginning with “Emily Dickinson Came to Earth and Then She Left,” one of my favorites:

your sweaty party dress and my sweaty party dress lasted a few minutes until the tomato was gone some day they will disambiguate you but not while I'm around our species won Emily we won it feels so good to be winning the flame of victory pass it around it never goes out dinosaurs ruled Massachusetts dinosaurs fucking and laying eggs in Amherst Boston Mount Holyoke then you appeared high priestess pulling it out of the goddamned garden with both hands you Emily remembered the first time comprehending a struck match can spread a flame it feels good to win this fair and square protest my assessment all you want but not needing to dream is like not needing to see the world awaken to itself indestructible epiphanies consume the path and just because you're having fun doesn't mean you're not going to die recrimination is the fruit to defy with unexpected appetite I will be your outsider if that's how you need me electric company's stupid threatening letters cannot affect a poet who has faced death

Alone in the woods, reading the poem aloud feels unexpectedly absurd, weightless, as if the words my puny voice intone lack a necessary human context or scale. This weightlessness excites me, as does the poem itself: in them, I recognize the passage of ghosts: yours, Dickinson's, Spicer's, Lorca's, Whitman's: all those crazy pilgrims whose carols still vibrate in the ether.

Conrad, I do not want to disambiguate you, your words, I chant them again, they move thick upon one another, they press, ripely, at the edges of sound and sense, pregnant with unbroken momentum, the phrases stretched into one another like the lineage of poets throughout the besotted centuries. Conrad, I want to practice literary criticism as an

unabashed love letter, I want to wonder, with you, “how to love/ this world without/ sounding silly,” then to sigh, contented, “ah, too late.”

With my back to the apartment buildings below, I begin, slowly, to touch myself over my shorts. I am not thinking of you, exactly, or of your poems, but of being outside, of fucking in plain air, of the ghosts of those teens whose nearby pleasures are only ever confirmed as furtive. When it hits the earth at my feet, my cum does not feel as inconsequential as my recited words did earlier. Thick and viscous, it looks like strands of Elmer’s glue.

In the instructions for “Touch Yourself for Art,” you recommend bringing a pair of binoculars to a museum to better observe a favorite artwork. I love to picture you, owl-eyed, staring in rapt attention at a Rothko. Like you, I prefer my artistic enthusiasms UP CLOSE, vision exaggeratedly enhanced, as little critical distance as possible from the object of affection. Extreme.

As I trudge back up the hill towards the main part of the park, I think about how the French call an orgasm *la petite mort*, the little death, and about your own fixation with death in the (soma)tics, wondering if there’s another, darker side to love: not hate, but oblivion, the quietus on the far side of creative ferment.

Emerging from a secluded, wooded trail onto a wide, paved path, I exchange friendly nods with an Hispanic man. As we pass, he remarks, with evident contentment, “Beautiful day today.” “It’s perfect,” I say, and I mean it.

Back in the main part of the park, I look for an appropriate lawn to lie down on: not the one with two couples on it, overlooking the Hudson, and not the one palpable with frantic children, reminders both of vitality’s obliviousness to death. Here it is: a quiet triangle of grass between the park drive, a footpath, and a small stone wall. I remove my bag, sink into the grass, and slowly close my eyes.

Death is the indifference of noise, I write when I eventually sit up. Stillness: all these bodies packed in the ground and the birds continue to chirp. By definition, an absence cannot know it is absent, unless, of course, it is a poem.

Thank you, immensely, for yours,

Louis

John Corbin's "Drift"

: Context

"Drift," an exhibit by the artist John Corbin, curated by the novelist and art critic Lynn Crawford, was on display at the CUE Art Foundation from November 18, 2010 to January 15, 2011. The exhibit consisted of paintings and sculpture assembled according to a series of undisclosed procedures. Sound artist Robert Machado and I visited the exhibit right before it was taken down, recording our conversation as a means of reviewing it.

: What was I trying to do?

To test out, in another context, a way of "reviewing" that had begun to feel particularly satisfying to me.

**John Corbin's "Drift":
A Conversational Review**
with Robert Machado

*CUE Art Foundation/
Trestle Restaurant
January 18 2011
11:22 am*

CUE 1: Conversation

Louis: I think maybe we should begin by saying that we're here at the CUE Art Foundation in New York City, about to look at the John Corbin exhibit, titled "Drift."

Robert: Curated by Lynn Crawford.

L: Right. And what we're going to do is record ourselves having a conversation, both at the gallery itself and then afterwards, about the exhibit. Part of the idea is to use the conversational form as a kind of constraint for giving weight to our immediate and subjective experiences of the work.

R: Which I think is a politically compelling idea because to me it suggests a structure for a mode of reception, a loose game of sorts, whose rules might reduce some of the anxieties that can get in the way of having a relationship to art and its institutions.

L: Yeah, reviewing as a process generally is defined by expertise, but we agreed at the outset that one of the rules we were going to follow was that we weren't going to read anything about Corbin or his work beforehand.

R: And we didn't. And for me this isn't an attempt generally to laud amateurism over expertise; expertise is of course valuable. But working this way lets us consider other productive ways to process and interact with art. The idea that one simply isn't qualified to observe something and comment on it meaningfully, without having a field-specific background—this of course has complicated and broad implications, limiting both art and the people looking at it, or not looking at it.

L: Absolutely. For me it's a question of what type of relationship I want to have to art and ideas. Which I think is as much an ethical concern as it is a methodological one.

CUE 2: Mapping

R: Which one do you want to talk about first? Which is a picture that might lead us to read all the others?

L: At first, I thought that maybe the big net ["Flâneur"], or the wall of maps opposite it, was the main part. But then I realized that there's no one element of the room that's a master key to the show because the work invites the viewer to think about the relationship between part and whole in any given art exhibition.

R: If anything, I think there's actually a misleading invitation to read the "Gierlmandy" pieces as clues because there are several of them.

L: Right, and even in those, each one creates a totality through fragmentary pieces. From a distance, this one ["Gierlmandy Atlas Entry"] reads, visually, as seamless, but up close

it contains lots of small, interconnected parts. Even the net, which is the piece that requires the most viewing distance, because of its large scale, when you get up close it's this whole other thing: those little flecks of color turn out to be atlas pieces.

R: I initially was thinking that each of the hexagons that comprise the net consisted of at least one side that contains a map piece, because most do, but then when you try to follow that idea through, it turns out not to be the case. So to me there's a recurring invitation in Corbin's work to recognize pattern and decode, and then a moment when the object of the invitation is retracted. Which makes you think about mapping itself as a kind of reading strategy, as a schema for mastering, for digesting, for "making" and not just recording boundaries.

L: To the extent that it's a successful map, it's related to the ease with which you can decipher it and use it to orient yourself.

R: Even if a map doesn't have a key, usually it's systemically rendered. Whereas the atlas inclusions in this show, there's no systematic framework to catch them and make them intelligible. Maybe if you look closely you can see city names, but even then, it's not immediately obvious what those names are meant to represent.

L: I feel like when you get down to that level of granularity, it just becomes a hopeless quest to find meaning wherever you can. I sort of played that game with the maps on the opposite wall – "What cities are in each one?" – but you're almost too close and things become unintelligible.

CUE 3: Shape

R: I like what you said earlier about Corbin's interest in playing with variations that occur from different viewing distances because from this distance [about 12 ft. away], those different landmasses or bodies of water that are centered in the maps, their shapes are suggestive of letters, symbols, and figures.

L: Yeah, that one ["_____"] looks like a seahorse.

R: That's what I wrote down: seahorse.

L: This one ["_____"] looks like a question mark to me. And that one ["Samantha"] pretty clearly feels like a rooster.

R: I guess from a distance, landmasses take on a symbolic valence. The shapes themselves search out correspondences. It seems this show is so much about processing and trying to orient.

L: Yeah. Italy is a boot; Florida is phallic.

R: And this one ["_____"] is a ridiculous-looking landmass.

L: Why ridiculous?

R: I think a lot of these landmasses look ridiculous in terms of their geographic plausibility.

L: Oh, really? I never questioned it. Because, I don't know, landmasses are strange, no?

R: I don't think I've ever seen a landmass that does that.

L: That curves like that?

R: Right. And moreover, this background is suggestive of water, but it's made of sections of land from an atlas. Which makes you wonder, "Is this painted section the water, actually?"

L: Ohhhh, yeah.

R: As soon as you try to pin it down – these painted dots look like pinheads to me – as soon as you try to pin things down, they escape from you.

CUE 4: Names

L: I've been calling the painted middle sections "gelatinous."

R: They're certainly wet looking. And concentrated in color.

L: Yeah. Which contributes to the idea that they could be water and not landmasses.

R: Right. Unless they're attempting to articulate topography. Sometimes coloration on a map is used to indicate elevation.

L: Mmm. Which you actually get in this one we're looking at. We should probably try to name them for the review.

R: Not all of them are even listed in the catalogue. And none is identified with a title card.

L: Yeah, that's the thing. The one we're looking at now is the red, green, and yellow one ["_____"].

R: Is this the "Lisbon" one?

L: Um, what's the "Lisbon" one?

R: That is how I identify this one ["_____"]. See the city "Lisbon" is readable on the map.

L: Oh, I see. You know, looking through the catalogue, all the paintings are named after women.

R: I noticed that too. So these could be types of portraits based on nationality. Or blobs of paint translating an image of a person. This one now ["_____"] really seems to resemble the back of a person...

L: Absolutely.

R: in profile: leg, arm, head, leaning over. And the fact that they're titled with persons' names suggests their connection to issues of identity; whether it's by visual affinity or national or ethnic make up, we can't be sure.

CUE 5: Great Men

R: Did you notice that the bookshelf walls underneath the coffee table are silhouettes of faces?

L: Oh, I didn't see that.

R: To me, these silhouettes, which buttress what appears to be a representation of a continent, suggest that this landmass is founded on great men. I mean that literally, which is problematic.

L: Even before you noticed the silhouettes, I was thinking something along those lines because you have all those busts on the bookshelves.

R: Is that JFK?

L: It looks like him. The others are—that's Beethoven, I think, there's an Einstein one. This sculpture ["Gierlmandy: Bed"] and the book [The Sorrows of the Artist as a Young Man] are the only places in the show where there's a focus on the individual.

R: Except all these maps have names, female names. Which perhaps sets up a gendered dialogue between pieces.

L: Right, yeah yeah yeah, you're right. Except unlike the great men here, the female paintings don't have last names, which, unless you're a Brazilian soccer star or an ancient Greek philosopher, is kind of the way in which individuals become known, historically—through last names.

CUE 6: Color

L: Another thing I noticed in a lot of these pieces is that the seams are always showing. The act of splicing seems really important: putting things together and making connections.

R: Splicing without really naming or distinguishing the parts except through color and shape.

L: I almost wonder if color and shape are being suggested as in some way sufficient for making those kinds of distinctions and connections.

R: We can identify difference but we can't identify the meaning construed through that difference. Which brings up one of the longstanding questions about color: What does a color "mean" and what do we mean when we ask that question?

L: Speaking of color, I was trying to describe in my notes all the different blues and greens in the coffee table and I didn't have a vocabulary for describing them. And I realized that most of the colors Corbin uses are quite distinctive—are difficult to label and identify.

R: They aren't easy primary colors, that's for sure. Other viewers may have a more sophisticated color vocabulary, but, even still, none of these color masses is a solid, flat color. They have flecks in them, and textures.

L: Exactly. I don't even know if it's a matter of not having a refined enough vocabulary. I don't know if such a nuanced vocabulary could even exist.

R: Well, a person familiar with, say, Pantone color charts, would be able to identify this blue better than we might according to family resemblances constructed by that system. But that naming still would be insufficient because these colors are mottled. All of them have different little bits within them, some of them even reflective. And the little pinpoint dots some of them contain recall the dots in the land map ["____"] over there.

CUE 7: Parts

R: If these paintings have the names of females—I guess they don't have to be names of human females. They could be the names of anything—the names of dogs.

L: Boats.

R: I guess it goes back to naming and ways to pin things down: the argument that those ways come up short and entail the discourse of mastery through mapping. Mapping always is functional, but then Corbin confronts us with afunctional maps. They really don't enable you to distill a thing and come to terms with its parts. They keep leading me to a more aesthetic logic.

L: One thing in what you just said is that we often make sense of objects through their parts. I like the argument you just outlined, and I think there's also an argument here about how perception happens in different ways, either through assessing things in their

totality—like an inkblot or Rorschach test—or through assessing things through their particular, discrete parts.

CUE 8: Drift

R: We haven't discussed the borders of these paintings, which to me bring up the question of synecdoche—we can't get a sense of part to whole. Because the hexagonal edges of the water or land here are clipped, they seem to continue on into space off the map that we have in front of us. There's no way for us to zoom back and recognize how these landmasses may go together, or if one is necessarily rendered completely.

L: I think they create or fit together in what you could call imaginary space. And I really like your reading of their edges: it's suggestive to think of them not as a boundary or limitation but as implying extension or continuity. They look to me, particularly the blue border painted on the wall around the net, like the teeth of a gear, which suggests the capacity for movement when that gear interlocks with another one.

R: And the show is titled "Drift," so in that sense, the paintings might be said to be drifting, they're not tied down.

CUE 9: Netting

R: This net ["Flâneur"] to me is so interesting. It's the only piece that folds over onto itself, which produces a shadow.

L: Mm-hmm.

R: It perhaps suggests a way to read color variations in the other pieces, ways to render three dimensionality, which goes back to the idea of color being used to articulate topographical differences.

L: You know, in the lone gummy map on the wall next to the net ["Gierlmandy"], the tiles of the interior painted form are very compressed.

R: Right, the center is suggestive of a fold. There's all this condensation and tension in there, perhaps as way to render a fold in two dimensions.

L: Yes, exactly. And this is the only painting that has that specific kind of tension, where the tiles scrunch together in this way. But what I also wanted to say about the net was that—you sort of can't not read it as a landmass or a map, given the context of the show—but you can also read it, simply, as a net.

R: A net floating on...

L: water.

R: And it's called "Flâneur," a person who drifts, a wanderer. Which for me of course evokes Baudelaire, and the pleasures involved in mixing with crowds, of anonymity despite proximity.

L: Exactly, but it's strange to me, too, because this piece is so oceanic, it's set against a blue background, a net can be used to fish, but a flâneur is an urban figure. In other words, there's an interplay in the show between city and not city, land and not land.

R: I like thinking about the rest of the show through the lens of this "Flâneur," this netting.

L: Of using it to trap things.

R: Yes. Nets can be used to catch and acquire things, but that also means that thing has been captured, perhaps in a negative sense. To me this plays with the idea of being trapped in a certain aggressive mode of trying to pin down or capture identity in certain terms. We might think of these maps as counter-maps in that sense.

L: Yeah, maps in the service of dismantling the map-function.

Trestle 1: Conversation

L: Ordinarily, when you leave an exhibit with someone you say, “Did you like it? What do you think?” But you often don’t end up actually saying much of what you think, even when you’d both like to. So I liked getting to work in the conversational way we were working in the gallery.

R: Me too. It’s a process of shared discovery and enthusiasm, which I think is a productive exchange. But a conversation doesn’t have to include two people, right—it could include going alone. So thinking about the license of conversation also can let us think about the structures involved in talking to oneself. And then there’s also interactions with strangers, which conversation as a democratizing constraint promotes.

L: The thing about interacting with strangers though is that you can’t assume a shared context. At least for me that’s the difficulty. If you’re in a gallery, do you immediately start riffing at the level of form and associations, like we did? Do you just leave it at the level of appreciation? “Oh, I like it. It’s nice.” Which I feel would be the safer option with a complete stranger. I don’t know, do you get approached by strangers at galleries much?

R: I have. If anyone starts a conversation at a gallery, I assume they’re interested in a more critical perspective. I might start with, “It’s nice,” but I’ll talk a little bit, because I assume the person doesn’t just want to hear, “Oh, this is nice.” I guess it’s not one of my hang-ups, so I’m not worried about the protocol, I’ll just give them my feedback. But other people that I’ve been with have said, “Do you know that person?” So to me it’s normal but I think I’m just a little weird.

L: Well, I like the idea that it could be normal. The idea that it could be an occasion for producing some sort of dialogue, at whatever level, between strangers.

R: Right, and perhaps conversation understood as a productive game could help to make it more normal. It’s like a bridge between people and also ideally to a third place where you’re coming to a certain comprehension or appreciation of a thing that can extend beyond the space of the gallery in some productive manner.

Trestle 2: Constraint

L: One thing I wanted to talk about was the exhibit’s curation.

R: One thing that interested me about it was that there was no wall text. I find it curious that an artist would name a piece if he or she weren’t intending to put that name on the wall. Unless the artist were interested in creating different viewing contexts, perhaps to undermine the idea that there’s an authoritative view of the pieces. Which seems to fit in Corbin’s case.

L: Yeah, it’s a gesture in keeping with the work itself. Description and context is sort of the museum function, which is like a map key or legend. It seems like there are some

intentional processes of mystification going on here, not just in terms of names not being provided but also in terms of the constraints used to make the work.

R: Constraints may have been used, but they're not described anywhere. We can't know if those constraints were arbitrary or if they were thematically related to the exhibit's content.

L: Yeah, no, we have no way of knowing, which places these as a type of constrained work where the artist is like a magician who doesn't want to reveal his tricks.

R: Preconceived or conscious constraints are typically foregrounded in a work, or at least disclosed, no?

L: Well, at least in the literature of constraint, the two competing positions are: we should tell people what constraints were used, because it adds to the aesthetic experience; or, alternatively, we *shouldn't* reveal the constraints, because it adds to the aesthetic experience. But you're right that typically the constraints are foregrounded, you're often let in on the secret.

R: I think that, again, the show suggests a resistance to the categorical, which extends to the show's apparatus. It's not as if all of the maps were equidistant from each other: the fact that they were arranged in groups of three and seven suggests curatorial intention. But when we approached them as groups, we were not able to justify those closures. Perhaps it's saying: do the work yourself, we're not going to foreground a way to package this show, and we aren't going to let your readings rest easily on normalized institutional regularities either.

Trestle 3: Line

L: There are several pieces that have the word "Gierlmandy" in their title, which to me sounds like, "Girl. Mandy." And you have all these paintings that are titled after women.

R: Well, supposedly the island of "Gierlmandy" that was referenced in Plato was matriarchal, so in that sense maybe these "girls" comprise a matriarchy?

L: I think that's interesting because the busts and the things associated with national identity are saying, "This is the fatherland." For Germany especially, it's overdetermined, those nationalistic associations.

R: Feminizing Germany. Ger-man-dy? Maybe this *explains* all those candy colors, as well. An attempt to *feminize* the production of maps, or to draw attention to certain epistemological modes, such as mapping, as readable in gendered terms? The foregrounding of color in this show as a rival perhaps to the delineating lines of maps brings up that historic binary between line and color, often traced back to Plato, actually, that interests me so much. I'd say that maps primarily consist of lines and boundaries. But these maps are more like blotches of color that we can distinguish from one another based only on color differences and the boundaries that they assert.

L: And from a distance, the lines are not the point of the images. It's only up close that you see they're riddled with lines. From any other distance, you get a kind of seamless whole.

R: You said something good before: the lines don't lead you anywhere in these maps. They all criss-cross, stop, run against each other. I think that we're better able to recognize a type of coherence, if that's our goal, when we foreground color in this show, or let it be foregrounded, rather than trying to recover the dominance of line that we

associate with the mapping function. When we try to foreground lines in this show, they don't tend to give clues that satisfy the sense of identity that we usually associate with maps: you know, a map defines through lines what a thing is. But these don't seem to.

L: If maps are in some way masculine, that would seem to have to do with a mania for borders and demarcation and identity through those processes. So it seems important that the roads are criss-crossed and dead-ended.

R: This allows at least for critique. And the colors, to me, weren't as necessarily dead-ended. Part of the critique might be that we're used to making sense according, perhaps, to how lines make sense. Irrespective of its colors, so long as a map has outlines, it's likely usable. But then in this show, we're set adrift because the ways to make meaning through color are more ambiguous, more open.

L: Yes, and possibly feminized.

R: At least if we're talking about that binary historically, yes, at least in the West, color often was considered a supplementary discourse to line; it was the domain of the feminine, the queer, and often of other marginalized or romanticized subjectivities and discourses, especially when color seemed to challenge the authority of line or other geometric systems of representation.

L: And it's considered suspect because it's associated with aesthetic pleasure for its own sake, joy or exultation just in the richness of it. We talked about the colors' gumminess and wetness—that these attributes are considered suspicious because...

R: sensual.

L: Yeah.

R: It takes us perhaps outside of logic's ability to process them. So a sensual perception that you can't really contain within a logic is itself a critique of that logic.

L: It's a very Barthesian reading of the exhibit we're arriving at: an affirmation of the sensuality of viewing.

R: I think this affirmation suggests a critique of a certain kind of mapping as a methodology for construing subjectivity. The art scrambles and aestheticizes locational data, which to me leaves us with a strong notion of identity as something not defined passively according to inherited context but according to a more active construction of selection and pastiche.

Trestle 4: Hexagons

L: Because they're so prevalent in the show, I think it would be useful if we talked briefly about hexagons and how they're functioning in Corbin's work.

R: The irregularity of the hexagons is to me so important.

L: Irregularity in that they were stretched, differently shaped, not cookie cutter hexagons?

R: Right. I think that their irregularity has an important function in all the pieces. It creates a sense of movement, of dimensionality, a way to render depth. I also think that the hexagon as a shape better allows for the suggestion of skin, of scales. To me, triangles, for example, aren't as scaly.

L: Absolutely.

R: And scales for me, as a type of hard skin that's shed, suggest another way to think about the skin of identity. "Flâneur" actually looks like a reptile's shed skin.

L: Yes. Identity as a shedding of skin.

R: And skins being insufficient summaries of what they contain or cover. Which perhaps leads us back to those busts as an insufficient way to process this fictional country. I think the hexagons are purposeful in these ways and probably many others.

L: It occurred to me through this show that hexagons are sort of an irregular regular shape. Among geometric shapes—I don't mean "irregular" in the sense of off-center or not symmetrical, but that...

R: Once you get beyond a four-sided figure, maybe it starts to get a little strange?

L: Yeah, there are sort of queer geometrical shapes. They may have rules to them, but they look funny and are unfamiliar. Like a, is it a rhombus that consists of two sets of two parallel lines?

R: A parallelogram?

L: Oh, a parallelogram. [draws a trapezoid] Is this a rhombus?

R: I forget.

L: Like this one [points to trapezoid], you know, it's regular in that there's a prescribed form, but it looks funny.

R: I agree.

L: I feel like hexagons look funny. You know, octagons have more sides and have a roughly similar shape...

R: They're closer to a circle, though, so perhaps that's why they look a bit more regular.

L: They're more digestible as a visual form. Maybe it's because "Stop" signs are so common.

R: I think that as the number of sides increase the shape moves toward a circle. Also, maybe there are fewer cultural functions for a hexagon.

L: A hexagon looks like a lemon—which is a queer fruit.

R: I think the word 'queer' works well. It seems to be a rather queer geometric shape, despite its regularity. I'm sure it goes back to Corbin's interest in constraints, because why a hexagon? It seems to create all these associations having to do with bodies.

Trestle 5: Coffee Table

L: Do you like the idea of calling the sculpture a coffee table? Does it seem like a coffee table to you? Its actual title is "Gierlmandy: Bed."

R: I'm not saying it's offensive. I actually like—you're forcing me to say whether I liked it or not—I think I like the idea of talking about it as a coffee table because coffee tables themselves are so facile somehow as furniture.

L: I mean, to me, intuitively, it just looks like a coffee table.

R: It's pretty big for a coffee table, though.

L: Well, that's what I like about it—that it's this massive floating island.

R: I'm saying, it would be hard to have coffee around it.

L: It's kind of grotesque. Coffee tables are usually regular.

R: It's unruly, really.

L: Yeah yeah, and unruly not just in terms of its size but also its shape and its color. The color palette is less bright than some of the maps, it's more dark and manly, but as a color scheme for a coffee table, it's totally dissonant. It's hard to think of it as a purely functional piece of furniture, as something that could fit in your living room. In terms of the larger themes of the exhibit, it's fitting that it would not fit in.

R: Absolutely, because it's held up I think by men, and also, it suggests the pretense of functionality. And that's the critique of these maps: that through mapping, you can get a sense of identity and place that's a satisfying and sufficient summary of whatever it is you're attempting to master. So here, you could imagine people having coffee around it, and the fact you can be around it means that you are capable of surrounding it, in a sense you have mastery over it, you're doing something as common as having coffee *on* it, you own it.

L: Maybe the way to put it is that maps are representations of space and this table-map intrudes on space. There's a representational level to the table, but its sheer size overrides that.

R: Moreover, you're turning a place into a coffee table, a map into a bed. We could think about why.

L: What does calling it a bed do?

R: It wouldn't be a comfortable bed, of course. I mean it could be a figurative bed, like a bed of flowers.

L: A resting place, where you call home.

R: But it doesn't immediately suggest a place to rest.

L: No no no, nothing about it suggests repose.

R: Repose or sex or anything we might associate with a bed.

L: You know, busts are sexless. Busts are like pure intellection of a person, right? It's all above the head, there's no torso or body. I don't know about you, but I don't particularly, as a generalization, like busts.

R: I never considered it.

L: I never did, either. I don't know. Maybe I'm just getting carried away in the moment. But they're actually kind of an affront in some way.

R: Because they bifurcate the body in this way? Head and the rest? And the rest doesn't count?

L: There's that separation. And there's just... a bust can only ever be of an important person.

R: Or those who think they're important, either seriously or under the aegis of camp. If you have enough money and you think you're important, you can have a bust made of yourself.

L: That's exactly why I feel like busts are an affront. Because they're clearly a reproduction of one's image that's predicated on elitism, self-importance, even world-historical importance. I mean, geez, if you had a bust in your house today...

R: Of yourself?

L: Of anyone.

R: Yes, pretty antiquated.

L: It's an affectation.

R: I don't know if you could get away with at all unless you were very old or it was an heirloom of some kind or unless you were kidding, in quotes.

L: Sculpture's fine, but a bust crosses some sort of line. And I think the thing to say in the context of the Corbin exhibit is that those are the only representations of the human figure in the exhibit.

R: That are easy to ascertain, anyway. One of the maps seemed to embody a figure of a person looking away, at least for me.

L: So there are paintings that *suggest* figuration, but the only clear figures are the busts and the bookcase silhouettes. Everything else is a form of abstraction.

R: Do you think the grouping of busts and books suggests anything? Are books types of busts?

L: There's certainly a type of vanity associated with not just having authored something but with having the object to memorialize it. It wouldn't be too much of a leap, I think, to say that the same vanity underlies both. And, you know, books are very...

R: head up.

L: Exactly, you know what I associate with busts the most? Have you ever read the *Peanuts* cartoons?

R: Yeah.

L: I think of Linus, the pianist.

R: Oh sure, right. Was that Mozart...

L: Either Mozart or Beethoven.

R: on top of his piano?

L: Yeah yeah, and he had the girl, Lucy, who was fixated on him, but he was devoted to his art. The bust was a sign of his seriousness.

Trestle 8: Authority

L: I really like what you said earlier about the limitations of maps as heuristics.

R: I think a resistance to being determined by maps is being registered. There's a type of bravado in cutting up something that seems to be fixed—a boldness that seems anti-authoritarian.

L: But it's interesting because, while I agree that it's anti-authoritarian, in a sense the project can't not replicate the authoritarianism of maps. A map, as we've teased out, can be an imposition of abstract forms upon an actual physical reality, a way of making sense of it and drawing up borders. So in cutting up maps and then putting them back together, Corbin's still creating borders.

R: But they don't conform to any politically existing entities, at least that we recognize. For us they're useless in that way.

L: That's what makes them anti-authoritarian. But to the extent that border-making—and this is very relevant to constraint, I think—to the extent that border-making and delimitation is an authoritarian act, you're always going to be caught up in it, you're necessarily implicated in that kind of imposition of form upon reality, even in an anti-authoritarian project.

R: I guess the only thing militating against that would be the lack of coherence in those apparent constraints, at least that we can immediately discern. There was always an absence of a final piece that would enable us to assemble a puzzle which could have suggested a grander sense of authority, a redefinition. There always seemed to be either a laxness or a purposeful omission of certain details that would have allowed us to see closure.

L: I love your description of them as puzzle pieces. The atlas pieces in the paintings are fit together, jigsaw-like. Maybe as a way of wrapping up, it might be interesting to consider what you so interestingly pointed out when we were in the gallery, that one of the paintings was hung upside down—it's sort of like a puzzle piece that doesn't fit.

R: Intentional or not, it works.

L: Yeah, and the fact that the upside down image doesn't read as upside down... I don't know about you, but to me, whether or not it's right side up or upside down, whether or not there even is a proper direction to that map or the others—you can imagine the net being hung in any number of ways—it's almost beside the point.

R: Well, because the attendant documentation corresponds to all the hung pieces except one, it's authoritative in a sense: the book, the official record for *history*, argues for the way by which the art is supposed to be organized and viewed and remembered. So to have one of them hung upside down brings a question: Who's the authority here? Is it the person who hung it? Is it the person who took the picture documented in the gallery book?

L: Is it an accident?

R: Again, I think it's significant that it's just one painting that destabilizes things. Woven throughout the whole exhibition there always seems to be one variable that doesn't allow us to close off meaning.

L: Can I say, too—I mean, we talked earlier about how I'm interested in conversation as a mode of criticism—that's one of the things that I like about how conversation works. The other person provides precisely that kind of variable. I have an intended line of response, but you're going to redirect it. And then I'm going to redirect yours. It's one of the joys of working in this way.

R: I agree. Conversation itself seems to fuel that anti-authoritarian interaction, is that what you're saying?

L: Yeah, I think so.

R: All interactions I guess generate friction that suggests a dynamic which always leaves room for ideas to continue to generate and feed into different directions.

L: Individuals in the show are pretty clearly aligned with the pole of authoritarianism. One book that stood out to me on the coffee table's shelves was Thus Spake Zarathustra. Individuals are always making decrees. Which is contrasted with the pole of the landmass, the society, the civilization, the group—as organized falsely or accurately in maps.

Trestle 9: Literature

L: We've said a fair bit by now, but one thing we didn't talk too much about is the literature in the exhibit—and that's fine, we can't cover everything.

R: If we had more time we could have catalogued the book titles more thoroughly and we could have made some sense—or not.

L: I don't think... Here's what I wrote down: Beckett. Swift. Mary Murray Delaney (author of Of Irish Ways). Frank McCourt. William Butler Yeats. George Bernard Shaw.

R: Einstein was in there.

L: Einstein. Ireland Beautiful. Einmachen-Einfrieren, a German cookbook. Bust of Beethoven. Isle of Man. Books by Goethe. Irish Trivia. The Great Cities/Dublin. The Great Cities/Berlin. Discovering Britain and Ireland. Ghosts in Irish Houses. (That seemed to me a suggestive title.) Joyce's Dubliners. Einstein: The Life and Times, by Clark. Einstein busts. Thus Spake Zarathustra. The New German Cookbook. The Cooking of Germany.

R: I'm sure we could make some coherent sense of that if we had the time and the interest. To at least group subject matter. But that could be another one of those futile enterprises.

L: I feel like it would be reading the atlas backgrounds of the maps for their roads. It's not just that you could go on forever, 'cause like we were saying, conversation can, and that's productive. But there's a sense in which there are certain interpretive abysses that go on for forever and there's no yield: you go down the rabbit hole, you notice that here's a misplaced Cologne, here's Hamburg, here's Berlin—what does it mean? It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't lead anywhere. Whereas the particular rabbit hole we've chosen to go down in having a conversation and, you know, just talking about the issues the work raises for us, I think is more obviously productive.

R: It's at least encouraged by the exhibition and the curatorial decisions. And yes, in a grander sense, it could be more productive as an alternative to an authoritarian way of reading.

L: Yeah yeah yeah. Except I guess the danger of an anti-authoritarian way of reading is the potential abyss you could fall into of trying to interpret the atlas backgrounds: hopelessly trying to connect how and what they might mean without any real prospects for closure or surety.

R: If you don't have a center that holds, then you're adrift? I don't know if there's an answer, if one or the other mode is better, except that the one we're engaged in now seems more fun.

Interview with Ammiel Alcalay

: Context

Ammiel Alcalay, a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, had recently launched “Lost and Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative.” The initiative was an outgrowth of his teaching at the university, providing a space for students and scholars to perform archival research on the extra-poetic work – correspondence, journals, critical prose, transcripts of talks – of the New American Poets.

: What was I trying to do?

I was interested in interviewing Ammiel about “Lost and Found” as part of my dissertation – even though the topic didn’t, on the surface, seem to fit into the lineage my project sketches – because I wanted to entertain comparisons between the kind of information management scholarship undertakes the with the kind of information management Conceptual Poets undertake. I was also interested in treating the interview form itself as just such a form of scholarly or artistic information management—and, by extension, as a potential critical tool in its own right.

Interview with Ammiel Alcalay

*CUNY Graduate Center
August 27 2010
4:01 pm*

L: Can you talk about the origins of Lost and Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative?

A: They're multiple. I've been thinking about doing something like this for many years. It comes out of a long history of thinking about why things are out of print. Gilbert Sorrentino emphasized this when I studied with him: "All these great writers are out of print? Why is that?" John O'Brien started Dalkey Archive Press in correspondence with Gil and the idea was to reprint important books that for various reasons were no longer available. I've also always had in mind doing something like Donald Allen's "Writing" series, which was so useful.

L: What was Allen's "Writing" series?

A: They ranged from pamphlets to books and I think there were seventy or eighty in the end. A lot of them were so-called "extra-poetic" work but they contained very important material. In the first group was Charles Olson's "Proprioception" and "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," Ed Dorn's interviews, Philip Whalen's interviews. I found something like that lacking in the contemporary poetry landscape.

L: Lost and Found also has roots in your teaching. Can you talk about those origins?

A: At the CUNY Graduate Center, where I teach, we were facing a local problem of students who work hard teaching in the CUNY system but as a result don't have time to do extensive research and scholarship. As a way to incorporate that kind of work into class, I started a course called "Contexts of Twentieth Century American Poetry," which was focused on textual scholarship and issues of poetic transmission. The class came on the heels of several years of telephone book-like "Collected Poems" that had been coming out – Ted Berrigan, Barbara Guest, and others – which I felt dissatisfaction with. The volumes were nice to have but very context-less. And I found when I brought in the original books to class that students would have a different experience of the poems. Without fetishizing the book as such, there is something important to how you get the poems, what form you receive them in. So my idea was to have a course where students would come out with a publishable project.

L: I'm curious about the questions of access and circulation that you've brought up. You mentioned, for example, Allen's "Writing" series, which is no longer in print and therefore harder to find, more obscure. What do you see as the politics of textual access, the politics of what remains in print and what doesn't?

A: There's so many levels to this. In my own experience, I did a lot of translation during the war in ex-Yugoslavia. One of the books I translated was The Tenth Circle of Hell, by the Bosnian poet Rezak Hukanovic, who was held in a Serb camp. When I first translated it in 1994, I tried to sell it and nobody was interested in it. Then the massacre at

Srebrenica happened and all of sudden my phone was jumping off the hook. And I said, “But this book has nothing to do with Srebrenica.” But now there was interest in this sort of thing. So I published it, it received prominent reviews in places like the Washington Post and The New York Times, and within a year and a half it had gone out of print. On the other hand, in 1998 I published Semezdin Mehmedinovic’s Sarajevo Blues with City Lights, which has stayed in print and gone through three or four printings by now. The reason why it was important to publish that book at a place like City Lights is that it presents a challenge to American writers who would look for innovative writing in presses like that. Whereas The Tenth Circle didn’t have enough traction to become a commodity, so it disappeared despite its initial blitz, which was tied into the idea that we’re in the middle of a war and this is therefore something you need to know about. The same thing has happened with Arab writing in the past five or six years. I’ve been championing Arab writing for the past twenty-plus years, but it’s only since September eleventh that Americans now have the idea that they need this material. It’s totally indiscriminate.

L: Publishing something because it’s topical is a form of planned amnesia. The news cycle works the same way.

A: I think the politics of the introduction to the The Tenth Circle of Hell plays into this as well. I thought it would be important to get somebody for the introduction that, insofar as it would be possible in this country, fifty percent of high school kids would recognize the name, so that the book could go across certain boundaries. My first thought was Toni

Morrison—that that would be an interesting and odd pairing. A couple of people flipped out, said it couldn't be done, and Elie Wiesel ended up as the choice, which to me was revolting because he was basically cleaning his conscience for not having initially responded to the situation and here he was given an opportunity to be politically correct. So much of what happens in commercial publishing, particularly regarding foreign things, has to do with the cleansing of reputations, but people aren't aware of it.

L: And that's partly, too, a matter – or a lack – of context, of unfamiliarity with the places where the books are coming from.

A: Yeah. At a certain point, I found myself increasingly removed from commercial translation projects because I knew too much and was a pain in the ass. I was involved with certain projects that were literally putting people in danger. For example, I co-translated the work of a former Syrian political prisoner and there was an organization that wanted to showcase his work in the context of the “Axis of Evil” thing with Syria and North Korea. And I said, “You can't do this to this guy because it will get imputed to him and he'll get killed.” So part of Lost and Found has to do with ethics. Even in the hands-on training of certain skills: How do you consider an archive? What's the process of choice involved? What happens when you have to deal with family members? It can get very complex.

L: I think the assumption when you're doing scholarly work is that you're working with inanimate things—things that are dead, in the past—and putting them under an electron

microscope. But it's not just the authors' relatives who are still living, it's the work itself—and that also implies an ethic.

A: Part of what I wanted to see happen with Lost and Found pertains to the consumer model of experience, which we're inundated by on every level.

L: It's our default setting.

A: Yeah, it's everywhere. I'm fifty-four and happen to have had a particular background. My father was a painter. Growing up, it was just normal for me to have all these poets and artists around. They were family friends. It's weird because there's a paradox now. On the one hand, there's very open access: you can email a writer you like, if you're a young person, and maybe they'll respond. Whereas when I was growing up, this kind of culture was weirdly underground. But on the other hand there was a different kind of recognition then. I remember when I was thirteen in 1969, Kerouac died in Boston. It was a local event and a big deal. It's very difficult – without getting nostalgic – to say what constitutes differences in experiences. But what became evident as Lost and Found developed was that the interactions with the poets' surviving family was important and instructive for the both the students and the family. Claudia Pisano, for example, was dealing personally with Amiri Baraka and Jennifer Dorn, Ed Dorn's widow, and had to deal with the touchy issue of how they were going to feel about the personal matters that were being discussed in the letters she was publishing. Stefania Heim got in touch with Muriel Rukeyser's son, Bill, to get publishing permission and Bill responded by coming

from California to a NeMLA conference – where some of our students had organized a panel on Rukeyser – and giving the students old publications of hers. That’s similar to the kind of first-hand transmission that I grew up around, which I feel is not manufactured. It’s surprising, you’re not expecting it, you don’t quite know what’s going to happen. It’s a risk. It’s not a context where you’re sure of what’s going to happen. That’s an important aspect of the whole training.

L: I like how you’re describing the ability to negotiate interpersonal relationships as an aspect of scholarly training.

A: Totally. How do you deal with the archivists? You have all levels of bureaucracy and strangeness, of openness and closedness.

L: First-hand transmission is obviously important both to your methodology in Lost and Found and to the poets who are the focus of the series. Can you talk about first-hand transmission in the specific context of what gets called New American Poetry? More generally, how do you view the historical import of New American Poetry?

A: The New American Poetry presented work that had been circulating at an underground level for ten or fifteen years, which all of sudden you could get it in one place. There are people who disagreed with the way Don Allen classified things in the anthology, but he was working in a model that was very successful. To me, that period in American poetry – roughly 1950-1975 – I think we’re looking at it all wrong. I’ll take the

Tang Dynasty, I'll take the Abbasid, I'll take the Elizabethan, I'll take the Romantics—this period is right there in terms of any adjective you want to give to tremendous cultural production.

L: You said we're looking at the period wrong. How do you think it's typically viewed? And what would be some alternative ways of viewing it?

A: When Robert Creeley died, the obituary in the New York Times was a classic American PSYOP: get 'em coming and going, so they don't know where they are. Don't be too positive and don't be too negative. The second paragraph said that Creeley had mastered the vernacular, which is like saying Langston Hughes has natural rhythm. And then there was a quote from John Simone – an art critic – who elsewhere has said of Creeley that his poems are short but not short enough. That quote is there to be balanced, so that the obituary is not too laudatory. Now imagine an obituary which said that Creeley worked in the tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, and Melville, and that along with Charles Olson, he was one of the coiners of the term “postmodernism.” Had that obituary been written, we'd be living in another country. What I'm saying is I think we're not close to wrapping our heads around a heroic age. These were people who were up against unbelievable odds, a handful of people who through messiness, courage, and imagination took on a very complicated shift in the total society, all the Cold War stuff, covert operations, a squeezing of experience, perpetual war—things that poets like Rukeyser and Robert Duncan were prescient about. There's a colonization of the past that takes place. The New American Poets are viewed as individuals who are “problematic”

because we've now "gone beyond" them: they're patriarchal, messy, etc. All the kinds of categories you can easily debunk people with.

L: They become a kind of stepping stone to what's *now*—and we've surpassed them.

A: Yeah. That's one prevalent dismissal: "We're tired of hearing about them." Another prevalent dismissal is this really odd thing in this country, which is that you have this bloc of what Eliot Weinberger very intelligently called "official verse culture," to whom the New Americans are nonentities, meaningless. Official verse culture is what our literate culture thinks of when they think of – *if* they think of – poetry in the last century. Poets like John Wieners are unknown.

L: What you're saying reminds me of how Muriel Rukeyser writes in Willard Gibbs that, "If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future." In other words, one's cultural heritage must be actively selected, fought for as a matter of value. This notion is obviously crucial to what you're doing with Lost and Found, but I think Rukeyser's formulation of it emphasizes how this kind of recuperative work isn't simply a matter of bickering over reputations but has profound implications for the present.

A: That's definitely the idea. I'd say two things. First, during the time of the New Americans, the university system in the U.S. expanded exponentially and disciplinarity became increasingly defined by private vocabularies and terminologies. The technocratic

nature of expertise became multiplied. There was little place for actual thought. Within this environment, it was often poets who were doing the thinking. To me, Olson is one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. He was dealing with the human universe in an experimental way that has enormous implications still. People completely unaware of him are now doing history as he would have prescribed it. It's taken that long to filter through. There's a school of thought that dismisses Olson's archaeological work in the Yucatan as imperialist plundering. There may be some iota of truth to that, but there's the fact of curiosity, of human solidarity, of the idea that we need to risk something in order to find something else out, something that may not be "yours."

L: It's like critiquing an abolitionist in 1830's America for not living up to the ethical standards of 2011.

A: Yeah, I think it's a pervasive phenomenon, where we see this real colonialist subjugation of the past and privileging of the present and our advantages in the present. It runs through so much thinking. As much work has been done on the so-called New Americans, the surface has barely been scratched. There's lots of unpublished, unknown, unexplored, unexamined work. Josh Schneiderman made a great off-hand comment while working on the Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara correspondence, saying, "Why do they call them the 'New York school'? They're never in New York together." And throughout Lost and Found – with the exception of the work on Rukeyser, who precedes the other poets by a bit – all the poets are mentioned elsewhere in the series. In the Koch-O'Hara correspondence you'll see references to Creeley, Whalen, Baraka. In the Baraka-Dorn

correspondence, you'll see the same range of reference. This takes you out of codified literary history and into actual people. Part of the point of the scholarship is to follow the person. Forget about the school. Who did the person think about? Who did they criticize? If they're criticizing someone, that person is in their sphere. They're thinking about them. They're concerned with them.

L: They might be more concerned with someone outside their so-called school than someone in it, but it's become unfashionable, when performing literary history, to focus on individuals rather than movements and trends. Those kinds of handles are useful...

A: Of course, but they're also limiting.

L: Yes. A few times now, you've mentioned individual students who have edited an installment of Lost and Found. Can you talk, broadly, about the students' role in the project? About how it serves as a training ground for them?

A: I've noticed several things about the general trajectory of writers and poets working in academia in the U.S. over the last thirty to forty years, but especially over the last twenty. I don't want to be too harsh, but they often exhibit a certain kind of ambivalence or contempt for the academic structure they exist in. A poet writing a "tenure book" is really disturbing to me. I came into this business as a Middle East scholar and so I really appreciate the nature of scholarship. Having said that, I think a lot of the students who have shown up here have felt a dissatisfaction with some of the scholarly models that

they see out there and are very attracted to the odd and unique mix we have here at the Graduate Center, which on the one hand is very writer-friendly but on the other hand is rigorous in terms of what you're going to need to think about if you're going to produce scholarship. The further back in time you go, the more prerequisites there are: if you're a Medievalist, you need some Latin, another language, this and that. If you're working in a contemporary period, you actually know the least, but you have a hard time validating what you know intuitively, which is the time that you're in. The trick is to learn the traditional skills of knowledge gathering, codification, and transmission, and then to think about the times you're in, because it's easy to think that you automatically understand something because it's contemporary.

L: Can you discuss scholarship's relationship to the contemporary? One suggestive thing you've said elsewhere about literary scholarship is that you think the most radical work one can be doing right now is nuts and bolts contextual history. What is it about scholarship in our historical moment that makes you say something like that?

A: That's an incredibly complicated question because there are so many levels involved. There are a couple of things I would say. I've been proofreading a project that I helped edit called "Circles and Boundaries," by my friend Kate Mormit, who had a lot to do with Lost and Found. She has written about how the category of adolescence was invented by Rousseau in the 1760's and 1770's, around the time of the steam engine. Before then, it wasn't a category: you were a child and then you worked. What has happened in this country is that we've extended this category. A high school diploma is worth nothing at

this point. As a country, we produce nothing other than money. We're supposedly in the global information economy. The ante has been upped. A college education only takes you so far. You need some kind of graduate degree. So on the one hand you have this extension of adolescence as advanced degrees become increasingly necessary. But on the other hand, the trend is for the educational process to be curtailed. People want to move through school as quickly as possible. There isn't much time for real scholarship in this career trajectory. Olson went to the Library of Congress and read every item on whaling so as to boil it down into two paragraphs for Call Me Ishmael. That's no longer a common occurrence. People don't have the time.

L: I agree, but why do people feel that way? They could go slower. What creates this condition?

A: The general terror of life as it's lived. In other words, the worry that you're going to get stuck, that you're not going to have job security, not going to be able to raise a family. There's no safety net. Even in the period of time since I finished my doctorate in 1989 – at the same university where I now teach – even in this twenty-year period, the student experience is another universe compared to the way I did it. When I first moved to New York – and this was the case up until the 1980's when it got a little dicey – it was an economy where I could work one week a month and pay the rent. Those equations have totally transformed. You're now working to live rather than living to work. In that context, it becomes exceedingly difficult to do the kind of exploratory work in which the results are unexpected and unknown. That context isn't going to change, but what I've

tried to do is perforate a little bit of air into it to see what that experience would be like on a small scale and to make that the seed for a longer life's work. As opposed to the more utilitarian approach that many people have. And not surprisingly: you have loans; there are students who are first-generation college students; students coming back from the military. So people say, "Yeah, I want to finish and move on." The horizons have been curtailed enormously.

L: I think that's a great point, but I'm wondering to what extent that sort of class-based critique is unique to students at CUNY, one of the largest city universities in the world. Are the conditions similar elsewhere? Are doctoral students at, say, Harvard better funded and thus more leisured?

A: It doesn't happen elsewhere, outside of certain very specialized disciplines. My own involvement in academia gives me a unique lens on this. My home department is Classical, Middle Eastern and Asian Languages. To do classical Homeric scholarship, for example, you need to have studied at least French, German, and Latin to begin with. In my department, the Homeric scholar happens to be Korean and very interested in things Asian, so she also knows Chinese and Japanese. Now when you're in a tenure review and somebody from an English department, who has written a monograph on Dickens and whose research has never included any foreign sources, asks how come this Homeric scholar hasn't finished her book, you're kind of apoplectic. Well, because the learning curve is in another universe. I see it happen in other disciplines, too. Because there's a rush to produce Middle East scholars, people do not take the necessary time. You need a

minimum of five years in a country to really absorb the language and other intangibles, like how a culture operates. When people are rushed through, the work is often cursory.

L: They're getting squeezed on both ends: more education is expected of young people but in less and less time. Taking the time to do the kind of exploratory travel you did...

A: Yeah, I managed to cobble together about eight years in another place, Jerusalem. It qualitatively changed the nature of what I was able to do.

L: ...seems beyond the pale of the kind of career trajectories that young people imagine are available to them.

A: We've become so self-governing that nobody has to tell us to act a certain way because you're going to do it yourself. It's totally internalized. I see it in politics, too. After September eleventh, I was offered a weekly column called "Politics and Imagination" in a Bosnian newspaper. I was able to write there in ways that were unimaginable here. Even the imagery I used would have been unthinkable here. I wrote a column about when Bush went to Ground Zero, the clip of which reminded me of Milošević when he came to Gazimestan. It was the same situation: he had a bunch of handlers, he was very nervous, he didn't like the crowd, he was very apprehensive, but they threw him into the scene and he came up with a slogan and the crowd responded. And it was the same thing with Bush. So I was able to describe that, which would have

been unimaginable in someplace like The Nation in the first weeks after September eleventh.

L: In our discussion of Lost and Found, you've talked a fair bit about your background as a Middle East scholar, as a translator, and as an activist. What do you see as the relationship between that work, much of which came earlier in your career, and your more recent work on American poetry?

A: In 2005, I was attacked by the watchdog group Campus Watch in an article called "Poetry, Terror, and Political Narcissism." There were several ironies involved in the attack, but one of the things that I found most interesting was that, after years of doing work on the Middle East, I was attacked at a time when I was more and more involved in U.S.-based material and institutions. I don't think that's coincidental. The fact that I was bringing in issues and people from the Middle East and other parts of the world to places like the St. Mark's Poetry Project and other U.S. cultural institutions was what cranked up the volume on the attack. The attack had some libelous stuff in it, but it was one of the greatest possible validations of my work because it meant that these reactionaries implicitly and explicitly recognized the power of culture. This made me realize that my own poetic and scholarly efforts, in terms of what I'd like to do over the next x number of years, are very much related to this continent, these poets. I feel that it's a continuation of my previous work and that it's potentially unsettling.

L: We've talked a lot about your own career trajectory, which I think exemplifies that model of personal, poetic, and scholarly curiosity evident in the Lost and Found initiative, but what about younger scholars who are starting out? Given the predicaments for undertaking scholarship that you've outlined, what sorts of courses of action *are* possible for someone who might have these intuitions or inclinations but might not work in an environment where there are outlets or spaces for them?

A: One very simple practical piece of advice I often give to students is that, given the constraints you're under, maybe you need to think about your dissertation as simply being one chapter of a much larger trajectory which will take you many years to get to. That doesn't mean that you need to lessen your ambitions or your conceptual framework, it just means that you need to say, in practical terms, this is the amount of work that I can do at this level at this time. The idea is to develop not the amount of work but its method.

L: How worried do you think students are about how their work fits within market concerns?

A: I think there's a tremendous amount of self-policing that takes place for students. I've been very involved in various aspects of departmental life: chair of a department, director of a program, deputy chair of a large Ph.D. program, involved in the job process, sat on tenure committees. People self-police. In many cases, they underestimate the collective intelligence of their colleagues who are hiring them. And sometimes they may be right to do so. But in most cases – and I've seen this proven time and gain by how some of our

graduates have gotten jobs – if the quality of the work, and the intent and the ethos and responsibility of the person are evident, those things will have a lot of weight in terms of how the particularities of the work will be considered. This isn't always the case, but it happens much more than you'd think.

L: In other words, when they present their work to strangers, students don't think they're going to be granted their *donnée*.

A: Exactly. You're fitting it to your projected idea of what you think they want, which may have no basis in reality. As opposed to saying, "This is my strength. It may sound weird to you, but let me explain." I think in many more cases than you'd think, you'll get the benefit of the doubt simply based on the strength of your own argument and the strength of the work. That's why things are so stultified: everyone's trying to conform to some idea of what they think is wanted.

L: Talking now, it occurs to me that in my own dissertation work I've set up that self-policing position as a straw man that I then knock down. But it may be necessary because I've internalized a belief in the existence of certain external expectations. They don't exist, but I have to act as though they do so that I can grant myself permission to escape them.

A: I don't think that's atypical at all.

L: It might be useful at this point to articulate briefly the connection between this interview and my own dissertation project. I'm very interested in the similarities between the interview as a form and a scholarly project like Lost and Found, in that both perform intellectual labor in large part by moving information from one place to another.

A: I discovered that in my book Keys to the Garden. To me the centerpiece of that book is the interviews, which are there in place of an essay: they're historical, they're biographical, they're political, they're aesthetic.

L: They *are* an essay.

A: They're an essay.

L: My other goal in conducting this interview was to help make information about Lost and Found available to readers who might not have otherwise encountered it. Can you talk about what its reception and dissemination has been like to this point?

A: It's pretty surprising what's happened. It was published in an edition of 1,000 and 500 are already gone in the space of several months. They're available online and in certain bookstores. The hardest part about distribution was creating the list of places where they would be sold because to me that was the whole business. The first hit was among people to whom this stuff really matters, to whom this history is personal and important. Through word of mouth and other means, most of those people have gotten it, which

gives this project such a firm basis of existence. I was driving, for example, from San Francisco to L.A. and got a phone call from Graham McIntosh, a close friend of Jack Spicer, founder of White Rabbit Press, and a printer for Black Sparrow Press. Graham said he hadn't seen anything like this in years—I almost drove off the highway. When I conceived of this project, if I had a pair of eyes that I wanted to look at it, they were his. As object, it passed muster: the rest will take care of itself.

L: Are they available digitally, too?

A: When the second group in the series comes out, the first group will be available as PDF's so that they can be accessed by students and those not fetishistic about the object.

L: I guess the other function an interview might serve – though I don't think this always happens – the other function it can serve in addition to bringing the work to a larger audience is that it can deepen the work's background for those already familiar with it.

A: My feeling about it is that there is no audience. There's you, there's me, there's who we give it to—there's no abstract audience. The audience is very particular. It's people who actually receive it. I can go into numerous examples. When I came back from Jerusalem, right before the Gulf War, after living there for about six years, I was being encouraged to write about the experience for the Sunday Times Magazine, but chose not to because I didn't think it was a good idea. Around that same time, Robert Creeley got in touch and said he'd been invited to Jerusalem, what did I think he should do. I told him to

go, but to let me write him something about what he should be looking for because nobody's going to show it to you. I wrote him this long letter, called "Israel-Palestine 101," which I later published with his permission in Memories of Our Future. Writing that letter had so much more efficacy than if I had written something for the Times, which a week later would have been fish wrapping. The letter went to an individual who absorbed it, internalized it, did something with it.

L: I've been fascinated lately by the letter as a literary form and its one-to-one model of intellectual exchange as a stage for preliminary thinking, or for thinking that calls itself preliminary but is actually the thing itself.

A: There's a great line in Ralph Maud's Olson at the Harbor where he talks about seeing Olson wiped out one day and asking him what he had been doing and Olson said, "I wrote eight letters today." Everything gets worked out in those letters.

L: Olson's Maximus Poems began as letters to Vincent Ferrini. And a lot of the material you're republishing in Lost and Found is letters.

A: We write hundreds of emails per week. What happens to them?

L: I often write emails as though they were letters. But I feel like that's discouraged. It takes time to exchange letters.

A: I have a couple of handwritten correspondences and you really have to gear up for them. It's a very exciting thing. It's a very different thing than on the screen.

L: There's a material object involved. I just started a handwritten correspondence with a friend and even knowing the first letter was going to arrive, it still felt surprising to receive something in the mail that wasn't related to commerce.

A: In his History of Textual Scholarship, David Greetham has a great thing where he says that what we think of as normal manuscript material is a very rare, short-lived phenomenon. The existence of a manuscript is generally not the case: the originals used to be destroyed after a printing. The period of the typewriter manuscript is rare and anomalous. So in a weird way the model that we're on now may be closer to a historical precedent. It's an unsettling and weird and useful thing to know. It complicates all sorts of things. It's odd that we have a manuscript of The Waste Land with Pound's scribbles on it. We don't have that for the Elizabethan period.

L: What you're talking about is a great example of the kind of insight that only historically-minded, contextually-rich scholarship can provide. How do you see your work – both in Lost and Found and elsewhere – in relation to regnant models of historical literary scholarship, be it New Historicism or whatever is in its wake?

A: That's a big question. Let me try to answer it with an example. I just discovered that Christopher Simpson's The Science of Coercion is out of print. It's a great, concise

history of Cold War propaganda, with no punches pulled. When I assign this book to graduate students – who are of course familiar with Foucault – I ask them how they can glean its methodology, which is not evident.

L: It's not "using" Foucault.

A: It's not "using" anything. How do you discern its methodology? Simpson's book demonstrates everything one could find in Foucault as far as his research methods, the interrogation of institutional structures, the archaeology of knowledge, but it doesn't wear its Foucauldianism on its sleeve.

L: Why do you think that is and what might its implications be?

A: There's been a complicated shift in what for want of a better term might be called "bourgeois liberal thought," which has adopted theory, but decontextualized it. All of this theory grew out of decolonization. When people were talking about the Other in the '50's, they were talking about the Algerian. When they were talking about the body, they were talking about the tortured body.

L: So you're saying that as this theory has been imported, its original context has fallen away.

A: It gets imported at the cost of poetics, at the cost of the thought of poetics. There's no poetry in any of this stuff. Ed Dorn had some very provocative and useful diatribes against continental theory in Ed Dorn Live, his last interviews. The problem is that if you're French, you've grown up in an education system where certain philosophical postulates are a given, so that when you encounter Derrida, it's completely logical, it comes at the end of a long train of thought. But that's not true in an American context.

L: That was my own experience as an undergraduate being introduced to literary theory. I was given recent theory without knowing much, if anything, about the history of work whose shoulders it stood on.

A: It's hard to read Derrida if you haven't read Benveniste, for example. You don't know the philological background to the thought, so you're getting an abstraction of it. It's very depressing. People have been brainwashed into accepting all this terminology and its application. It's incredibly brilliant, but its usefulness depends on what you're doing with it. When you encounter something like The Science of Coercion, which doesn't fit into the received categories of theory, you don't know what to do with it. You have to encounter that text on your own. You have to reach a state of consciousness where the text will impinge upon your assumptions.

L: That kind of approach to a text seems to me a poetic one. How does your own background as a poet inform your scholarship? Someone unfamiliar with your work might hear that you're a poet and think that means, say, that you write well-crafted

sentences in your criticism. Which may be true. But what you've been saying about poetry as a mode of thought that has been, in a North American context, an alternative to canonical literary theory seems much more substantial than a concern with matters of superficial aesthetics.

A: The reality of the U.S. is incredibly complicated. In The Book of the Fourth World, Gordon Brotherston revisits the famous Levi-Strauss-Derrida debate about the speech-writing hierarchy and concludes that they're both wrong because neither of them deal with non-written texts, which is what he's dealing with in the pre-Colombian Americas: quipus and other texts that don't fit that model. For all the work I've done on the Middle East, there's no comparison to the levels of complexity that you encounter here.

L: That's a really surprising statement because the politics of the Middle East are typically perceived as hopelessly complicated.

A: Stereotypically, yes, but in fact it's all pretty readable, it's all pretty legible, because the layers are all there. But here, how do you begin to account for disappeared languages, mixed peoples? It's off the charts. Who are we? It's so complex. So to go back to your initial question, poetry is a form of knowledge that can allow you to get at that complexity. It's an approach. For my generation and the one previous, you cut your teeth on Pound's The ABC of Reading. When I've taught it in the past ten years, students don't know how to respond to it—Pound is a crank. But however cranky he is, there's stuff

there. He's telling you to read this but don't read this, to immerse yourself in this and that and understand how meter works. He's telling you actual stuff. It's not theory.

L: ABC is off-putting, too, because there's very little commentary in the anthology at the end. It's just given to you.

A: Yeah, *you* figure it out. I think theory is a kind of prophylactic. It removes the need to make judgments. People are very afraid of two things: generalizing and making judgments. Because they're risks. But if you're not making judgments, you're hiding the authoritarianism behind these theoretical constructs and you're dismissing authority, which is needed. You can go to Pound as both an authoritarian and as an authority.

L: Yeah, the problem isn't the exercise of authority, because we want to be able to say certain things in the past are good and worth preserving and thinking about in a continuum with the present, but what's troubling is what you were just saying about hiding the power relations, not making them open and apparent. It's like a cocktail: two parts Foucault, one part Butler, one part Stein, and you have your argument.

A: Take something like Muriel Rukeyser's Willard Gibbs. First of all, she had to teach herself high mathematics in order to be able to write about Gibbs. Second, she was criticized for daring to say that the representative people of the nineteenth century were Melville, Whitman, and Gibbs. But if you make a claim like that, you're going to elicit a response, you're taking a risk. When I talk about Charles Olson as a major thinker of the

twentieth century, people are going to look at me like I'm a lunatic. It's like when I gave a talk at Cornell on poetry and politics, the first thing I did was to ask how many people are familiar with Robert Duncan. Maybe two hands. Then I asked how many people are familiar with Michel Foucault? The whole room. Why is that? What's at work here?

L: Two things that strike me. One is that running throughout many of your remarks is a do-it-yourself ethos. The other, which seems crucial, is that what you're doing by asking those questions at the start of your Cornell talk – and this is something many writers and scholars I admire do – is that you're creating a context for your work that doesn't already exist but that needs to, for one reason or another. That's the thing, actually, about the codification of literary theory: it allows you to assume you're operating within the exact same intellectual context as your colleagues. Which is of course never the case. I don't want to make it into too much of an equation, but an important aspect of Lost and Found is the way in which it creates a context you consider vital, but which can't be assumed as shared by others.

A: Absolutely. In this case, I don't know where it's going to lead. Marilyn Hacker sent a nice email where she said she was happy to see Rukeyser in this context because she belongs there. Rukeyser's never thought of in relation to New American Poetry, but she's related. And so when I say Lost and Found considers New American Poetry "writ large" – in and around and about – that's to avoid reducing these writers to a series of schools: Black Mountain, New York, the Beats. These were movements, yes, but they were like an enormous scattering of magnetic filings. Kerouac is a great example of the need for

context. There's a scene in On The Road where he's driving through an obviously black neighborhood and the scene is a kind of projection. Discussing this scene in class, a student said that it was racist. Well, look at the next page, where he's doing the same thing to a farm. Maybe he was racist, but what does that mean? In what context? Who was he with? What music did he know, inside and out? Amiri Baraka has Kerouac's books around his house, all over the place. That kind of critique makes me crazy. It's so easy; it's so simple.

L: It's not judgment.

A: It's not judgment. It's received opinion and it's conformism. It's like the patriarchal and misogynistic business with Olson. Yeah, the guy was very problematic. On the other hand, think about it in reverse, what does it mean for a guy who was 6'7", with a successful political career, to say, "I'm outta here. I'm a poet." The only thing it could mean is that he's a fag. It's the only thing it could mean in that context. You don't think he overcompensated for that?

L: Creeley talks, in "Contexts of Poetry," the first Lost and Found pamphlet, about the physical fact of Olson, how he didn't want the attention, but it was unavoidable with his height.

A: Instead of this retrograde thing why not apply Lacan's gaze? Or "being for others"? He was noticed. You could do a Fanonian or Lacanian reading of Olson, but instead you get this simplistic thing.

L: It merely replicates what you already know about certain power structures.

A: It's not helpful. It doesn't advance anything. It puts him in his place, so you don't have to deal with him, instead of complicating things and asking what it might mean that his work was so liberating for all these female poets.

L: The irony of many applications of theory is that they take this incredibly rich, nuanced and textured discourse and completely flatten out its implications.

A: Derrida has wonderful readings of Edmund Jabès, really nuanced and intricate. You can't reapply them elsewhere, though. They're great in and of themselves, but that's it. The only thing you could do would be to reapply their intent.

Under the Spell

: Context

Last winter, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego held a retrospective on the work of artist Kim MacConnel. Enamored of the , Shari and I heard exhibit, Shari and I heard from a docent that MacConnel's most recent work, a series of paintings entitled "Abracadabra," was on display at the nearby Quint Contemporary Art. Tucked away in a gated alley, Quint was hard to track down: even the proprietors of neighboring art galleries somehow couldn't easily direct us there. Thankfully, we persisted: and though we'd never bought any art before, and certainly hadn't intended to buy any when our search for the gallery began, we walked out of it the proud owners of one of MacConnel's Bunnies.

: What was I trying to do?

Two things: to write from a place of rapture; and, much the same thing, to string together a series of sentences each as well-chiseled as the marbled prose of Wayne Koestenbaum, my dissertation advisor.

**Under the Spell:
Kim MacConnel's Abracadabras**

Are we turned on is always a question worth asking of a work of art.

And: *what is the nature of our stimulation?*

- Wayne Koestenbaum

Abracadabra, from the Aramaic: (הרבא + ארבדכ) "to create" "as I say."

Part of the magic of MacConnel's enamels is that the colors – glossy, strong, and rich – always look surprised to find themselves next to one another.

Quietly, the patterned white sections aerate the paintings, allowing the other colors to assert their radiant, bounded optimism.

All parties to a magic show, even the magician himself, must continually reaffirm their capacity for astonishment, lest any trick appear routine.

Abracadabra, as in: prepare thyself for arousal.

Geometers, like magicians, maintain faith in the incantatory power of formulas and spells.

Objects I perceive in the shapes of "Abracadabra": teeth, an eye, an hourglass, a vagina, a raccoon's bandit stare, cleavage, beads, butt cheeks, a crescent moon, the Ghanaian flag, a snowflake's jagged edge.

And, too, the loose outlines of the letters that spell out the word itself: sundry A's, B's, C's, D's, and R's.

Abracadabra means: watch me give form and shape to your desires.

Divided up into narrow vertical columns, almost as if each canvas were its own compressed triptych, the paintings evince a profound comfort with heterodox contiguities.

In *4 Rabbit*, a pink triangle infringes, delightfully, on the icy dispassion of its gray chamber-mate; their neighbors, a string of green bubbles carved out of a yellow background, exult in their proximity to the sassy pair.

The occasional thin band of vertical color appears throughout the paintings to help ground the other shapes' heady lyricism.

Abracadabra, an oath: to make no apologies for one's poetic pretensions.

The Bunnies, smallest in scale (18" x 18"), somehow benefit, sonnet-like, from their limited scope; the Rabbits (46" x 46") exude a confident, mature simplicity; the Big Rabbits (72" x 72") indulge in outsized dreams of color.

To bunny: to lead a life of small, contented pleasures.

Among all animals, rabbits most clearly embody arousal's blessed fecundity.

Abracadabra, or: I hereby conjure life where there was thought to be none.

Up close, every canvas in "Abracadabra" contains traces of the artist's hand: triangles whose corners are almost, but not quite, symmetrically aligned; tiny dots of fugitive color; small clumps of uneven paint; borders that waver and wobble.

The tension between the paint's mesmeric sheen and the shapes' subtle irregularities points out superficiality's droll posturings.

A good magician, it is said, does not reveal his tricks, but that does not mean that he can't, with a sly wink, let his audience know that he trafficks in illusions.

Abracadabra, in other words: suspend your disbelief, grant me my *donnée*.

The siren song of enamel: surfaces so sumptuous, so seductive, they verge on decadence.

In contrast to classicism, "the subordination of the parts to the whole," Oscar Wilde defined decadence as "the subordination of the whole to the parts," an apt description of the many-limbed canvases that populate "Abracadabra."

A row of MacConnel's Rabbits looks a bright orgy of appendages, each thrashing gleefully amidst the happy whole.

Abracadabra, which is to say: this magician's hat contains more parts than decency would seem to allow.

Gertrude Stein declared that "sentences are not emotional while paragraphs are," which means, simply, that gestures derive emotional meaning through context and contrast.

Each painting here is a paragraph of interlocking color; each color a ringing, sculpted sentence.

"Abracadabra" reminding us, warmly, that a poetics of the gesture—bold and glowing—is also always a poetics of presence, of the vitality that inheres in color and shape.

THE CLINAMEN

Notebook Fragments

: Context

The following chapter excerpts most, though not all, of my general (that is, not book-specific) dissertation notes. As the dates of these notes suggest, I took fewer and fewer general notes the further the project progressed.

: What was I trying to do?

To write a book, by whatever means necessary.

Notebook Fragments

5/5/07

high wire feats of literary constraint (Never Again, A Void, Eunoia) perhaps obscure more mundane applications of it

(me) a constraint involving mixed metaphors?
(not for diss)

(me)
thinking consists
of funny spaces, stops
interruptions, revelations
▼
hence poetry

6/6/07

Sanders' catalogue of ships problem: how to avoid "data-midden boredom"

6/7/07

(me) can restrictions be seen as a way of dealing w/ Olson's problem of the postmodern?

6/8/07

(me) the critic takes everything on what she imagines to be the terms by which all things must be engaged w/ - ie, history, the invisible arbiter, tradition, etc.
- the artist takes everything on her own terms and in so doing defines the rules of engagement better than the critic ever can

6/10/07

(me) to be listless is to sink into a state of lethargy from lack of the governing sense of order and purpose that a list provides

distinction:

- 1) appositive list—amplify & refine
- 2) enumerative, or itemized list—collect, set down
another distinction, within enumerative lists:

- a) indefinite series: can continue indefinitely, unbounded as long as you're able to think of new entries
- b) definite series: has a prescribed # of entries, a boundary

6/17/07

DHL. Mornings in Mexico

p.77 – “Our cosmos is a great engine. And we die of ennui.”

6/20/07

(me) think about Sanders' catalogue of ships problem in relation to what Stein says about naming as a poetic act in “Poetry and Grammar”

6/22/07

the asymptote & the list

6/23/07

Zukofsky & the Oulipo, esp. Roubaud

- Perloff essay on the topic

6/24/07

(me) the asymptote as the way knowledge works

(me) consider the list as a genre

- does it have a history?
- key practitioners?
- developments? breakthroughs? etc.

(me) list & the Oulipo

- renunciation of chance procedures indicates a desire for total mastery, the illusion that rigid constraint, and lists, provide

(me) what to say about lists other than that they are essential

- the history of lists is a history of doing, of planning & failing to do

6/26

(me) cannot overstate the importance of the fact that the Oulipo understands one of their principle aims being the creation of constraints for any writer to use

- the thrust of most literary/artistic movements: exclusion—this is what makes us new, different, revolutionary, inimitable, or imitable only insofar as the imitation is perforce unoriginal, inferior

- in the Oulipo, imitation – of themselves, of others – is a virtue
- there are no contests for primacy, for supreme originality, for genius

--reading Bénabou's Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books & becoming aware of the way in which Oulipians are writers who know they want to be writers before they know what it is they want to write (like myself)

- ▶ thus, the form over content tendency (Mathews' essays esp.). Thus, the tendency of so many books to dwell – explicitly, allegorically, symbolically, etc.
- on the act of writing
- writing for writing's sake

6/27/07

Bénabou equates reading as he does it to bulimia

6/29/07

(me) the use of "etc." when, in fact, you've run out of things to say

- the reluctant exhaustion of a list

7/6/07

for the prospectus: by not extending constraint to the critical realm, the Oulipo implicitly reinforces the notion that there is an unbridgeable gulf b/t the creative & the critical

- I imagine this diss as a living critique of that notion

7/12/07

Stein's a vocabulary can't not make sense quote

7/15/07

(me) all classificatory systems, if followed through far enough, ultimately reveal their own inadequacies

- Mathews' The Journalist a parable of the endpoint of all classification

8/1/07

imagine an acrobat was telling a narrative through her performance: would you care much about the narrative?

- (me) perhaps why narrative in dance had to go

8/6/07

Kubler: "By this view, the great differences b/t artists are not so much those of talent as of entrance & position in sequence."

▼
might be relevant to anticipatory plagiarism

▼
in this view, a way of dealing w/ the problem of arriving too late in the series/sequence

8/7/07

Jefferson's Notes as a possible precursor, an ordering exercise
- Deist god is a clock-maker
- Oulipians become clock-makers

8/9/07

genealogies at the end of the Popol Vuh?

8/14/07

Rukeyser's Gibbs bio?
- scientific methods
- p. 350: quote on math

Stein, in "Poetry and Grammar"
p.238: language is an "intellectual recreation"
▶ (me) both leisure/play & re-create

WCW's thoughts on Poe: local b/c he establishes his own rules, makes clearing & foundational gestures—might be relevant to the Oulipo

The Cat in the Hat & Green Eggs & Ham both written w/ the restriction of a vocab list, à la Mathews' Selected Declarations (a proverb list)

8/15/07

Poe's "Philosophy of Criticism" makes me realize that you can distinguish b/t intentional (Cage) & unintentional (inspiration, intuition, automatic writing) chance, the former being a type of constraint, the latter not

8/16/07

(me) Nufer & Bök both write wild sex passages

8/22/07

(me) why does Mathews say in The Paris Review that he got the idea for Singular Pleasures from an angel while he was jetlagged? Mocking or serious?

(me) a distinction suggests itself: inspiration can make you want to do something but is not enough to make you actually do it

▶ that is, the Oulipo isn't against inspiration per se, but against the idea of inspiration as the modus operandi of artistic creation

- Oulipo: creation is pure labor, nothing divine about it

ie – Bök was inspired by the Oulipo to come up with his book idea, but what enabled him to persevere & write the book was the constraint, not the inspiration

- in other words, there is a place for inspiration in the Oulipian world-view, it is just a much more limited one than we ordinarily imagine it to be

QED

8/27

(me) what makes a list authoritative?

meeting w/ Wayne – 9/4

- argument, overarching
- self-diagnosis of my method
 - horror & restraint
- lots of work done on lists
- think of prospectus as a manifesto - polemic
 - who are you trying to convince out of what torpor

Books – 9/4

I Remember
queerness

Alphabetical Africa
Sorrentino

Poe
Roussel
theory/manifesto

MATH
LOGIC
THOUGHT
WRITING AS SEX

X20

Mathews:

Singular Pleasures
20 Lines
Selected Declarations
Cigarettes
The Journalist

Sleeping w/ the Dictionary
Eunoia
Fortification Resort
Never Again
Negativeland

Cage

French Oulipo

what are they bored
w/? they're bored w/
sex, broadly
construed--that is, sex
is consumerism,
is channeled desires,
is trying to escape
desires, is the
dialectic of
availability, of choice,
that the quantitative
inundates us w/

issues

- translation
- sex
- play/games
- the exercise
- chance
- bondage/constraint
- order, classification
- lists
- horror, trauma
- masturbation, pleasure, self-pleasure

sex

parts of speech & sex
latent in founding Oulipians
explicit in 2nd generation Americans
“clinamen” sounds vaguely sexual
desire in the modern world: unlike knowledge, it’s not an asymptote: is too readily catered to and fulfilled
rigid sex – analytical dictionary definitions – math
awkward sex – Brainard
periphrasis
lists – spillage
death & sex
compounds, kennings
Poe – banishment of sex
Roussel – jouissance – Barthes
- do I have to do deal w/ this?
X20 – desire – pain
2nd gen’ers – sex & boredom
masturbation – closest we can get to the consummation of fantasy? – writing?
sex & pop culture – Mullen
acrobatic descriptions of sex – Nufer, Bök
games & sex
words & sex
exercise & sex
chance?
bondage, order
language

Shaw

Bök – constraint-based criticism – NW’ern
Friedlander. Simulcast
- Hipolyte’s history of existentialism

9/10/07

the constraint most people are familiar w/ is the deadline

9/12/07

for Olson, the critical act is in the choosing, prior to the analysis

(from his letters to Creeley & Benedict)

9/18/07

all Oulipian texts are fundamentally about writing

- ▶ (me) an interesting corollary:
they don't distinguish b/t writing poetry & writing fiction, it is all, in a sense, of a piece, just writing, only according to different rules

(me) implicitly, I might be making an argument about the imagination & structure, the latter as somehow essential to the former

9/22/07

(me) what if I organized the diss by types of constraint instead of authors/groupings?

10/12/07

Oulipians are de Certeauian users

- ▶ grasp of what is controllable for them as individuals, but not the larger situation
- rats who devise their own maze

10/15/07

ways of organizing the bibliography:

- alphabetical, chronological, reverse alphabetical, thematic, personal preference, scrambled (arbitrary, random), reverse chronological, associative logic, number of letters in the title, Amazon sales rank
- see Perec's "Ways of Arranging My Library"

10/17/07

Shonagon

- in what way do tastes reveal/conceal a politics, an aesthetics?
- in what way are tastes superficial?
- ▶ the tyranny of musical taste, the way in which people define themselves by their taste in music, boast about it, pride themselves on it, play the (range of) reference game

10/25/07

(me) if it's an "exercise" in criticism, then at least some of the constraints should be familiar critical modes (psychoanalysis, deconstruction, New Historicism, etc) or apparatuses (bibliography, book review, etc)

10/26/07

Friedlander, Simulcast, p.55: “the most suspicious writing of all masks its literary qualities”

(me) in a way, the real point of Friedlander’s exercise is Welch’s point vis-à-vis Stein: that grammar & sentence structure & rhythm have their own emotional – their own argumentative – force

11/25/07

(me) constraint as a prosthesis?
- related to androcentrism?

1/22/08

(me) chance procedures not as egoless-ness (avant-garde radicalness) but as a submission to fate (gambling)

1/22/08

(me) literary criticism is the only art criticism that partakes in the same medium as its object of study
- think of the imprecision, the flaccidness, of most music criticism

1/23/08

(me) a faux-reverential scholarly ch.
- Borgesian

1/24/08

(me) make Ex in Crit my one main book that I keep expanding and revising, like Leaves of Grass or some other 19th C. works of accretion (Douglas’ autobio), like Maximus & that line of lifelong poems

(me) like Perec says about the lipogram, constraints always need to announce themselves as such, lest they go unnoticed
- could be a justification for revealing the constraint/methodology
- doesn’t satisfy a curiosity but declares an allegiance

Huizinga, p. 8: play “is free, is in fact freedom”

1/28/08

(me) exercise is always very structured, esp. at the professional level: track, football, soccer, baseball, etc.

4/2/08

for meeting w/ Wayne

publication

too scattershot at the moment – need to tackle some major issues now, I feel

prospectus – ok

definition

loose constraints ok? (more severe, more exciting, if I can pull it off)

freedom, discourses of – America

Meeting w/ Wayne

prefatory – constraint & book & constraint I'm using

- graphic – t.o.c.

pretend that it's a biblio

find constraints that don't...

interrupt sameness – anything you can do to interrupt claustrophobia

literary & cultural history to define constraint

- tonal & procedural family resemblance

dispositif: proscenium that the...

overview of issues for 2nd half of prospectus

some cuts in I Remember ch.

- put some back – a system

6/17/08

Hotel Theory – a ch. on constraint applied after the fact, not beforehand—what, if anything, is the effect?

Notes as I approach the mid-point and do some spring cleaning, 4/09

- Wittgenstein: “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly.”
p.72, Philosophical Investigations
- a ch. of deliberately misguided interpretations
- a ch. where the constraint is complete freedom
- ch. w/ no commas, but no Steinian run-ons

- Oulipo & amateurs

- Huizinga, p.8: “Play is free, is in fact freedom.”

- Harryman: essay: an attempt to think about something incompletely
- Bök & exhaustion: obscure words, tiresomeness, physical exertion of his sound poetry
 - deliberately misinterpret a passage from Pataphysics—p. 39, for ex.
- philosophy—its rules, laws, border controls, etc—as a constraint, as constrained thinking
 - philosophers (Kant, ie) as the biggest perverts, the kinkiest, most submissive writers
 - ▼
 - critics: dilettante philosophers
 - me: a dilettante critic

- a constraint about ineffective/ugly constraints?
- a constraint: you can revise, but only your first time through the essay ► after a paragraph (maybe a sentence?) has been completed, it cannot be altered
- Fortification Resort as a non-evaluative--an ecstatic--criticism
 - one possible way of doing it: where the object moves you, as opposed to what it “says”
 - another: what the object “says,” rendered ecstatically, done w/ oblique exposition
 - ▼
 - maintains its ties to criticism more than the former in that it still serves a critical function and not simply an aesthetic one

job letter
first draft of prospectus
list of omitted books
fear of success
pan MD's book?
K. Silem
Waldrop. A Key
Powell
Nowak
list of potential future projects
dramatic sestinas/Writhing Society
Berrigan—sonnets
a filler ch.
Twitter
a ch. on my financials, after Myles?
p. 261 and 263 in Wanderlust: complicating the notion of exercise
interview myself
maybe's
Kunkel essay and Internet commentary
the "like" button on Facebook
AK's "how to" of networking for poets—blech
an epigraph for every ch.
orals list
McCaffery
find Hazlitt quote about not being able to read novels after the age of 30
what about Mac Low resists being discursively situated?
Harper's p.17: Facebook's database reality
6 word bios—NPR
ch. written while high?
the "no one can be expelled from the Oulipo" rule as related to the Writhin Society's mission
something on the difficulties of writing about the contemporary:
--you have to read a lot of second-rate work
--difficulty of making accurate pronouncements
--hardest thing is that the field keeps expanding right in front of you
describe an art gallery but not the art—ie, the labyrinthine Struth exhibit at the Met
a ch. where I analyze books I haven't read but claim to have
Poe's duration of a sitting
blogs

“Crossing the Great Divide”

: Context

“Crossing the Great Divide: Critical Thinking and Writing in the Majors” is a biennial conference, held at Quinnipiac University, framed around the linkages between critical thinking, usually associated with general education, and thinking within the majors—the disciplinary thinking students must master before they graduate. The following chapter consists of a transcribed excerpt of the Question and Answer segment of the panel I spoke on; my talk, not included, was called “Negotiating Disciplinary Constraints.”

: What was I trying to do?

To get a job.

**“Crossing the Great Divide”:
Panel Q & A**

*Quinnipiac University
November 20 2010*

Audience member: I’m really interested in your idea of constraint and pleasure and how those are interrelated. And I wondered if then you would see lack of constraint being related to pain, in your dissertation, as well as in general. I’m one of those people who when I read literature that’s sort of doing this experimental stuff, I find it painful to read. And so I was thinking, “maybe that’s an intentional thing.”

Louis: “Experimental literature,” is that term associated for you with not being constrained, with being freer in some way?

A: Well, I think it’s a different kind of constraint. But, not knowing tons about the nature of constraint, can you move away from constraint, and – if so – would you do that in order to produce pain, or as a counterpart to pleasure?

L: That’s interesting. I don’t know if I’ve actively thought about trying to produce pain. But there are definitely certain art house movies I’ve seen where it feels like part of their point is an endurance test.

A: Well, artists, for example, particularly performance artists, have experimented with pain and endurance.

L: Mmm, yeah, like Marina Abramovitch. One of her performance pieces in the 1970's consisted of her sitting in a room with a table full of torture implements and weapons, including a loaded gun, and visitors, the audience, were allowed to do whatever they wanted to her with those implements.

A: Yeah, someone actually held the gun to her head.

L: Yeah, a loaded gun. What you were saying about pain reminded me in a way of my own pedagogy... When I give writing assignments that are a little too open-ended and vague, that are in some sense freer and more relaxed, the results end up being painful for me because the student work isn't usually as good as when I give a more focused, directive assignment.

A: Right, when students violate conventions we often find it painful, but maybe it's because the conventions bring pleasure.

L: Yeah, they really need structure, conventions, and a set of rules to follow.

A: I do, too.

L: Yeah yeah no—and obviously I like it as well. But I guess in a larger sort of philosophical sense, I don't think that having a greater degree of freedom necessarily entails an experience of pain. Constraints can provide pleasure, but they can easily

provide pain as well; it's not hard to imagine situations where that's the case. So it's not the case that freedom is an inherently painful state of existence. It's closer, in an existential sense, to a state of anxiety and uncertainty.

Moderator: It's a very Sadean discourse. The whole premise of Sade's work is framed around these two questions. Does one lead to the other? Can you get past pain to pleasure and vice versa? I'm not suggesting you should try to do that.

L: No of course, but I do think it's interesting to consider pain. I've theorized constraint more in relation to pleasure, because it's what it's been more about for me. Although, actually, interestingly, the more precise way to say it would be that pleasure is what I've *tried* to make it about, but I almost feel like I'm protesting too much. At points the process has been enjoyable, but—it's a dissertation, which is just a strange, frustrating document in so many different ways.

A: It's a pain.

L: Yeah, exactly, you know, I'm insisting that I'm having fun and enjoying the writing, but maybe it's actually a sign that I'm kind of suffering.

M: That part will come at the defense.

“Oulipolooza”

: Context

“Oulipolooza” was a celebration of potential literature held at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kelly Writer’s House. In addition to constraint-based finger food, the event featured a panel of five scholars and poets giving readings and talks on the theme of constraint. Like ““Crossing the Great Divide,”” this chapter excerpts a portion of the panel’s Question and Answer segment; my talk, untitled, provided a brief overview of my dissertation project.

: What was I trying to do?

To allow articulation its accidental astonishments.

**“Oulipolooza”:
Q & A**

*Kelly Writer’s House
University of Pennsylvania
March 15 2011*

Audience member (1): I was wondering Jean-Michel and Louis both sort of talked about constraint-based writing as sort of this return to I think Louis you sort of talked about it as almost a chance to get at more personal writing and also Jean-Michel with this idea of the unconscious which I think is the opposite of what most people think of as Conceptualist and constraint-based writing they think of it as an evacuation of the subject so I was wondering if you guys could talk about that

Jean-Michel Rabaté: I wanted to talk about a book that is not really Oulipian she was asked to join the Oulipo and she didn’t want to do it Christine Brooke-Rose who when she was asked by a publisher to write her autobiography said no no I cannot write one but then she thought a little more and thought it would be interesting to write her autobiography without using the first person so she wrote and published Remake which is really a good book because after awhile you realize that there is the child the young woman the older woman it is always her and she explains that she needed that constraint to overcome the inhibition that was caused by the request to write an autobiography and I think it works like this in many cases this is why I mentioned Poe of course I was alluding to the famous explanation of “The Raven” also A Void the translation of Perec’s La Disparition which of course has no “e” but we know that for Perec as well the tour de force of having

to write without an “e” which in French is almost impossible it’s harder than in English enabled him to talk about the experience of his parents and the Shoah

Louis Bury: Jean-Michel just stole a bit of my thunder

A (1): He plagiarized you

LB: Yes a case of anticipatory plagiarism I was thinking of Perec also that his constraint in La Disparition provided him a way it’s not that his novel is directly personal but it’s a way around a topic or blockage he might have had and when I made that specific comment about the personal during my talk what I had in mind wasn’t necessarily that writing under constraint is an inherently personal way of writing but that writing my dissertation by setting up arbitrary rules and ignoring other ones allowed me to do things that were more personal in my dissertation that in an academic context wouldn’t normally be allowed so it was a way of granting myself permission and actually thinking of Perec and the Holocaust my grandmother was a Holocaust survivor and one of the chapters in the project is about her and it was really difficult to write what was difficult was finding a constraint that allowed me to deal with the subject in a way that felt satisfactory so like Perec’s novel it’s about something that’s intensely personal but it somehow felt that the only way I could easily get at the subject was by distancing myself from it through the use of a procedure

Audience member (2): Hi we were talking about failure in Conceptual writing or failure of certain devices and I was wondering how a Conceptual poem fails is it because you can't finish out the device or is it that the device just doesn't generate something pretty

Nick Montfort: All failures in writing are the same all successes different and you have the same cause in a piece of Conceptual or Oulipian writing that it does not say anything new it does not explore the avenues of writing in interesting ways

J-MR: I realize that failure was a delicate idea to launch into in my talk by failure I didn't mean something totally negative the problem of the joke for example translating the joke into another language take for instance Finnegan's Wake in it Joyce has a series of the days of the week translate the days of the week as particular sad emotions so *Mopesday* *Tearsday* and so on at times it's great at other times it fails to reach the flash of insight that would come from the idea that "wow using those two codes you splice them together and you have the days of the week" but then you can think "well the days of the week would work better with say erotic ideas" if you can imagine that maybe that would work better

LB: I'm also inclined to say a word in favor of failure thinking of it as a writer as first an inevitability and secondly as a good inevitability as a sign that you're doing something right that if you're taking risks and failing I'm also a professional poker player so I'm used to thinking in terms of risk and if you're

taking risks as a writer or as a whatever that means some of them aren't going to work out and that's okay but if you make enough bets if you're a gambler and you make enough winning bets in the long run it's going to work out for you in other words the fact that you're sometimes failing is what enables the possibility for your continued success

J-MR: Do you think your work on the Oulipo helps make you a successful gambler

LB: Heh no they're actually very different skill sets I think they're only really related in that I probably have slight OCD

Books That Have Left No Memory

: Context

See enclosed.

: What was I trying to do?

To remember what I could about books I could no longer remember: in other words, to compose, unwittingly, an elegy for literary ambitions past.

Books That Have Left No Memory

Culture is what remains after we've forgotten everything we've read.

- José Ortega y Gasset

In her essay "On Bookselves," Oulipian Anne Garréta proposes some possible principles for arranging one's library according to a classificatory system other than alphabetization or genre. The logic governing her principles is sometimes whimsical or arbitrary in nature – "books in which one encounters whales," for example – but is more often personal, deriving from the reader's relationship with the books, as in the category "books given to you by someone you love, or have loved."

I'm particularly intrigued by an organizing principle she offers almost in passing: to shelve together "books that have left no memory." At first glance, such a grouping seems impossible, for what book, once owned, hasn't left at least some sort of memory, if not of its contents, then of the circumstances surrounding its acquisition or consumption? Even unread books persist in the owner's imagination, forever to be associated as impulse purchases, unwanted gifts, masterpieces put down at page ten. What Garréta most likely means, of course, is for the owner to shelve together those books she has in fact read but about which she cannot remember a single page. Books in which no scene, image, or argument remains: its contents, known once, now a loud blank in consciousness.

For bibliophiles, these lacunae are perhaps more prevalent than we'd like to admit. Vast swaths of my bookshelves have, over the years, become ciphers to me, a series of titles and names and little more. Whenever a casual reader visits my apartment, he or she invariably asks, "Have you read *all* of these?" and I'm not lying when I reply that I have indeed read part or all of most of them. However, the more accurate,

trenchant response might be that of Jacques Derrida when faced with the same question: “I’ve only read three or four of them, but the ones I have read, I read them very well.”

If a personal library has been accumulated, as mine has, for purposes of use, and not simply for the sake of collection, then its principles and aesthetics of arrangement constitute more than just a solution to the problems of book storage and access: they constitute a veritable compendium of that individual’s literary knowledge and experience. And the collection’s compass, a ticklish and prideful concern to its owner, matters less as a showcase for guests than as a personal inventory, redolent of past experiences and possible future directions.

What follows is an annotated list of some books on my shelves that have left no memory, an attempt to account for – perhaps salvage or fashion a use for – the amnesia in my reading life. By “books that have left no memory,” I mean those books about which I cannot recall a single word. Works of poetry, possessing a different relationship to memory than other types of writing (see Jacques Roubaud’s Poetry, etcetera), shall be excluded from the list, as their inclusion would unnecessarily complicate matters.

* * *

Addison and Steele. The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from *The Tatler and The Spectator*. I remember nothing of either Addison’s or Steele’s prose, only that I didn’t get very far in this book in my attempt to teach myself the history of the essay form, my area of academic focus when I entered graduate school.

Adonis. An Introduction to Arab Poetics. Regrettably, I can't recall anything about this primer, and only very little of Arab poetics in general (some snippets from Michael Sells' translations of early Arabic poetry, Desert Traces). The principle thing I remember about Adonis was seeing him read in front of a packed auditorium at the CUNY Graduate Center, and then, the next day, running into Shawqi, a former student of mine and a big fan of Adonis, on the street and telling him about it. This coincidental encounter reminding me now, fondly, of the semester when Shawqi and I used to walk partway home together after a night class I taught at John Jay College.

Amis, Martin. The Information. What I remember most about Amis is that, when I first became a serious reader, the summer after my freshman year of college, I read multiple books by him, starting with his memoir, Experience, purchased for half price in hardcover. Without anyone ever mentioning Amis to me, I had acquired a vague notion, probably from either the dust jacket or from the memoir itself, that he was an important and authoritative literary figure. I was, in other words, reading almost completely at random, with no sense of a personal intellectual program and even less sense of literary-historical categories and groupings. It can be a thrilling way to read, if also at times an inefficient one, but at this stage in my reading life, it's an Edenic state to which I can never return.

Andrews, William L. To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865. I remember many things about the autobiographies themselves, but nothing of Andrews' arguments about them, which I never even finished

reading. The only thing I remember about this book is that I read it—somewhat incongruously, it felt—while staying with Shari, my wife, at a Bed and Breakfast in upstate New York: out on the front lawn, comfortably ensconced in a wicker chair, notebook and pen in hand, I couldn't concentrate on the book beneath the warming halo of the sun, a difficulty – not being able to read outdoors – I have always had.

Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. What I remember about The Human Condition has nothing to do with the book proper, but with the innumerable authorities I have seen cite and praise it, which encomiums caused me, upon finally reading the book towards the end of college, to become thoroughly disappointed that Arendt did not once and for all explain to my satisfaction the vagaries of the human condition.

Aristophanes. Clouds. I know that this play is a comedy, but not from the text itself, which I read on my own during an ancient Greek phase in college, but from my general fund of knowledge about Greek drama. One thing I do remember was feeling proud of the fact that I was reading a play that had been translated by a former professor of mine.

Augustine. Confessions. An example of the way in which collective cultural memory can become – literally become – individual memory: I have in my mind the vague outlines of a famous scene involving a tree, but I don't recall ever reading this scene myself.

Austen, Jane. Sense and Sensibility. The one Jane Austen book I tried to read on my own. Kant was wrong, by the way, about that whole duty over inclination thing.

Austin, Mary. The Land of Little Rain. Forgetting this book is somewhat embarrassing, as I read it within the past three years for purposes of academic specialization. Another case of duty followed in the letter of the law alone.

Bangs, Lester. Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung. I feel like I'm close to recollecting something about this book – how can one forget a book with such a loud title and gaudy cover art? – but any potential memories remain, at the moment, hollow spots whose contours I can only trace, blindly, with my brain's tongue.

Barnes, Julian. Flaubert's Parrot. Another book I read when I picked books at random. At the time I bought this novel, at the start of college, I don't think I even knew who Flaubert was. The only thing I remember about Flaubert's Parrot is that I underlined furiously in it, though I have every suspicion that were I to re-read my copy of it today I would be embarrassed by both the quantity and quality of my marginalia, as I am whenever I re-read or lend out D.H. Lawrence's Studies in Classic American Literature (a book I remember quite well).

Berger, John. Selected Essays. I can recall, verbatim, the inscription my friend Tayt wrote in this book – “To Lou – who knows where the beauty is...” – but I cannot remember any of the essays themselves. Anthologies and collections tend, paradoxically,

to inhibit the memory-function, as each piece's individuality becomes subsumed by the group's collective identity, but in the case of this book, the problem is that Ways of Seeing so predominates Berger's oeuvre that it eclipses all his other work in my imagination.

Blake, Lillie Devereux. Fettered for Life. When I lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, I used to pass by P.S. 6, the Lillie Devereux Blake School, on my runs into Central Park. Every time I passed it, I wondered how many parents, teachers, or students there knew – or even pondered – who was Lillie Devereux Blake. I was quietly proud that I knew, even though I can't remember a word from Fettered for Life, a novel I read for a course on 19th Century American Women's Writing my first semester of graduate school.

Brown, Dee. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. If my retention of literary and philosophical texts is often spotty, my retention of historical ones is even worse. Whatever I know about Native American history I know from before when I read this book (that I never finished reading), though through no fault of its author.

Burroughs, William S., and Allen Ginsberg. The Yage Letters. An utterly unremarkable book. The catch is that in order for me to be able to make this claim, I need to be able to remember what about the book is unremarkable, which I'm unable to do. One virtue of an exercise in forgetfulness, then, is that you learn to accept – even cultivate – your own lack of authority.

Burroughs, William S. Naked Lunch. I have three memories of this book, all, so far as I can tell, unrelated. First, I remember that the editor's introduction quotes Norman Mailer's defense of the book's artistic merits during its obscenity trial. Second, I remember talking about Burroughs with a street book-vendor during my lunch break at a summer work-study job. As I was looking at a used copy of Junky, the vendor, a 1960's holdover, and I got to talking, superficially, about Burroughs, and I told him that I had just finished reading Naked Lunch, but didn't like it. He told me that Junky was a better entrée into Burroughs' work: much less difficult and confusing. Intimidated by the vendor's authenticity (he looked like someone who would have fit into Burroughs' milieu, while I looked like the comfortably middle-class NYU student I was), I eased out of the conversation as well as I could and didn't purchase that or any other book from him. His stand was right outside the building where I worked, but I did my best to avoid any further intercourse with him that summer, except for the time, on a glorious, sunny day, when I stepped outside into the blare of David Bowie's "Space Oddity" emanating from his portable stereo and smiled at him, thankful for the lilt he'd put in my step. Finally, I remember, during a party in my college apartment, my then-girlfriend's younger brother, drunk, cackling on my bedroom floor as he riffled through the pages of Naked Lunch, saying to his sister, "Look at the smut your boyfriend's reading." If there is a thread running throughout my memories of Naked Lunch – throughout my memories of forgotten books thus far – it is that books signify as objects, talismans we carry out into the world, as much as they signify linguistically.

Camus. The Fall. The only thing I can remember of this novel is that I encountered, for the first time, my mother's sparse, curiously reticent marginalia throughout its brittle, yellowing pages: two mouse-like "[...]" marks – and nothing more – sporadically bookending sentences she found noteworthy.

Condon, Richard. The Manchurian Candidate. I don't have a head for plots, which isn't to say I don't like them. Rather, I become so absorbed in them during the moment of reading that the outline of their particulars becomes difficult to recall. I experience them, in other words, as experience, as something to give myself over to, participate in, and not as an object of study, memorization or criticism. For myself, the less plot-driven a novel, the easier it is to know myself knowing it.

De Quincey, Thomas. Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. A book that did not meet my expectations: namely, that it would be as interesting as its subject. On the whole, in fact, the literature of drug use is astonishingly flaccid and cannot compare to the deservedly more renowned music of drug use.

Derrida, Jacques. Politics of Friendship. I can remember aspects of every other Derrida book I've ever read (Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference, and Positions), but the only thing I can remember of this book is that we were assigned it as part of a graduate course team taught by Avital Ronell and Jacques Derrida. An undergraduate at the time, I was in awe of the fact that one could take a course with such literary-philosophical heavyweights. My one abiding memory of the course is of when Ronell introduced

Derrida to an overflowing auditorium by whispering into the lectern microphone, in a solemn, breathy voice, “Welcome to ‘Literature and Philosophy.’ We are here thinking the unthinkable, with Jacques *Derrida*.” It was a spectacle befitting a rock concert.

Dubus, Andre. The Last Worthless Evening. This book was one of only a handful of books other than course books I ever purchased at the NYU bookstore. Like most university bookstores, NYU’s was not particularly inviting: its ho-hum ambience and awkward layout didn’t encourage browsers to linger. And the ubiquitous school paraphernalia they hawked didn’t help either.

Ehrhart, W.D. Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir. I really like Ehrhart’s poetry, but I can’t remember anything about this memoir. What little I do remember about it comes from an essay in Ehrhart’s collection, In the Shadow of Vietnam, where he discusses his syllabus selections for a course on the literature of the Vietnam War. In the essay, he explains that he usually includes his second memoir (the title of which I forget) on the syllabus because he knows of no other memoir by a Vietnam veteran that focuses exclusively on the veteran’s time as an anti-war activist. When I was deciding between purchasing the anti-war memoir and Vietnam-Perkasie, I was more interested in reading the former but picked the latter, reasoning that because I’d eventually read both, I’d be better off reading them in order. There was a time where whenever I walked through the ‘Literature’ aisles of a bookstore, I imagined that I would eventually read every single title on the shelves, right down to Richardson’s Clarissa in all its bulky

splendor. I'm not sure if that was a good or bad belief to possess; what I am certain of is that I no longer possess it.

Eliot, George. The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner. I remember a scene involving a brother and sister playing near a creek, but I can't remember from which novel the scene comes. I can also remember believing, when I first began frequenting bookstores in college, that T.S. Eliot authored all the books with "Eliot" on their spine. In my earnest zeal, I looked forward to one day reading Middlemarch and all the other of Thomas Stearns' hallowed novels, thereby claiming a further slice of my Western patrimony.

Ellison, Ralph. Juneteenth. In a coincidence of alphabetization, I also retain a distinct memory of examining Juneteenth on a bookstore shelf. I was deciding between Juneteenth and Invisible Man, and was leaning towards the former, using similar logic to that which I used regarding Ehrhart's two memoirs: because I would eventually read both books anyway, I reasoned, better to start with minor Ellison and then work my way up, so that I could savor the masterpiece when it finally came time to read it. However, on the basis of Juneteenth's off-putting and clumsy title, I decided to purchase Invisible Man. In the event, I was assigned Juneteenth for a graduate course anyway, but, now knowing that it was an unfinished novel, couldn't concentrate on it enough to afford me any chance of remembering it. An unfinished novel is different in kind than other types of unfinished work: books like the Philosophical Investigations and the Arcades Project, while irksome to pedants, nonetheless work because, to satisfy the reader's imagination, arguments and ideas don't require thoroughness and completion in the way plots do.

Fielding, Henry. Tom Jones. In the summer between my junior and senior years of college, I taught myself a crash course in the history of the 18th Century British novel, reading Tom Jones, Pamela, Moll Flanders, and Tristram Shandy in succession. Of those four, Tom Jones is the only one I can't remember. Looking back on it now, I marvel at the austere ambition of the undertaking: to verse myself through self-study in a period of literary history I wasn't even particularly interested in.

Glaudes, Pierre and Jean-François Louette. L'Essai. I can't read French well without a dictionary, so it might be a stretch to say that I've 'forgotten' a book I can barely even read, but, when my study of French and of the essay had both reached their zenith, I translated the introductory chapter of this book for my own scholarly purposes. At this late date, however, my recollection of the book has gone the way of my French. My strongest memory of the book pertains to the person who recommended it to me: Pierre-Alexandre, a French tutor studying for his doctorate at NYU. I remember Pierre as kind-hearted and gregarious: genuinely interested in his charges, if a little too interested in one or two of the female ones. He was also a bit loopy: I can recall him hanging upside-down from a plush armchair in a corner of the French department, repeating "Je ne voudrais pas d'être normal," over and over again. He would give me stanzas of French poetry to memorize, one of which, from Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," I remember, fondly, to this day.

Harper, Frances E.W. Iola Leroy. Even in a novel named after the protagonist, I'm struggling to recall one thing that the protagonist does in the book, though there was a time in the past when I knew the plot in its entirety. At this point, the only memory that remains is of a graduate school professor lamenting, during the question and answer portion of a job talk, that Iola Leroy was "the only Harper anyone ever reads." Heard often enough, comments like that, however well-intentioned, hone a deep-seated and not altogether healthy sense of obligation and shame with regard to one's reading habits.

Heidegger, Martin. Poetry, Language, Thought. I actually have very distinct memories of the writing in this book, but all of those memories pertain to its lumbering pace and curiously poetic use of repetition, rather than to the content of its argumentation. I include this book in this list, then, to demonstrate that it is possible to remember a book's contents even if you can't remember its contents.

Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell to Arms. I'm unsure if I should be proud or embarrassed to do something so brazen as forget completely the work of such an acknowledged master.

Herlihy, David. The Black Death and the Transformation of the West. A fine book, I'm sure, but titles like this induce amnesia in me.

Herr, Michael. Dispatches. Considering my abiding interest in the Vietnam War era and this book's stature within its literature, I'm surprised I've forgotten it, but not so surprised

given that after finishing it I never had occasion to talk to anyone about it or to read anything substantial about it. These accidental mutenesses are the tiny deaths books die; they occur more frequently with literature than with any other art form.

Howe, Irving. Politics and the Novel. A question: If you remember something a professor said about a book, but you don't remember reading that something in the book itself, nor anything else about the book, is what you remember a memory of the book, or a memory of something somebody – in this case, an authority – said about the book?

Jung, C.G. Modern Man in Search of a Soul. I remember two things about this book, neither of which has to do with its contents. First, I remember reading the book, as I read a number of other books, because Pat Hoy – my undergraduate mentor and a dynamic professor – was deeply influenced by Jung. Second, after finishing the book, I remember asking my mother, a social worker, if she read any Freud or Jung for her MSW, the answer to which, to my surprise, was no. I no longer think, as I probably did then, that such an omission constitutes a failure of our educational system.

Kilito, Abdelfattah. The Author & His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture. If it weren't for the fact that I'm just as likely to forget Hemingway as I am Adonis, I'd suspect that my amnesia vis-à-vis this book were due to some sort of cultural bias.

Lawrence, D.H. Twilight in Italy and Other Essays. Having written my undergraduate thesis on Lawrence's essays, I remember so many of them so well that this instance of

amnesia surprises me a bit. But not so much: over the years, I've been compelled to return to every one of Lawrence's essay collections except this one.

Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph. The Waste Books. When you can't recall anything of a book you loved, as I can't with The Waste Books, you realize just how little we remember of everything we read. The one thing I do remember is that I read this book, over the course of several months and by design, entirely in the bathroom.

McAlister, Melani. Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000. The curious thing about the game I'm playing is that were I to permit myself to look at the table of contents of a book like this, there's a good chance I'd remember something about it. Certainly, but, for that matter, I could also remember things about these books by re-reading them: the point of the exercise is to allow memory to happen the way it normally does, that is, either by making itself available on command or by happening on accident. And I'm open to the possibility that all memory is accidental, if by accidental we mean fundamentally unintentional, even when we try to summon and control it.

Miller, Perry. Errand into the Wilderness. Gilbert Sorrentino: "The process [of criticism] is, of needs, interminable and leads me to believe that the exercise of criticism is at best—in that delicious old phrase—a mug's game. The critic is either subsumed in his criticism, the latter becoming, relentlessly and imperceptibly, a kind of natural effusion of the collective intelligence; or he is forever identified as 'the one who said that...' and

reviled for such rank stupidity. Either way, he is denied his reality, becoming in the first instance a public idea that everybody held all the time, and in the second, an idiot whose pronouncements are contemptible when they are not hilarious.”

Nabokov, Vladimir. Pale Fire. I cringe every time somebody asks me if I’ve read Pale Fire, because I then have to explain how I tried to read it, but couldn’t get through it. Most recently, a stranger at a bar asked me which part I tried to read, the poem or the explanation, and I couldn’t, for the life of me, remember even that. From now on, whenever someone mentions Pale Fire, I’m going to lie and say I’ve never read it, even though that means I will likely have to suffer their incredulity that I, a writer and English professor, haven’t read such a remarkable book.

Nabokov, Vladimir. Pnin. I’ve read five Nabokov novels in total (Lolita, Invitation to a Beheading, and The Defense being the others). I read Pnin, years ago, for the explicit – and bizarre – reason that Martin Amis, in his memoir, likens his dentals problems to a passage from the novel in which Pnin’s tongue rolls around his mouth like an eel. So approvingly did Amis cite this and other Nabokov passages, I became convinced that Nabokov was a master stylist, one it behooved me to read extensively, and so I devoured novel after novel of his, even though I didn’t particularly care much for them. It helped that the books were available in the Vintage International editions I liked so much; to this day, the look of a row of Vintage Nabokov books still pleases me. And Nabokov is, no doubt, a master stylist, only not one who speaks to me in any essential way—not one I’ll be reading again – and forgetting again – anytime soon.

Neihardt, John G. The River & I. I'm trying hard to remember something from this book, because I don't want to write about it or its author. Several years ago, before I settled decisively upon a scholarly trajectory, I spent two weeks researching the genesis of Black Elk Speaks in the archives of the John G. Neihardt museum library, located in Bancroft, Nebraska (pop. 500). I enjoyed the experience of briefly living and working there, and, while I was in archives, threw myself into the work with commendable vigor, but, from this vantage point, it is apparent to me that I was engaged in a project, and a larger course of study, about which I felt thoroughly lukewarm. I purchased my copy of The River & I from the museum desk, at the enthusiastic recommendation of Nancy, the museum director. For Nancy, Neihardt's writing glowed in a way it never could for me, which is how I knew, even then, that researching him was a mistake. As could be expected, I fell out of touch with Nancy and never wrote up any of my findings from my work in the museum.

O'Brien, Tim. Going After Cacciato. For a number of years, The Things They Carried was one of my favorite novels, perhaps because it is thin on plot, but my only memory of Going After Cacciato is from my sophomore year in college, when my neighbor, Chris, an aspiring dramatic writer, was over (probably to play darts, at which he'd usually whip me). He was looking over my bookshelf, saw Cacciato, and commented on how great a book it was: in particular, he gushed about the gripping realism of a scene in which a soldier was wounded and needed a tourniquet. Naturally, I couldn't remember that scene at all, so, not yet having learned how to talk about books I know little or nothing about, I

feebly nodded along and pretended to remember and agree. What bothers me about this memory is how intimidated I felt by Chris, not because I couldn't remember the scene he was talking about, but because of his good looks (tall, blond, fit, always smiling) and his aura of quiet, self-assured confidence in everything he did, even, apparently, his reading.

Addendum: Midway through writing my entry on Going After Cacciato, I remembered, suddenly, the novel's plot: a group of soldiers desert their unit and wander off into the jungle towards either Laos or Cambodia. Given that I couldn't recollect the novel's plot until *after* I started writing about how I couldn't recollect the novel's plot, I'm inclined to leave the novel on this list as a specimen of that type of accidental recollection in which one memory or association unwittingly begets a chain of others.

O'Brien, Tim. If I Die in a Combat Zone. Maybe it's the case, unfortunate as it may be, that each individual soldier's memoir blends together, in my mind, into an archetypal depiction of what it was like to soldier in Vietnam. But that's not wholly accurate, as the archetype – both my own personal version of it and the collective, public version – is crafted, first and foremost, from those works of fiction, particularly the cinematic ones, with which we are all too familiar.

Outram, Dorinda. The Enlightenment. Another interesting case, in that I can't recall any specifics of the book, but it must be true that I know many of the things that I know about

the Enlightenment from it. History textbooks have a peculiar relationship to memory, similar to the relationship Sorrentino outlines between critic and posterity.

Ridge, John Rollin. The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit. These past few entries, I've been pausing a bit longer before writing about each new book, trying to see if I can force a tiny recollection of it. The trick worked with Jed Rasula's American Poetry Wax Museum (I remembered that Rasula likens poetry anthologies to museums) and with Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo (I remembered the word "HooDoo"), but with Ridge's novel all I can remember is that I used to keep handy, for the purposes of my graduate oral examination, a one- or two-sentence long summary of the novel, and my take on it, in my academic cocktail party repertoire, though it has long since departed.

Sade, Marquis de. The 120 Days of Sodom. I have emphatically *not* forgotten this book and it's unlikely I ever will, though it's equally unlikely I will ever read it again (too much uninteresting repetition). The reason I have included The 120 Days on this list is because its inclusion makes clear the importance of surprise and shock to memory: the traumatic, the outré, and the striking are all more likely to stay with us. And ideas and arguments, not just daring sex acts, can be these things as well: in fact, most pornography, a genre de Sade fringes, is remarkably *unmemorable*, as the defining feature of the actors/bodies is that they are interchangeable, archetypal, not unique. In the context of this discussion of memory and the uncommon, it is perhaps not too much

of an indulgence to note that I read The 120 Days in a rental car on the drive to an apple orchard in New Jersey, reading passages aloud to Shari the while.

Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. Le Petit Prince. This book was a birthday gift from Shari. Predictably, I remember none of it, though I also remember not being able to finish it. If I had ever lived in France, which I would have done if I hadn't gone to graduate school, I'm confident I would have succeeded in my efforts to read this and other French-language books.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Nausea. A novel whose purpose is to explicate a philosophical system is unlikely to be memorable as either fiction or philosophy. I do remember, however, being able to answer, in class, my French professor's question of what we did over spring break, with "J'ai lu La Nausée," an utterance whose pretension gave me a not inconsiderable amount of satisfaction, which was only compounded by the professor's impressed reaction.

Tanselle, G. Thomas. A Rationale of Textual Criticism. Unlike Jerome McGann's A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism, which our Textual Scholarship class read as a foil to the Tanselle book, I can't remember any specifics of Tanselle's argumentation. What I do remember is the day when Tanselle and Speed Hill, another textual scholar, visited our class, and Hill accused Tanselle, multiple times and with stern disapproval, of being a Platonist. "If you believe in an ideal version of a text," he'd intone, "does this not make

you a *Platonist*?" True or false, consequential or inconsequential, these rarefied insults were some of the most delicious I'd ever seen slung.

Tolstoy, Leo. The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Short Stories. There was a time when it only was a question of *when*, not *if*, I would read War and Peace. I can say now, with some confidence, that the answer to that question is probably never.

Trachtenberg, Alan. The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age. As with the other works of history I've "forgotten," my amnesia concerning this one questions not the integrity of my own individual memory but the integrity and bounds of our very concept of memory.

Vonnegut, Kurt. Cat's Cradle. The cover of my sleek-spined Delta paperback edition of Cat's Cradle features the following quote from the New York Times: "A free-wheeling vehicle... an unforgettable ride!" Which brief panegyric provides incontrovertible proof that blurbs are an inherently specious form.

Waugh, Evelyn. Scoop. When I bought this novel, I don't think I even knew that Evelyn Waugh was a man. It matters not: Scoop sits, inconspicuously, on my shelves, proof, should anyone ever require it, that I have in fact read something by Waugh.

Williams, Roger. A Key into the Language of America. Thanks to Rosmarie Waldrop's poetic re-writing of this book, I remember Williams' version quite well, and have included it on this list as an example of poetry's mnemonic powers.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. The Blue and Brown Books. I didn't think Wittgenstein capable of being unmemorable, but apparently these notebooks are the one place where he managed the feat.

Zoss, Joel, and John Bowman. Diamonds in the Rough: The Untold History of Baseball. I have always wondered what it would be like to have a last name that begins with the letter 'Z.' It has never seemed a pleasant proposition to me, though I suppose it has the virtue of being distinctive and therefore memorable.

* * *

There are, of course, others: other books I've forgotten in part or in whole; other shelves I didn't bother to inspect. No matter how thorough the search, in the final analysis, any accounting of forgetfulness will necessarily be incomplete, given the very nature of the task. The best that can be hoped for, it seems, is a few fragments of experience shored against the ruins, a more palpable recognition of the loss' scale, a sharper sense of how books matter, or don't, in our lives.

My Father

: Context

At an end of semester party several years ago, I mentioned, in the course of a group conversation, that my father was an electrical engineer. Wayne responded to this revelation with surprise and great interest: this seemingly negligible biographical detail seemed to him a clue to my interest in constraint. Because we had recently discussed the idea for each of my dissertation committee members to “assign” me a constraint to follow, he immediately decided that his assignment to me would be to write a chapter about my father, electrical engineering, and constraint.

: What was I trying to do?

I agonized over this assignment, not because I was uncomfortable with the idea of writing about my father, but because I couldn't figure out how best to do so in the context of a project which, to that point, had been predominantly impersonal in nature. I eventually settled on a procedure after reading, in David Shields' Reality Hunger, about an artist who found a stranger's address book and, before returning it, called and interviewed everyone listed in the book so as to construct a collective portrait of the stranger. That method intrigued me, so I decided to compose a questionnaire about my father for each member of my immediate family to answer. I asked that their answers be their birthday present to me that year, a request they all heeded. At the same time, I also wrote up some of my own thoughts on the subject of my father and constraint, with the loose plan of collaging pieces of everyone's writing into an essay. However, no matter how I arranged it, the collage never hung together in a satisfying way. What's more, I couldn't figure out how to incorporate my father's own answers with those of mine, my mother, and my

sister, because his were written in a different person. With nothing seeming to work, I began to consider ways I could work with just my father's questionnaire. And the more I looked at it without trying to chop it up, the more I realized that he and I, together, had written a complete, stand-alone essay. More than anything, what I think this long backstory illustrates is that literary constraints are often most useful for where they can lead a writer and not as a binding blueprint whose specifications must all be strictly followed or else.

My Father: A Self-Portrait

Write down a word that comes to mind when you think of yourself.

precise

What language do you think in?

It is hard to tell. I think that I am still translating from Polish to English. Sometimes when I work with numbers, I might count in Polish. I acquired very good background in Polish language with good writing skills. In high school on the last final exam in Polish a student is not allowed to make an orthographical error. If this could happen, a student must repeat the entire year.

Maybe they have different rules today not like in 1964.

Do you think differently in different languages?

Yes, of course. I still make many mistakes when I translate from Polish to English. For example the verb might be located at different part of the sentence.

Meditate on the ways in which math is like a language.

If you analyze logic circuits, one can say that this is like a language.

Does your heart thrill at the thought of an AND gate?

I don't find myself excited by working with gates. For me this is just a tool to analyze combinational or sequential logic circuits. My students find digital circuits easier to comprehend than analog. Generally, I don't like digital circuits. I prefer analog where my doctoral thesis is primary based on it.

How would you characterize your childhood?

I pleasantly remember my childhood. I had lots of freedom since my parents were both working.

I played outside from morning to evening. Many hours I played soccer (I have to account for many broken windows) or in the winter time I was ice skating on the lakes. I also

played many war games, since this was the post-war era. I spent more time with my father than my mother. I went with him hunting, traveling and camping, gardening etc. Every summer I went for a month for a summer camp. I would go to different part of Poland. I remember that the first camp was close to my town. Later on I would go to the Baltic sea or to the mountains. This event was organized for children whose parent(s) were employed by the police.

How would you characterize your mother?

Smart and demanding. Very hard working women.

How would you characterize your father?

Smart and gentle. Very hard working man.

Explain the importance of your early childhood memories of guns.

As I mentioned above, this was a post-war era. I had access to many guns and rifles, since my father was a police officer. In our house we had many guns and rifles. As a teenager I was firing guns for fun in safe remote areas as in an old castle or army training area.

What do you think of these questions so far?

They are interesting. However, they are hardly related to the electrical engineering. As I remembered, you mentioned to me that your advisor suggested to you writing about me and my electrical engineering experience.

Write something long.

I will not write something long but I will mention to you that a colleague of mine from NJIT whom I work with at the Sarnoff Symposium writes less than I! Thirty five year ago when I graduated as an engineer, **English/communication skills were not**

important as today. At this point, I don't see a reason to take English classes in order to improve my communication skills.

Articulate your thoughts on transgression's importance.

One should not try to go over the limit as this can get him in trouble with the law.

What kind of social animal are you?

I don't like to socialize with people in bars. In my association with IEEE Princeton/Central Section I meet many people at our events. Since I am the Section Chair, Mom supports my volunteer work and attends with me many section events because she understands the importance of this to me! She attended our awards dinner at Princeton University Prospect House or activities in Albany or Binghamton.

What appeals to you the most about electrical engineering as a scientific practice?

I was always curious how a radio or TV works. In 1961, in Poland, my parents purchased first TV and had troubles with it. I was able to repair this set by changing vacuum tubes. This was not a very difficult task, but I was interested how this TV set works.

What appeals to you the most about IEEE as social and professional association?

I am able to discuss variety of engineering topics with many engineers.

Do you wish Emily and I could speak Polish?

Yes, I do.

How come you never tried to teach Emily and me Polish?

Why do you think Mom was attracted to you?

I don't think this has any think to do with electrical engineering. Please ask Mom this question.

Do you consider yourself a riddle?

No, I don't.

Describe my dissertation.

It is a very difficult and challenging task, especially when you write with constraints.

Does the second World War loom in your consciousness?

Yes, it does. When I was in Poland, only my parents were my family. My father had only one cousin in village next to town of Glogow. Both of my parents lost all of their family members in the war.

How do you feel about the practice of writing (in any language)?

I am more comfortable to write in Polish.

How do you feel about having conversations in English?

I do this automatically and don't have any feelings.

How do you feel about having conversations in Polish?

Not much different as a conversation in English.

Do you believe human nature is inherently evil, inherently good, or something in between?

There are three categories. All of the above. It is a human nature.

When I was a child, I once asked you how come you didn't attend church with the rest of the family and you told me that it doesn't matter what you do but what you believe in your heart. Do you believe this? Do you believe in a God?

I do believe what I said to you. I do believe in God, it has a power that can't be comprehended or explained.

Discuss a sublime experience you have had.

Say something about how constraints operate in writing.

There is a limited writing with constraints. If you don't know a language well, that is also a constraint.

Say something about constraints, unrelated to writing.

Any rules or laws that we impose on ourselves.

What is the nature of our relationship?

What do you most enjoy about watching sports? About playing sports?

I want my team to win. I also want to win.

Soccer: is it a cultural style?

Yes, it is. In South America or in Europe people are very involved with this sport. When we visited Italy in October, Emily chatted with shoemakers, I continue the conversation with them and asked them if they knew Giorgio Chinaglia, an Italian soccer player who played for Cosmos. He is not popular in Italy due to a stock market scandal. However, the shoemakers respected him of his achievements on the soccer field..

Write something random here.

Describe the aesthetic dimension of mathematics.

I am not mathematician. However, I took linear algebra in college with many math majors they enjoyed many proofs. I didn't enjoy their philosophical analysis. I prefer more practical engineering approach with more definite results.

Do you worry a lot?

Not a lot. Sometimes.

Do you ever see yourself in me? in Emily?

I see more in you, perhaps because you choose the same teaching profession.

Say something about your life as a teacher.

I enjoy working with bright students, since they learn much faster.
I don't have to work from 9 to 5.

Do you consider yourself to have a vocation in life?

What is your philosophy of existence?

We are visitors on the earth. The time goes too fast.

What is your favorite pierogi filling?

I like them with meat filling.

Write something purple here.

Purple flowers.

Would you say that the importance to your life of your time in Israel is disproportionate to the three years you spent there?

Yes, I agree.

What is it about electrical engineering specifically, as opposed to other types of engineering (chemical, civil, etc), that appeals to you?

I can design a converter that everybody including other engineers can use.
If I had other engineering knowledge, I might enjoy other engineering areas.

Write something in Polish about your Polish identity, then translate it into English.

Psychoanalyze yourself, briefly.

Any thoughts on poetry?

I tried to give Grandma's poetry books by Juliusz Slowacki to Polish church. She treasured these books, but I felt that they just taking a space. Few days ago, before I made a call to the church, I read some of the poems. I found these poems very enjoyable because they were rich in words that I could appreciate, not like poetry in English.

What do you think it is that makes you good at math?

I use math as a tool. After while you can become proficient in math by repeating particular operations.

In what ways are you different now from when you were forty-four? twenty-four?

When I was 24 I had no responsibilities. At 44 I had to support my family.

How much has living in the U.S. changed you? Do you consider these changes to be for the better or for the worse?

I am accustomed to a US life. These changes are better and I couldn't live elsewhere. However, my 18 years in Poland will be always in my memories.

I met Nobel Prize winner from Princeton University. He came to DeVry for a presentation.

He talked about his village in England where he spent his childhood. My point is that everyone remembers their childhood.

Are you easily impressed by others?

Sometimes.

How do you feel about communism?

I am glad that you don't have the experience to live under communism. Because of that, I have the tendency to be more conservative and ignore socialistic values.

When did Grandma first tell you she was Jewish? How did you react?

I think I was 10. I was in SHOCK!

Say something else about electrical engineering.

Good profession.

Identify something that you don't like about electrical engineering.

In the US, engineers are not respected as in Europe.

What do you think is the purpose of these questions?

You never ask me many questions. I think you would like to find out more about me.

Do you have any thoughts about metaphor or simile?

What is logic? What is its importance? Its beauty?

Name a great pleasure you couldn't do without.

Working on the computer.

Quote a text that you are particularly fond of quoting or that speaks to you in some way.

What sort of things bother you?

I don't like to hear negative comments about me.

How do you view yourself in relation to others? Does this view change depending on the context?

Provide me with a glimpse of the logic of your imagination.

What are your thoughts on family?

Is there a relationship between shyness and constraint?

Yes it is. A person might have difficulty to express his thoughts.

Categorize your attitude towards your physical appearance.

I am not very concerned with my physical appearance.

Name something that I don't know about you that I'd be surprised to find out.

Describe the effect of classical music on your brain. Feel free to be poetic here.

It is relaxing.

Say something else about Grandma here.

Very independent. Went thru a lot during war.

Describe your basic political philosophy.

Anti communist.

Discuss the relationship between chess and constraint.

You have to use logic in both.

Discuss the relationship between electrical engineering and constraint.

Some concepts in electrical engineering are imaginary. The constraint is that you cannot visualize them.

Discuss the relationship between masculinity and constraint.

If you weren't an engineer, you would be _____.

Science major- Geology?

Characterize your desires.

Moderate.

Are you given to introspection?

Has writing about yourself at such length had any effect on you

Not really.

Anything else you would like to add or say.

Thanks. Lou.

To the fact, to the point, to the bottom line

: Context

As I explain in my “Dissertation Defense,” the following poem consists of my late grandmother’s notebook jottings, arranged by me. The parts of the poem that aren’t from her notebooks or papers are taken either from a conversation she and I had (indicated by quotation marks) or from a letter she wrote to a friend in Israel who asked her to document her experiences during the second World War (the timeline and the poem’s coda).

: What was I trying to do?

After my grandmother passed away, on Yom Kippur, in 2005, I decided to keep her notebooks, of which there were well over a dozen. I had no literary designs on them; I simply found her varied jottings poignant. When, for my dissertation, I was trying to figure out a way to write about trauma, the Holocaust, and constraint, I eventually, after endless false starts and deliberation, fastened upon the idea of incorporating some of my grandmother’s writing into the chapter. Upon so deciding, two things became apparent: that there was nothing I could add, in my own voice, that could augment the poem into which my grandmother’s writing had begun to coalesce; that the dissertation chapter I had intended to write about the Holocaust and constraint wanted to be its own, book-length poem. I let it become that, then set it aside, considering it a byproduct, but not a part, of my dissertation. With yet more time to let things settle – if writing with constraints is like cooking with a recipe, then the time adjustments you do or don’t make to the recipe are by far the most important variables in the equation – I came to see that the poem could easily be, if I would let it, part of my project’s warp and woof after all.

To the fact, to the point, to the bottom line

Moses Freibaum – father
Regina Hoffnung – mother

Hoffnung means “hope” in German

living in a city
living in a section
living on a street
living at ____ number
living on a floor

Ita Freibaum
Born: 27 June, 1925

brother Henjek, seven years younger
never entered school war broke out

There are some verbs that cannot be followed by an infinitive

The effort: to afford a degree of safety

It was once a decent meaningful family life
and a happy loving childhood.
All suddenly destroyed without a trace
nothing left, even a single grave to turn to.
Nothing but memories

ea = i : sea
ee = i : free see

oa = o soap
ou = u soup

nuisance – annoyance
decipher – to make clear
hominids – almost prehuman
vivacious (vaiveigies) zyzy
atonement to atone (lo sevetie)
atoning
conciliate unspoken

To foster the desire of reading & writing
To draw conclusion

words used as nouns & verbs

answer	cry	dress
burn	dance	end
cave	demand	farm
cast	dislike	fight

The prepositions: Relationship
with the noun

to, around, aboard, above, after,
against, along, at before, behind,
inside of off, on, beside, besides,
below, between, among.
can be also adverbs

Who is a subject.
What can also be a subject.

Idioms

On the spur of the moment
Bend over backwards
Make ends meet
Get to the bottom of something
Bite off more than one can chew

What are you doing tomorrow?
I'll be writing my composition
A month from now I'll be living
in this apartment for 4 years

October – November 1939 long lines for bread. No electricity. No running water. The winter was severe. Our resources from before the war were used up quickly.

social codes prevail

The adornment of wisdom is humility.

A civilisation is a distinctive form of
culture maintained through several generations.

High society.

“I am in love with my chains.”

- He gave me the credit to which I have no claim.

- Simile of renewal is the snake. (serpents)

The evil with man to live after him

Your sorrow at this juncture does not concern me

His Highness the prince of.

Tendency to look away from

He generate the feeling that

- I don't like to be the recipient of his anger

- It is like chasing the rainbow

- Betray his confidence

To the point – to the fact.

The feeling is above description

- Intellectual nutrient.

Nourishment

Dear Wesiu Congratulation!

I am very proud of you. I always believed in you, and that's why I knew you can do Well.

I know it was not easy, but you succeed, and that what counts. Be healthy and keep up.

You have a wonderful family you get love and support.

Mom.

P.S.

I am glad my computer finely started properly and I could write my note to you tonight.

It is 11:10 P.M. I am tired but happy. nor more nerves

January 1940 I started to wear an armband with a “David Star” under strict law and punishment.

take a course in literature
pay attention to

critical of --
angry at or with me
bored with – on

Before I left Poland, I'd applied for a visa & Passport

- 1) simple I left , I had
- 2) before I'd left I'd had

I had been a widow before I came to the USA.

May 1940 Mr. Johan Klein, a Polish citizen before the war, a “folkdeutsch” by then, assisted by a German military police, invaded my parents home and confiscated what ever valuable things they could find. He knew my father from before the war. My father was beaten up for not opening fast enough the cabinets.

“I remember such a stupid thing which I will tell you”
family cook back then was Haddassah
Haddassah liked me, always gave me food or some treat
 a piece of chocolate a piece of candy
remembers very well:
 I would bring plates to the kitchen
 to help Haddassah because I liked her
Regina: “Don’t do this... Your daughter will never be a lady.”

- sin as a biblical concept
- She embraced him with unguarded emotion
- The devil is not so black as he is painted
- In term of negative result
- It was subject of interest
- To a degree that gives me a sense of sensitivity
- Time will resolve that.
- Can I have your undivided intention.
- She is not acting in a manner befitting a
- Better light a candle than curse darkness
- Death and fight for survival is the natural act of nature
- An uphill battle
- I resent the implication
- It is a terrible thing to waste the mind
- When I'll make up my decision you will be the first to know.
- I was just about telling you.
- The plans seem good
- Maybe I didn't let myself looking this way.
- Study the rules and practice the problem
- The foundation was laid
- The motivation developed
- I see myself reflected in your eyes

Better English

Imply

To imply is to hint
or express indirectly
Speaking or acting can
imply

Ingenuously

mean open frank
candid

Rob

To rob is to take the
contents of something
or the possession of
someone. (illegally)
To rob a desk is to
open and take what
you want.

May

permission

Infer

Is to draw a conclusion
from someone's implication
Only a listener or watcher
can infer.

Ingenious

means clever
inventive

Steal

To take the thing
(illegal) itself.
To steal a desk is to
remove it

Can

ability

July 1940 My teacher Regina Rawicz organized a secret class for boys and girls my age. My cousins Rachel and Miriam Frejbaum and my friends Edzia Friedman and Ada Gotlib were my classmates. After four month the class was closed. The teacher was arrested along with two boys. We studied history, math, Yidish and literature.

It was a shortage of food. Ration cards were less than the minimum. I think it was about 100 gram of bread for a person daily. To buy in the market was too expensive. We started to feel hunger. I went upstate Warsaw, first, with my mother, to bring food. The ghetto was not closed, but Jews were not allowed to leave the Jewish quarters. As I could pass for a Polish looking girl, and my Polish language hadn't a scintilla of a Jewish accent, I felt that I was the one who supposed to help.

By the end of 1940 the Jewish police was founded. They stood at the gates with the German, and Polish police, while the brick wall was build with barbed wire and sharp glass on the top. My way out of the ghetto was closed.

My grandfather, my father, and his brother lost the dairy business on the Plac Kazimierza Wielkiego which was the Aryan side now. They couldn't get out anything from there. It was completely taken away when the ghetto border was implemented.

Arbeitskarte
für Arbeitskräfte
aus dem Generalgouvernement
und
Bescheinigung
über eingezahlte Lohnersparnisse

52 mm

Zeigefinger

Ordnung für Fingerabdruck

hier
Mittelfinger

Vor- und Zuname
Blas

Die Deutsche Reichsbank
im Braubergbau (Bresch)

Diese Arbeitskarte berechtigt nur zur Arbeit bei dem genannten Betriebsführer und wird beim Verlassen dieses Arbeitsplatzes ungültig.

Arbeitskarte pracy uprawnia do pracy tylko u wymienionego pracodawcy i traci ważność po opuszczeniu tego miejsca pracy.

Ця карта праці uprawнює до праці тільки у названого-пробітника-директору і втрачає важність, коли покинути це місце праці.

Arbeitskarte — Befreiungsschein

Gültig auf weiteres. Widerruf vorbehalten

Familienname: Markiewicz

Vor(Ruf-)name: Helena

Geburtsname bei Frauen: _____

Geboren am 4.12.1921 in Gesia Wolka

Staatsangehörigkeit: Polen

Volkszugehörigkeit: Polen

Herkunftsland (eingereist aus): Generalgouvernement

Heimatort: Wawer

Kreis: Warschau

Wohnhaft: _____

(bei Ausstellg. d. Befr.Sch.) Beschäftigt als: Landarbeiterin 1A 2c

Arbeitsbuch-Nr.: A 49 / 09639

Arbeitsstelle: Georg Suhle

Klein-Kreutz/Westhavelland

Trpt-Nr.: 54/717

Im Inl. seit 26.9.42

Ausgestellt am 2.8. 1944

(Dienststempel) **Arbeitsamt**

Brandenburg

*) Dem ausländischen Arbeiter/Arbeiterinnen auszuspendigen!



Memorandum

Date: March 16, 1998

Subject: Social Arrangement

From:

Name: Helena Goodman
Phone number: 253-1129
E-mail:

To:

Name: Mr. Melvin Katz
CC:

Notes: I would like to make some changes in our social arrangement, that means that as long as you reside in Valley Stream we wouldn't be able to meet every week. However as soon as you move to Brooklyn the whole situation will change, and we will be able to meet as much as it will be possible. I am sure you understand the difficulties in traveling for you as well as for me. Take care and be healthy!

- He created the seeds for his own distraction.
- Agreed in principal.
- Referring to the fact.
-
- How to live up to my image
- He is reticent
- He is excessively inquisitive
- He looks ragged and poverty stricken
- On the spur of the moment
- Bend over backwards
- Make ends meet
- Bite off more than one can chew
- Meet someone half way
 - I did nothing special
 - I didn't do anything special
- One good term deserves another
- to get by To take hold on
- A tit for a tat
- He is very prowessful.
- Social codes prevail

“If I wanted to forget, I couldn’t”

March 1941 the food ration was smaller, we were hungry. We could not afford to buy on the black market.

Chapter. 16.

Accounting for Notes Payable

Credit_ Charge-account

Promissory Notes basis

represent formal credit

for period longer than 60 days.

- Can be used on the installment plan
- transaction of large amount of money

Advantages – The Note holder – has: specific evidence, - the note carry interest, It can be borrow money from bank based on the note as a security loan.

Payee – Maker. – Amount – Period of paym like in check.

Calculating Interest

$$\text{Interest} = \text{Principal of note} \times \text{Rate} \times \text{Time}$$

Principal – face amount

Rate – percentage

Time – terms/monets days. year.

360 – year.

Intellectual stimulation

I realized with delight how happy I am. –

- Anticipate with a degree of anxiety

- He was not up to a losing battle for a principle

- renewed vitality

- I have derived security from the certain and known sources

- Never had a Jewish education in sense of orthodox religious

interminable long.

admonished serenely

- natural intense

- Time and patience

Motivated by fear

- The magnitude of

- Hypothetic question

- My growing sense of lost (not to share)

Invented tactical decisions.

- To assess a situation

- To play and act who you are not.

- It is no use of thinking this way

- Perished in this preposterous

Like a new pair of shoes a pleasure to put on and pain to wear

- Human endeavor

Literature

Thomas Mann. A Sketch of My Life.
Wladimir Gdyakhovsky, MD. "The Price of Freedom"
Simone de Beauvoir.
Raquel. The Jewess of Toledo.
Blind Faith. by Joe McGinniss.
Lyndon B. Johnson. George Reedy
Golda Meir: Woman of Valor.
Maimonides.
For The Record. Donald T. Regan
How the Jewish People Live Today. by Mordecai T. Soloff.
1962. Camille: The study of Claude Monet. by C.P. Weekes.
Behind the Silken Curtain. Bartley C. Crum
Arab. Jaamal Hussein
François Mitterand. 1996
Thomas Jefferson. by John Severance
Breaking Free: A memoir of love and Revolution. Susan Eisenhower
Emily Dickinson. by Bradley Steffens
The Making of a Jew. Edgar Bronfman
Raul Hilberg. The Politics of Memory. 1996
Howard Fast. Redemption. 1996.
Carl Sagan. Ellen R. Buth & Joyce Schwartz
Mark Twain. Richard B. Little
Ernest Hemingway.
The Hidden Pope. Darcy O'Brien
Dwight David Eisenhower. Marian G. Cannon
Wait Till Next Year. Doris Kearns Goodwin.
The Buck Stops Here. Morrie Greenber.
Belva Plain. Fortune's Hand.
Julius Caesar. Roger Bruns, A.M. Schlesinger Jr.
Chaim Potok. The Chosen.
Eleonore Roosevelt: The Reluctant First Lady. Loraine Hickie.
Isaac Bashevis Singer: Lost in America
The Family Carnovsky. J.J. Singer
My Life with Dreiser. by Helen Dreiser
Song of the Valley. Sholem Asch.
Ted Kennedy: The Legend and Tragedy. Max Lerner.
Mary Higgins Clark. "A Cry in the Night"
Black Velvet Gown. Catherine Cookson
Kathleen Kennedy. by Lynne McTaggart
Bright Star of Exile.
Georges Simenon
Calvin Tomkins. Living well is the best revenge.
Howard Fast. The Immigrants.
Kissinger. Marvin Kalle

July 1941 I attended a sewing course organized by ORT, by Mrs. Roma Brandes at Leszno Street, in order to report to work knowing a trade.

Dear Marianne.

Thank you enormously for the birthday present “Beyond Stich & Bitch” I like it very much. It is fun to read the stories, and confirm what I always felt; that it is much more behind the ball of yarn and a pair of needles.

It brings reflection. It takes one back to the first uncoordinated struggle with the needles to a surprisingly flow of rows of knitting. Self designed, and scientifically calculated; what a trill! Anyway, the fingers do the work, but the thoughts are free to wander the other way. Call it meditation or relaxation. It doesn't matter. Strange how a mundane work can ease stress.

It is also good to find out that there are more fanatics and addicts to yarn. It justified my own. I feel like I was sitting in a doctor's waiting room with patients of the same illness. That makes someone feel much better.

Thank you again for a thoughtful present.
Love Mom.

Conditional Phrase

If I can I will

If I could I would

I wish I could better.

I hope I'll learn soon.

She hopes to be able to do it.

If I were you I would do it.

If I did know I would not go there.

If I have been there before,

I would have not agreed to pay him.

“I was on my own. I was alone.”

1939 in Otwock there lived over 14,000 Jews, making up about 70 percent of all inhabitants. In 1939, at the beginning of the occupation, Germans burned down Otwock synagogue. During the fall of 1940 they created a ghetto. On August 19th, 1942 a liquidation of the Otwock ghetto had started. The Germans shot about two thousand people; almost seven thousand were transported to the death camp in Treblinka. In Karczew the Germans created a labor camp for Jews. Most of the prisoners were killed at the end of 1942.

Between elation and despair
Therapeutic talk
Inability to feel Pleasure
Fey satisfaction
Hides fear of social and
intellectual embarrassment
It is relatively small, but adequate
in depicting the essence aspect
Recapture the past
equanimity
Money corrupted by democracy
Mutation in attitude

Evolutionary imprint
Altruism and exploitative instinct

What can I still believe in?
I want to know. I want to know

deviate – turn aside
aberration – deviate from normal acti
Ambivalent – uvepezy
Abate become less
obviate – zopolenc
Obtrude – namucae
Redirect – reverse in space
Restrain – keep in limit
Retrieve – the gain back
sparse – not much
trace – not many

What a suspicious mind people have
Your imagination left out the excitement and climax of the evening
Saturate your mind with proverbs
Above all, don't allow yourself to be deprest by dark thoughts They become your own
worst enemies

Summer 1941 It was getting extremely crowded in the ghetto. A lot of people were brought from other parts of the country and upstate Warsaw. A lot of homeless and sick people on the Street. The typhus epidemic broke out and spread very fast. People died, and often were not buried. In the morning corpses covered with paper were lying on the street. This scenario was so deeply engraved in my memory, that I could never erase it.

My mother got sick. We couldn't get the medicine. I was the only one who could pass for a Polish girl on the Aryan streets. I smuggled myself out and into the ghetto. I got the medicine, saved my mother's life. It was too late for my mother's sister, and for my father's brother. Both died from Typhus.

To my very dear grandson Louis!

I feel very blessed to be today with you, and proudly congratulate you on your college graduation.

Your hard work during those four years of study brought you closer to achieve your goal in education toward a bright meaningful future.

You are very special to me. Watching you growing up was my greatest pleasure, and I am gratified looking at you today seeing what a lovely decent young man you are.

I wish you all the happiness; health, prosperity and good luck in whatever your life brings you.

With love and pride Grandma
May 13, 2003

Dear Staff,

Thank You enormously !!!

My English is too poor to express my gratitude to all of you, who made my "Farewell" event so, overwhelming honorable, fairly memorable, and unforgettable. It will stay with me till the end of my life.

Rosie's reading Wislawa Szymborska's poetry, culminated the event, and deeply touched my soul.

Thanks for the concert Tickets. My grandson will accompany me on January 18, 2004. Special regard to Dolores for her surprising thoughtfulness.

I wish you all good luck and success.

With great regards

Helena

January 1942 I reported to work to the Jewish Committee. I was sewing and repairing clothes for children.

I enjoy eating not I enjoy to eat

sick – sick <u>ness</u>	gently – gentleness
foolish – foolishness	bitter – bitterness
sad – sadness	happy – happiness
ugly – ugliness	kind – kind <u>ness</u>

forward backward toward leeward

Aphasia – loss of speech

obtain – powfymae

obtain – otakzymae

(v) compel

(v) constrain

(s) constraint

a broken promise

Play on the wrong side of the law

This is the only mistake I don't feel guilty.

To loose the objectivity.

Emily Dickinson. 1830 – 1890

Poetry in Motion

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all

And sweetest – in the () is heard
And soon must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many ()

I've heard it in the chillest land
And on the strangest sea
Yet never in extremity
It asked a crumb from me

It's hard to act rationally by highly emotional issue
Reserve distance
The feeling is above description
It is like chasing the rainbow
I don't like to be the receptience of his anger
To the point, To the fact to the bottom line.

March and April I must tried to smuggle some food for my family. We all were starving. I succeeded twice. The third time I hardly escape shooting. The last time I was caught by an Ukrainer policeman and beaten almost to dead.

“I never told anyone this”
grandfather watching on the corner
mother putting a scarf around my neck
“Don’t go.” “I have to.”

snuck out with a group of workers:
“like Em’s graduation, I didn’t have the
ticket”

“I didn’t survive for myself. They wanted me to.”

Smithsonian. March 2004
Philipino Dead mural of POW.
From Batan Peninsula – to camp
O'Donnell Hell is a state of mind
O'Donnell was a place. —
Suffering is for ever. — it is
beyond words or even
comprehension.
Statement to the affect
definite Thread
consumed with anger for —
Our

2) Our awareness of God starts where self-sufficiency ends. We pray for health and justice because we cannot achieve that on our own.

Dim outline.
Phantom
A long cord of connection

On May 1942 I left the ghetto for the last time. It was not possible to come back. Round ups and shooting was every days routine. Although I still sporadically tried to send in some food to the ghetto I seldom succeeded.

I survived and I feel the guilt

Dreams had the same quality of strangeness. In a dream, you reached out to touch something and it dissolved (spring recess).

Being an old lady is a wretched business
like being at a party and overstaying
your time, and then just staying
on and on and your hosts are
dying for you to leave.

Letter to my Mother

You've suspected everyone of
falsehood of ulterior motives
Fate didn't grant you much joy
For you never know a person
unless you've known his childhood
Some sort of distant relatives
sheer obstinacy (upon)
to the best of my reckoning
destitute

“Emotionally free.”
David Viscott

Modus Vivendi

Sense of duty
No significant political
importance
Generate pressure
Maria Riva
Marlene Dietrich
Erica Young
The Devil is large
Portrait doesn't have
a center portion.
Distorted the most
inexcusable extent
Purification of the language
is silent

Israel: Country of every possible contradiction and every possible paradox

In July 1942 the deportation started, and the small ghetto where most of our family lived, was first to go. I lost my entire family after a long struggle with hunger and sickness.

Negative

inability	injustices
inaccessible	injustice
inaccurate	insecure
inaction	insensible
inadmissible	insensitive
inalienable	insignificant
inanimate	insincerity
inappropriate	insupportable
inapt	invariable
inattentive	ineffable
(inbred)	inefficient
incapable	inelligible
incessant	inept
incivility	inert
incomparable	inexorable
incompetence	inexperience
inconceivable	indistinct
inconsequent	indivisible
inconsiderable	inedible
inconsolable	inaffable
incorrect	inevitable
incontinence	inexpressible
indigence	inexplicable
indemnity	informant
incompatible	inseparable
incurable	inopportune
undefensible	insincere
inexact	instability
inexcusable	insuperable

- It was all been swept away by a catastrophe & the passage of time
- It was at the end of my rope.
- But someone awaits something without knowing it, and suddenly the slightest sign, the slightest summons takes on an unexpected dimension.
- The hidden grace of this —
- To maintain my nights
- Experience has proved
- All the daily necessities
- Try to coax her into a happier frame of mind.
- Beyond past redemption
- To make a supreme effort.
- Being addicted destroyed your capacity of choice

Pronouns

Demonstrative

That

These

Relative

Who

Whom

Whose

historic event this is a
historical writer politic advice
he is a political adviser

Aphasia – loss of speech
Potencial (Potencia)

A few month later I was caught on the street in Warsaw, and brought to a temporary camp to a former High School, and send to a labor camp in Brandenburg, Germany; under my false Aryan birth and baptized certificate, as Helena Markiewicz. Later I was taken to a German home as a domestic servant.

Referring to the fact.
In memory of.
Remembrance
- Question your judgement to the level.

I have gone away from God but not from my heritage

“You send me out. Will I see?”

Dear Hospice Friends:

I have the highest respect for all of you, for your devotion toward the dying people. Your patients come here actually with a death sentence, and you provide the best care for them in a dignified way to ease the pain and anxiety at the end of their life.

I can say that I learned here more than a few operations on the computer database. I learned compassion and understanding the needs of people at the last stage in their life. I learned that it is someone here who has the ability to bring comfort at the most critical moments in a person's life, as well as help to sustain the human dignity till the very end.

I am infinitely grateful to Marion for her help, support and understanding. It has been a meaningful experience for me, and I feel privileged that I could in that minimal scale contribute something to your humanitarian mission.

Thank you for that.

- Trust – but verify the facts
- Luck directed you to desire
- Human life span —
- ease your fate to the wind
- Alert to the hint of drama

- Monumental challenge with a spasm of rationality.

knowledge

Intricate

- Your sorrow at this juncture does not concern me
- Only saints continue to love where no love is schemed
- Experience a sense of loss a sadness without definition.

- A brief smatter of conversation
- Renewed will to study.
- Friendship riped to a point.

Inanimate objects can't complain

- The hidden space of this.
- It is beauty it has an appeal.

- His Highness the President of the US and Protector of their Liberties.

- To the full extend
- False sense of real being
- The condition of acceptance

Maintain the semblance of a normal life

Date 18 line. down.

4 lines

Insite Address

double spaced

Salutation

ds

Body

ds

Paragraph

ds

Sincerely Yours

4 lines

Name

ds

mw : yk

You either play your role or leave the cast. I never had the courage to leave the cast.

“Your father leaving Poland was a mistake on my side.”

“This is what I didn’t write about because I didn’t want to be a hero.”

coarse, heavy black bread and a pint of milk:

“If I only had this in my life, I’d be happy”

(Richmondton, Staten Island, 1988:

“I didn’t say anything at the time, but
if someone would tell me in 1942 that
I would be here and feed the ducks
with the bread, I wouldn’t believe it.”

- I am not disposed to agree
- Steadfastly refuse to accept
- It was reluctant to admit his failure
emotional capacity
- Motivated by love
- Compress and leave behind
- A token link with supreme effort.

- Principal of unity – discrete rectified intensity.
- Someone awaits something without knowing it and suddenly the slightest sign, the slightest summons takes an unexpected dimension.
- The hidden grace of this —
- To maintain my rights
- Expedience has proved
- All the daily necessities

“small episodes come to mind”

“I never think about them”

“sometimes I lie in bed and think about my mother – she wasn’t a bad woman”

The memory of a sealed well
filled with water and leaking nothing

“the lineage is very chaotic”: a coda

Dear Miriam,

April 22, 1999

Now something from a real life before the war. A lot of hope and “simches.”

It was a rich, happy, lovely family, and great social life in Warsaw. There were synagogues and schools. Theaters, movies and parks. Family gatherings; weddings and holiday celebrations, vacations in the summer time upstate Warsaw. I remember my youngest aunt “Perele’s” wedding shortly before the war, a real great simcha.

I often visited my cousins, Renia, Gita, Rachel and Miriam. They were close to my age. One or two years younger or one year older. We met at our grandparents home. A lot of laughter and youth privilege prevailed.

I was prepared to attend my second year in Gimnazium. My brother Yichil was ready for his first class. He was seven years old.

The festive Friday night dinners, especially at my grandparent home, was kept in my memory, like a relict for the dark time, and gave me hope for survival.

- **Our grand parents:** **Ide-libe and Sarah Frejnbaum**
- **Grandfather’s sister** **Feiga and Alter Frejbaum** (she married a Frejbaum)
- **Grandmother’s sister** **Topcia**

- **My parents:** **Moshe and Rifka Freibaum/Hoffnung** my brother
Yichil
Tovie

- **My father’s brothers:** **David**, his wife **Chava** and two daughters **Rachel**
and
Miriam
Shmil, his wife **Cepora** (Czesia) and one son **Tovie**
Chaim, his wife **Chana** and one son **Tovie**
Avrum, shortly married before the war. Wife and
one daughter

- **My father’s sisters:** **Chanke** and her husband **Akiva Ravicz** Two
daughters
(Rifka) **Renia Gitele**

Baske and her husband **Jacob Grizhendler** one son
Tovie

Perele shortly married before the war. Husband

Joseph

Sukiennik No children before the war.

The boys were born in the 1930-32 and all named after grandmothers father. "Tovie."
My brother had two names after grandfather's father and grandmother's father.

With love and best wishes Ita

Therapy

: Context

Writing often makes me anxious, sometimes despairingly so, yet still I want, even like, to do it. When I began this project, I was using constraints in a simple but effective way: to trick myself into being productive. Playing poker so satisfied an urge for sameness and repetition – for choice, bracketed – that, without some clever diversion from this diversion, I could have happily continued with it, depressed, forever.

: What was I trying to do?

More than ending the project where it began (with considerations of anxiety), more, even, than trying to fulfill my fantasy of working by not-working, what I was trying to do in this chapter was what I always try to do in therapy, that is, articulate what I didn't know I knew about a well-known set of personal concerns, and, in so doing, make them no longer my own.

Therapy

That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's soul. It is the only civilised form of autobiography.

- Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"

: Week One

March 3 2011

Louis: I thought a fair bit this week about what would be a good starting point for doing these writing-focused sessions and I guess I should start by explaining for the sake of readers that the idea behind this is when I began my dissertation three or four years ago one thing that interested me about constraint was that it could be used to lessen anxieties about artistic production so I thought it would be interesting to record several therapy sessions now that I'm near the end of the project to explore how I feel about writing and other related issues ok so as I was saying one thing that occurred to me this week was that I think a lot of people become writers well maybe this is what I imagine why people become writers and it's not actually the case but because they feel like they have some sort of message or they want to be heard that you know they want people to read what they write and I've never felt very strongly that way in fact usually I have the opposite feeling I mean don't get me wrong I do like when people read what I write or when I get nice responses but when I imagine other people reading my writing I usually feel a sense of embarrassment or even almost revulsion at the finality of what I've said

Therapist: You mean when you think about other people reading it

L: Yeah when I think about them reading it I sometimes feel embarrassed about how bad certain things I may have said were

T: Well you know you did just send me something the two chapters about your father

L: Right right right

T: which I read so that's what I'm thinking as I hear you tell me about how you feel when people read your work because I just read some of your work so I don't know whether you had that in mind when you were saying that

L: you know I actually didn't it's a weird thing it's like a switch either I really like the idea of others reading my work because I'm proud of it or I'm really mortified and disgusted by it because it feels inadequate or feeble but I do think related to what I just said about not caring too much about having an audience I feel like I got into writing I mean it's not like I one day woke up and decided to be a writer I just more and more got into it because I liked doing it and wasn't too concerned about trying to sort out what its life afterwards would be that if it pleased me while doing it but I think that's a weird way to write to mostly try to please yourself but so the other thing I was thinking of that seems related to this was that in that piece about my father in the context of what we're doing here in therapy

not just in these writing-focused sessions but in general the connections are really really obvious and one theme running throughout those pieces is my father's shyness and then also my own which is perhaps somewhat less obvious there were definitely points in my life when almost nobody I knew least of all myself would have described me as shy but I feel at least in retrospect like I actually was a closet introvert that whole time but was almost in a sense afraid to admit my own fundamental diffidence and this felt in some way related to my feelings about embarrassment about writing I almost too this is strange but I almost feel embarrassed not always specifically at what I've written but at the very fact that I'm a writer I guess I don't live off my writing at least not directly but I still feel like it's a somewhat embarrassing thing to be and I have no idea why I'd feel that way either because there are no particular quarters in my life that would have strongly encouraged me to think such a thing

T: Well what about it embarrasses you

L: Uh it's kind of I don't I don't really know

T: I mean when you think about being a writer and feeling embarrassed what does being a writer mean to you when you're thinking of it and being embarrassed by it

L: I think I'm having such difficulty answering that question because I guess I don't know what it means to me to be a writer exactly I sort of feel that I occupy as a

writer you know I don't know this is the problem with an indifference to audience because having an audience is the easiest way to define oneself as a writer you're a writer because people read what you write I certainly think like a writer and have directed everything or most everything in my life towards that purpose which I guess would be one possible definition of being a writer I also like the definition I forget whose it is that a writer is a person who finds writing difficult to do which is part of the reason why I like doing these kinds of recorded writing because it's almost like writing without actually doing the work it just sort of happens almost effortlessly or as a matter of course I like that way of working it's almost like it almost defies some law of physics that you have to give energy to get energy or something like that

T: Right it's a way around it somehow

L: Exactly I'm just doing what I'd normally be doing anyway having a therapy session but it will magically produce writing that's of some use but I guess the thing that I'm unsure about in terms of definitions of myself as a writer and what I think it means in a broader sense my concerns and anxieties hinge around other people's perceptions of you not that the one thing that I'm pretty clear about now that I'm talking about it is not that I think that uh when I tell someone I'm writer that that person will automatically have a strongly negative reaction in the way most people would if you told them you were a prostitute say I don't think that's the case it's more that it's kind of a silly thing to do to dedicate one's life to it you have to

go so far in a certain direction and maybe in my own situation given my own interests and practices it feels ridiculous too because it's not directly or immediately financially or commercially viable for precisely the reason that I started off saying that I'd like my work to be read but actually not particularly widely

T: So you're engaged in doing something that's not going to have any tangible success perhaps

L: um in certain respects I certainly don't rule out the possibility of success in terms that I would consider satisfying but those would necessarily be in very sort of limited ways

T: Would anybody else that you care about consider you to be successful if

L: I can envision scenarios where most of the people whose terms of success I care about and the people I care about in that regard are writers other artists people like that not so much civilians

T: What about the people that you love people like Shari your family

L: Yeah well Shari I feel like for as long as I've known her has been very supportive and almost takes it as a given that I'm very serious about it that I do good work that I have ability am smart so I've never been worried about oh

am I going to prove anything to her or things like that in terms of more extended family it's certainly not a matter of proving anything to anyone at least my own motivations but I don't know if they'd have quite a grasp on the terms I'd consider successful in the way Shari would not because they're unsupportive but you know I think they're happy to see me do anything I'm their son I don't know if I mentioned this to you but my dad found something I'd written in an issue of a literary journal that was for sale on Amazon I mean a really small little poem-like thing and so I'm listed as an author on Amazon for this one thing and my parents were over the moon for this and Shari and I joked that my parents probably bought every available copy of that issue but to me and this is the way I genuinely felt about it it really didn't make any difference to me the fact that it was available on Amazon that it was published in this particular journal you know I think my parents are content with anything I do in whatever context and you said earlier can you envision some kind of success in what you do and sure it would be if my dissertation got published with a press I really like and respect and the work resonated with people concerned with similar issues it's not that I think my parents aren't capable of understanding or something like that but in order for that press to have particularly much meaning to you you'd have to be aware of what it means in particular worlds be familiar with their catalogue etcetera whereas I think my parents would just be happy that it was a book but you know I think I had written in that essay on my father that unobtrusiveness was his default way of being and also mine and I was thinking that I almost feel like I want my writing to be that way also which is ironic because this whole dissertation project is one large performance you

might not have a sense of that from those two chapters that I sent you but a lot of them make these dramatic gestures others are flashy as a result of the procedures things like that and I was also interested as I've gone on with this project I've become much much less interested in the topic of constraint and in using constraints in a way that would be sort of by-the-book or doctrinaire Oulipian instead I've strayed and sort of done whatever interested me you know those conversational reviews that I've done I mean yeah there is a sense in which conversation is like a constraint but I feel like actually more of what I've done in this project is given myself permission to work in ways that I find exciting and suggestive and whether or not it's constrained in other words I've gotten particularly over the last year or so very very lax about all of this about trying to say something about the subject of constraint and lax about what constraints I use in my own writing um so I feel like I've arrived at a place where I've given myself certain permissions that I almost had to contrive the constraints to grant myself them

T: Well when I read the questionnaire your questions and your father's answers to them I was thinking a lot about what the premise of the book is supposed to be as you had explained it to me and how that resonated in reading the questions and his answers um and just thinking about and I don't know if you want to talk about this but you know just thinking about what we've talked about in terms of your relationship with your father which I know the suggestion had come from your advisor to put in some chapters about him but you didn't have to do that so the fact that you did you

know I think there's something that you have to be interested in in terms of thinking about or expressing something about your relationship with your father

L: Yeah yeah at some point in those questions I ask him what the nature of our relationship is and he leaves it blank and actually tonally there are a few blanks he leaves that are pitch perfect

T: I thought that was really so a lot of that questionnaire seemed so poignant to me there was so much there that wasn't stated that was implied in terms of your feeling about him and the constraints of your relationship

L: Yeah yeah no that piece was like an advertisement for why poets are always so hopped up on silences blanks and caesuras it's filled with them

T: But your questions it seemed to me had a lot of unspoken communication in them too because you know you must have been sure that he wouldn't or couldn't answer some of the questions that you were asking him

L: [sighs] I tried to create questions for him that would hopefully lead to something interesting and usable I wanted to prod him to say suggestive things the approach was to throw a bunch of things at the wall and hope some stuck it feels similar to the way that once I conceive of the way I want to write a particular piece and it feels like it will work or has to be in certain ways for certain reasons then I go about

doing it and then I'll deal with the results later that's a long way of saying that there wasn't any one question where as I was posing it I thought well he'll never be able to answer this or I was fishing for a certain specific answer it was more when I was re-reading it after sending it to you it occurred to me that if you wanted to do a crude psychoanalytic reading of those questions and what they might indicate about our relationship or how I felt about it it seemed like it would be very easy to do

T: Well what's your conclusion

L: Oh well you know I wrote that one question Do you consider yourself a riddle and I don't consider him a riddle exactly but there are parts of his inner life that seem mysterious to me because he is reluctant to or won't or can't articulate them

T: Well I guess yeah I mean on the one hand you've sort of accepted that there are limitations to this relationship you maybe want to sort of leave it at that but then I read these questions and answers and it's like you're saying to him look I want something from you I want more from you and can you meet me in this way by answering these questions and um some of them even seemed you know kind of provocative like c'mon already I'm gonna push you a little bit and how are you gonna respond and then you see that he responds in whatever way he can and can't respond to some of it

L: Yeah yeah I thought it was perfect towards the end where I asked him to characterize his desires and he wrote “Moderate” that’s very him very even-keeled a little evasive and some of the answers were the same way like the “does your heart thrill at the thought of an AND gate” it’s kind of an absurd question

T: Well some of it’s sort of tongue-in-cheek on your part

L: It’s strange to me the interesting question is particularly in terms of how I feel about writing so I obviously have certain traits and characteristics in common with my father but in other ways we’re obviously very very different and I don’t know you know this is weird I almost feel as I’m thinking about it now that in my writing I’m somehow close like all that stuff we said earlier about silences that that’s very close to a way of being that’s similar to my father’s I’ve never really thought of this before but it seems interesting and possibly helpful the point being that those questions I mean maybe I’m just being evasive or wanting to be silent about my relationship with my father but for me I think about those questions in relation to what it means to be a writer well you know here’s an easier way of putting it for me and I’m pretty clear about this as vague as I am about what it means to be a writer I am pretty clear that it’s important to me as a way of being in the world almost I wouldn’t have said this ten years ago certainly but that almost at this point feels necessary to me which feels weird to say because I’ve always heard of and been a little jealous of writers who say that the actual act of writing is necessary to them and I’ve never quite understood that because I’ve always struggled

with the act of sitting down and doing it but the part that feels necessary to me is the part that precedes or goes after the sitting down

T: The sensibility the perception you have about things

L: I think so I don't know that might be what I'm trying to say you know I think the simplest way to put it might be a way of being yeah and I like it too as a sort of *raison d'être* because it gives a purpose to the particular way in which you think about and do things which seems important to me and that also thinking about these recorded chapters I like them because I'm just sort of thinking out loud in them I mean it's inefficient in a certain way because it might take ten mundane or tedious thoughts in order to arrive at one thing that's interesting and insightful

T: Well that would happen if you're sitting down in front of the computer too

L: Exactly except working this way you leave in the traces of that process

T: So you leave in the ten mundane thoughts

L: Exactly or maybe you make it seven and a half you firm up a few transitions improve the phrasing in places but you leave in a lot of dross and filler but you know I wrote the introduction to the dissertation in this way talking into the voice

recorder for an hour or two and I had that same feeling of revulsion oh this is rambling and really only of interest to myself I sound so tedious and uninteresting and then I showed it to my advisor and he really liked it and thought it was doing a good job of framing certain issues so I guess I wouldn't work this way unless I held out the possibility that there could be something in the dross as well

T: Do you feel like you're crafting what you're calling the dross that the end version might have some of those mundane thoughts in it but you're crafting them for a certain purpose

L: I don't know I'd almost say it goes back to the essay writing classes I took when I was an undergraduate and I'd say that it's more that tracing the processes of how the mind works is an essayistic impulse essayists think that abstracting the conclusions from the process in some way does a disservice to the conclusions for me this is very apparent in the differences between essay writing and academic writing in an academic article you know you had ten mundane thoughts to lead you to the idea that you eventually arrived at but the article is supposed to just present that polished idea almost like putting it up on a podium while the essay on the other hand tracks some of the things that led there and that's part of the enjoyment of it assuming you find that enjoyable so that's sort of the way I think that I see it you know it's weird I feel like I'm talking about writing today in fairly theoretical terms which are terms I'm pretty comfortable with that you know unlike what I said about how when I write it's almost like being in a position that's what I imagine to be like my

father's way of being that I'd never thought of that has to do with how I feel about writing and so forth whereas this theoretical rationale about the essay I've been living with it for a decade it's been an animating force underlying my intellectual and artistic trajectory so I can talk about that for ten forty-five minutes sessions if you need me to but it's actually less in terms of what I might hope to accomplish in recording four therapy sessions it almost in a way feels less interesting to me not that I think the rationale is intellectually uninteresting but those feelings of shame and embarrassment are the things I normally have a harder time dealing with

T: well I don't think you or either of us want to just have some sort of abstract intellectual exercise because then you know you're not going to get what you want out of it I keep going back to I mean the part that interests me because you sent me these chapters about your father there must be some sort of reason why these are the chapters you wanted me to read um so I keep going back to that because I guess that's what seems compelling to me that there are all these echoes that you're starting to talk about about the whole topic of constraint and how that's what your dissertation is kind of about and how that's what your father is about in large part and it's also something that your relationship with him is about and that all of those things are things that you must have some feelings about and it's sort of apparent in how you present these chapters

L: one question that was also left blank but that I wanted him to answer and you know one thing I did as I wrote some of the questions is imagined what I'd write if I had to

answer it and sometimes I was relieved that I didn't have to because it would be difficult to do but the one and I wouldn't have a great answer for it at least it would take some thinking the one that seemed really interesting to me is the one where I said discuss the relationship between masculinity and constraint and that seems a really hard thing to do

T: yeah I was wondering about that I was wondering what you had in mind

L: No that's why what I had in mind was geez this would be really important to answer for myself because I'm really interested in what that relationship might be but I genuinely don't know it's like when you pose a question when you're teaching and you legitimately don't know the answer to it those to me are the interesting questions and it felt like there were lots of possible connections there not just in terms of what that might mean with my relationship to my father but in terms of how constraint works in general how masculinity works in general but it's such an intimidatingly broad question I feel like I'd have to then say what are my assumptions about how masculinity works I mean you know I guess one such assumption that seems obvious to me in this context is that men are supposed to be silent and stoic and strong I don't know that doesn't seem too interesting to articulate but it felt like a question that I didn't know how to answer but would like to and actually this seems very relevant to my father he was not big on which I don't actually mind but it seems important and determinative in certain ways he was not big on passing down fatherly advice I remember I've never had thick facial hair

and it didn't come in early in puberty and I was fifteen or so and we were on vacation and I had at that point like one or two little sprouts of facial hair and because we were on vacation and I guess there was no immediate razor or something it had grown a little long-ish over the week and so he saw this lone hair I think I was coming out of the bathroom and of course it looked stupid to have this one little sprout growing though because I couldn't grow any others I was secretly pleased that at least one could grow long but so he looked at me kind of in passing almost and he said "you need to shave your goat"

T: Your *goat*

L: he meant goatee but one I mean it was funny because of the malapropism which he does in other contexts too my family and I find it funny in a loving way though he doesn't because he's a little sensitive like one time he was describing something that was really profitable and he said oh yeah it's a real coal mine

T: heh heh right those are fascinating

L: yeah so that was kind of funny that he called it a goat but really the point of the anecdote was that that comment was the extent of anything I was taught about shaving from him

T: so he had never shown you how to shave or anything like that

L: no no I mean I sort of didn't need to up until a certain age

T: well how do most boys learn about things like that

L: again though it's not like I'm saying oh if only he had done x or y or z then we would have had this better relationship it's not that I think that's the case it's more that that kind of thing wasn't

T: well I mean what if you were to feel that something was lacking because your father didn't show you how to shave you certainly have a lot of disclaimers when you talk about your relationship with him but what if you were to have some sort of feeling that something was missing in that

L: the obvious thing that occurs to me is that I feel like we both can sort of respect each other from afar but doing that sort of thing would involve some sort of intimacy that for him and even quite possibly for me at this point or maybe even then might have felt awkward in some sort of way and that to me feels related to that question of masculinity and constraint it also feels related you know we haven't talked about this much I think I mentioned it once but that as I've gone on in my twenties not by design or anything I've felt increasingly more comfortable my closest male friends are either gay men or men who routinely get mistaken for being gay and growing up in the way I did where my life until the age of eighteen was like the

definition of heteronormativity all of my close male friends in high school were on sports teams myself included my best friend Nick was the captain of the football team named the best football player on Staten Island the point is not that we were fairly jock-ish the point is that we did a lot of things that were typically I mean for as foreign as so much of it seems to me now I know very well what it means to be around typical heterosexual male culture and actually the last live poker game that I regularly played in with a group of guys on the Upper West Side who I was only really friends with through poker it was before I got good at poker basically I stopped going because it stopped being worth my while I could make so much more money online so partially I stopped going for those reasons but partially too these straight male rituals which poker is of course a big one had begun to feel absurd to me but it looks like we're out of time

T: Yeah it's time

L: Ok [gets up] so I'll see you next week [picks up coat and book] oh you know that's funny

T: what's that

L: I've been carrying around this book for the last few weeks reading it on the subway

T: what book is it

L: Manhood by Michel Leiris which I just realized is a funny title in light of what we were just talking about

T: certainly

L: the reactions I've had as I've been carrying the book around are interesting Leiris is kind of this cult figure so those who see the book and know of him get enthused but most people even writers and intellectuals don't really know who he is and so I've had some confused looks especially since the book has this ridiculous subtitle

T: "A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility" heh

L: it's ridiculous but it's great and the book itself is basically a chronicle of Leiris' awkwardnesses and embarrassments it's an autobiography

T: are you reading it to coincide with these sessions

L: no not at all my advisor had recommended it to me and I've just been slowly reading it whenever I take the subway

: Week Two

March 10 2011

T: So how did it strike you when you transcribed last week's session

L: That was actually interesting normally I really like doing transcriptions I find them relaxing not exactly trance-like that would be making too much of it but that uh you can just kind of go on auto-pilot you're getting work done but it's easy mindless work so I like putting in an hour or two and doing that the point being that I wasn't bothered by anything that was said but I didn't enjoy doing the transcription as much as I normally do and I think that night yeah last Thursday night I was having dinner with a friend of mine who's also a writer and I was telling him that I was recording these sessions and he looked mortified he's done therapy a little and he was like oh when I go in there I just start blabbing stuff that I don't want to advertise but also what I was curious it doesn't directly follow from what we discussed last week but one thing that felt important to me was something I said the first time I ever did therapy I said something to the effect that I felt like writing was in some way a renunciation of living and Dr. S fairly strongly disagreed and said she actually thought poker was at least how I sometimes played and of course she was more or less correct but I guess what I was curious about was not so much is or isn't writing such a renunciation but why it was I felt this way in the past and still do in some sense though less so now I think

T: Well can you say more what you mean by that statement that writing is a renunciation of living

L: it's an awkward thing to articulate but sort of that instead of going out and actively participating in the world you're reflecting on what happens in it so you're sort of absenting yourself from living so that you can document or reflect on it or whatever I mean you're not actually absenting yourself but to me I guess the way to say it would be that it always felt like a necessary condition for me in order to be able to do the work

T: Well do you feel like that's what you do like that's the way you engage with writing cause I think it doesn't have to be that way it certainly could be that way but people have all kinds of way that they write and all kinds of ways that they live

L: you know I almost feel like uh that it's sort of close to how I just live in general but even if I weren't writing I mean I go out and do things and like I've said in the past I've had lots of friends and a very active social life and you know I currently have plenty of friends that are important to me and that I consider close and that I do stuff with but it is the case that I do sort of just like to remain put and avoid people and that started for me this is I think partially why I made a statement like that several years ago because taking reading and writing seriously coincided with a period in my life in college when I was sort of rejecting one model of socialization sort of what we were talking about at the end of last week where I was talking about

you know straight male groups and rituals which at least at the start of college was more or less still what I was sort of doing hanging out didn't just mean sitting around and talking it meant groups of five or ten people getting together and going to bars or clubs I could detail it further but I think that outline can sort of stand in for the general lifestyle and you know not exactly consciously but I didn't really want that anymore and it's not like one was the cause and one was the effect but they sort of both happened simultaneously that I took writing and reading more seriously and at the same time I was doing less of that kind of socialization this was also around the time in the middle of college when I met Shari so that part of my life the meeting girls became more settled which gave me less incentive to socialize in that way so yeah that all seems related to me and it wouldn't be a stretch to say perhaps that the impulse underlying that was fairly anti-social in nature I wanted to deal with fewer people than I used to and then you know Shari's fairly similar by temperament she's always had a small number of close friends and that works for her um so I mean that doesn't exactly answer the question but it's to say that I don't like to be bothered with lots of things that go on in the world and actually that's why annoyingly I've started playing poker again in this last week which is fine but this isn't the time I have a lot of other work to do right now

T: How much time did you spend playing poker this week

L: Um I started out just a little but yesterday I played like four or five hours I'd say

T: So what's your thought about why you went back to it now

L: My thought is that I seem to like doing these behaviors or gestures that are very obvious in relation to what's come up in a therapeutic context so I'm talking about writing now and in the past poker was a big thing for me in terms of how it was conflicting with writing and my work and I do more or less agree with what Dr. S said that for me poker works along those lines because oftentimes I'll play when I'm vaguely bothered or anxious about issues about a career as a writer stuff like that

T: So it's an escape from the anxiety you feel about those things

L: Sure and earlier I said that I like transcription because you can go on auto-pilot poker is somewhat similar for me another thing I told Dr. S is that some people who take poker seriously or play it professionally almost view it like an intellectual challenge and it is in a certain sense but it's a completely facile one most games are they're engrossing but they're simplistic in certain important ways and for me I always liked poker and games in general more for the repetitiveness of it

T: So I mean you're having these questions about whether certain things that you do provide you with an escape from

L: from what

T: well that's the question from what so you know poker is an escape from certain anxieties about writing you're wondering if writing is an escape from being more fully engaged in life in some way

L: well poker for me is an escape in the way you described but I feel fairly clear that I don't view writing as an escape from life or something like that it's more that it allows me to live in a way that over time has become more and more amenable to me so escapism which is a term I don't really like it implies that you should be doing something else if I were using writing as an escape from life it would imply that I should be living some other way and I don't think that's the case I mean there was as I outlined earlier a gradual unconscious rejection of certain ways of being on my part that coincided with writing but it was less an escape than a rejection actually

T: Well but I thought that when you said you view writing as a renunciation that it did have something to do with avoiding something maybe this is just kind of a semantic point or something I don't know but first of all renunciation is a pretty strong word so to me it sounds like the question in there is are you using writing to not participate in life in some way is that your question I don't agree or disagree that writing entails that but I'm curious what brings that to mind for you

L: yeah that's what I'm interested in also let me saying something somewhat different but that felt related as you were talking one thing that's always bothered me about my relationship to writing is that lots of writers talk about the importance of community to them and for me I've always associated community with being in or regularly going to a place or at least that's what I thought of writing communities from afar but it used to give me a lot of anxiety like how does one insert oneself into a pre-existing community and there's more I want to say about community but one quick thing I wanted to say was that I was talking to a professor of mine four or five years ago before I had ever published anything before I knew particularly many writers and wasn't actively involved in many things so I was asking him that sort of question how does one become a poet and obviously it's just a gradual thing but one thing that he said to me that stuck with me was that your contemporaries are just the people you find around you in other words it's less a matter of trying to insert oneself into pre-existing structures than just developing relationships organically and now that that's happened for me in certain respects I see how that process works and I always associated these anxieties too rightly or wrongly so with the fact that I was from New York originally for me this was just the place where I happened to live like any other place I didn't come here to make it and so at least for a little while I didn't think that individuals could have access to seats of power in the way that if you come here from somewhere else if you're into poetry say you start volunteering at readings or running them or whatever and get to know people that way I never really wanted to do those sorts of things yeah I'm pretty clear about that and so I imagined that that's how

those things happened and I figured well temperamentally I'm not like that I'm not ambitious in that specific way and so I'll never get by or fit in in that sort of world and that relates too I've told this to a number of people over the past couple of years that when I first got into reading and writing I was really nervous around other intellectuals writers and artists in a way I never had been around other people I never before had any strong feelings of social discomfort but it felt so foreign to what I'd grown up knowing and of course something about intellectual activities interested me in them and made me want to pursue them further but for me the key thing is that it was much less about socialization than it was about the work itself so actually all those kinds of poetry cliques and gossip and stuff that feeds a big part of it and has to do with reputations and opportunities and things like that that really feels uninteresting to me it almost feels like high school and in high school as I've told you I mean I had some of the regular discontents and anxieties but for the most part I was reasonably happy I had a close group or two of friends I was friendly with a lot of other cliques dated and so forth so I did that and as I was saying earlier today I sort of rejected that consciously or unconsciously and then you know at least from afar some of those artistic intellectual worlds seem not too dissimilar to me certainly within the Graduate Center the community I know best it's a huge department most English Ph.D. programs matriculate ten-ish students per year whereas my department matriculates somewhere between thirty or forty in any given year which means that the department has around three or four hundred active students and I actually like

that I mean good lord I know people in twenty person departments I can't imagine life like that

T: You'd better like the other nineteen people or you're in trouble

L: Exactly and even aside from amicability and basic pleasantness what if you want to meet peers interested in similar things to help excite and generate ideas anyway point being to me it's almost sort of laughable that certain cliques consider themselves the "cool kids" I mean I don't think any of them would articulate it quite that way but they certainly act that way and I should say that these feelings on my part aren't a feeling of rejection like oh if only I knew more people at the Graduate Center I mean now I feel like a bit of dinosaur because I've been around for so long but for most of these eight years I've been very involved in life there and had lots of different groups of friends and acquaintances and so on the point being these feelings aren't bitterness on my part it's more like well mortification is probably too strong a word but amazement that these structures *still* exist even among people who pride themselves on moving past normative structures and it's probably just the way humans socialize but this is all maybe just a long way of saying it wears me out and I don't want to bother with it which I first started to feel maybe a decade ago and have been acting on it ever since so writers communities what was the point

T: I think you know you're trying to circle around the question of how is writing a renunciation of life and then you got to talking about you feel like you like to avoid the writing community you're talking about ways that you kind of feel more comfortable keeping yourself apart

L: yeah one thing I've noticed is that I really like one-to-one models of friendship I mean it's weird because as you were just talking I was thinking well geez you know it's true that I prefer to remain a little apart but at the same time I've found all sorts of ways to draw other people friends acquaintances even family into the orbit of my dissertation collaboratively and at times I feel almost embarrassed that I've done so and for most of the collaborations the way I did them was I'd approach a specific person who's very well suited for the specific thing I'd like to do it's only ever with people I feel comfortable working with where there's a good pre-existing rapport and a mutual interest in some topic the point being as you were talking I was thinking that these collaborations would suggest that it's not the case that I don't want any human contact or something extreme like that it's more that there are certain terms I'd prefer it to be on and one thing I actually do feel about one-to-one models of friendship in general is it doesn't feel like a very New York thing particularly in artistic and intellectual circles everyone myself included is always very busy and even though we're all in the same city it's a genuine effort to get to Jackson Heights from Brooklyn Heights it's not a very easily sustainable thing unless you happen to live in the same neighborhood I almost feel like that model of friendship is almost outdated or anachronistic it actually feels related to me

to Facebook to that kind of networked socialization I'm on Facebook but before I joined around the time when it first started someone sent me an invitation to join and the idea that you had to count up your friends really bothered me it was a strange unpleasant idea to me I think in high school I would have cared how many friends I had that's the mindset that I'm talking about and this is why it bothers me even in writing communities most writers will have like 1,500 friends on facebook and I understand that you know we're all involved in this obscure enterprise and in it together sort of but it does also seem a little absurd to me and one quick digression I went to a poetry conference last summer and a lot of well-known people from the poetry worlds I follow were in attendance which made me anxious in the ways I was just describing not feeling a part of a certain community and so on and I realize that it's just a matter of doing your own work which eventually puts you in conversation with people but so I reacted after one of the days at the conference by going home and sending friend requests to like ten or fifteen writers some of whom I'd met some of whom I hadn't and this is not uncommon or extreme Facebook behavior but I'd never done this before and most people just accept your request they see that you're friends with other writers but one of them wrote back to me and said "I'd like to think friendship is more than just a matter of pressing buttons if I met you and I forgot I'm sorry but just let me know how you know of my work or if I should know about your own or whatever" and actually it was very nice because I had followed his work for awhile I told him about my own it was just so much more human and personal

T: Well there's certainly I mean Facebook is such a complicated multi-layered way of interacting with people that I'm sure people will if they haven't already write dissertations about it but um I think that all the things you're saying are pretty much about the same thing which to my ears is your conflict about keeping yourself apart and joining the fray whatever joining the fray means to you I think that you know maybe there's some way that we could think about what it means to be a part of things and what it means to not be part of things and what your dilemma is about that

L: it's like Whitman where he says he's "both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it" or something along those lines you know there are two things that I'm thinking about that seem important [buzzer rings for next appointment] oh we've got five minutes well the first thing as early as high school I remember having pretty strong feelings that I didn't like being a visible part of a community where you would be like accountable and judged by other people for things that for whatever reasons I didn't really want to be I feel like high school and maybe even a little before I always sort of shied away from that right like the people who were sort of respectable upstanding citizens in the community always seemed a little too paternalistic well for example I haven't thought about this in a long while but in junior high school I made several new groups of friends and most of my life at that time came to consist in hanging out in my neighborhood and all my new friends lived only a few blocks away but they all grew up knowing each other but not me and so all their parents knew each other too and the parents eventually got to know me but my parents never knew theirs and I

never had any of their phone numbers and they didn't have mine the way it worked was if you wanted to hang out you rang their bell and you saw them "calling for" them it was called um and I actually liked the potential for their parents to know my parents actually bothered me on some level probably in part because even at that young age I wanted to drink a little and stuff like that and then that same feeling carried over into high school always because to me that feeling of being visible would make one subject to moralistic scrutiny yeah I don't know it's a long way of saying a lot of what I've been saying today is a long way of saying that I've always had mixed feelings about the idea of community which to many artists and intellectuals is a really big and important notion it's almost upheld as this unassailably good category of thing and I'm not sure that's the case and I'm also not sure that the processes of community formation how they do what they do and hang together I'm not sure it's so simple I feel like people like to use the term a lot when the process of community formation and what makes it continue and remain vital is very confusing and complicated to me at least in literary criticism there's a famous book called Imagined Communities and I forget most of its main arguments at this point something about how the novel creates some sort of imagined community across a nation I mean I forget but the thing that I have always remembered about the book was that he basically makes the argument Benedict Anderson is the author that um a certain type of community whatever one he's talking about he says that a certain type of community coheres by virtue of imaginative acts and I've always felt that that's actually how *all* communities cohere even when they're ostensibly based on geographic proximity

: Week Three

March 17 2011

L: so yeah I had a lot of thoughts in the last week pertaining to what we've been discussing you know it's interesting I'll get to them in a second but it occurred to me that the majority of the thoughts happen in between the sessions and the sessions themselves are more like reports where I come in and extend the full thought but all the actual work happens in between it made me wonder if that's true of all therapy in general or if that's just how these sessions are working because of what I'm trying to do I think it's true of therapy in general and possibly even for writing itself in a way anyway the first thing I wanted to say picks up from where we left off last time where we were talking about well a few of your comments pointed out how the tension or the issue for me was that I kept wanting to remain apart from the fray but at the same time be in it in some way and the other thing I was thinking of in relation to being part of the fray but didn't have time to discuss was that I feel like and I don't think Facebook is the thing that's enabled this but it's made it more pronounced but I feel like there's a way in which to young people growing up and I feel like I was accultured to believe this growing up not at home but through watching MTV The Real World watching movies talking to friends things like that but the idea that seems prevalent nowadays is that the greatest possible affirmation of one's existence consists in being witnessed now I don't think this is actually the case but I think it's what various aspects of our culture inculcate in young people so something like Facebook which is all about

witnessing others and broadcasting the particulars of your own life to all categories of acquaintance it's almost like a willing submission to a surveillance state or even more that one can only achieve singularity of being through being surveilled and of course my own methodology in these therapy sessions both participates in and reflects upon these structures and I know that growing up I really bought into these ideas I remember at a certain point thinking that it would be really really cool like really super-cool to be on The Real World which of course was only the tip of the reality TV iceberg but I feel like my generation late twenties early thirties was really the first generation to grow up with that around I think the first Real World aired in 1990 or so

T: really

L: yeah it was in the early 90's it's amazing to contemplate that it's been around for twenty years I can recall saying to a girlfriend at the time "you know they should make a movie about my life it would be so interesting" but uh the point being that this was something that I grew up with but that I don't consider particular to the place where I grew up or the people I happened to know it seems more of a generational thing and now it's only even more intensified with the way things have gotten since so I mean the one major thought I had this week was that I felt like using constraints in my dissertation was almost a way of acknowledging my own fundamentally passive nature that in other words I don't want to be witnessed you know I'd rather if there were only two options I mean everyone of course

goes back and forth between them and there are probably others as well but if there were *only* two I'd rather be the one doing the witnessing and the watching but the breakthrough to me wasn't so much about the witnessing but the passivity that it was a viable way of existing in the world and this actually came up in the last week or two with Shari and I in terms of some of the sexual stuff we've talked about so yeah I feel like this was the most prepared speech that I've come in here with so far but I did that because I felt like I had reached a point looking over the ground we've covered there were a few topics I wanted to make sure we covered

T: well so do you want to continue with that you're saying there's something about your feeling of passivity or your behavior that you would label as passive that has implications so what are those implications I mean cause you were just giving the example of your relationship and I guess sex in particular

L: that's actually very interesting to me because I've *never* been able to be a sort of alpha male aggressive initiator I've never been comfortable doing that sort of thing but finish your question

T: yeah so I mean that's the one example that you gave is there more that you can say about that are there other situations in your life where you'd describe yourself as passive

L: yeah you know the sex thing is interesting to me at times in my life when I was actively pursuing women my approach so to speak was to try to emphasize my passivity so one sort of stereotypical complaint about men is that they're overly aggressive that they're not particularly considerate of what women want things like that so not being that way by nature I would sort of try to emphasize or play up the fact that I was a perfect gentleman

T: well passivity and considerateness are two different things

L: absolutely that's what I was about to say but in a way it's almost it's hard to think back it's been so long since I've had to deal with dating but in a way under the cover of being gentlemanly I was more just hiding my own trepidations or fears or awkwardnesses about being forward but it feels to me even now that it still is a hard thing for me to be assertive

T: so what I'm not sure of so far from the way you're describing it is what's your own feeling about what you're describing as your passivity are you comfortable with it do you feel there's something you need to change about it

L: I think that's a good question because I've sort of considered it and I think the way I feel about it is I actually really like it I feel like it works for me for the most part it makes me feel good it's not like I think well I am sort of passive by nature *but* if only I could be assertive or dominant or aggressive in whatever

context it doesn't have to be sexual it could be a poetic context a career
context whatever then my life would be so much better in other words
that passivity is probably partially temperamental but I feel like it's also partially a
decision a conscious choice to not be involved in certain ways which feels related
to constraint to me

T: so you can use it as an avoidance sometimes

L: no you know I'm

T: cause like in that example you just gave about when you were younger and trying to
pursue girls you just said it basically it was an avoidance of your own anxieties and
discomforts about what was going on with them whether it was an anxiety about
being rejected or your own sexual feelings I don't know

L: yeah yeah no I'm interested in articulating it

T: but we don't have to go back to that example we could use something happening in
your life now

L: well I'm thinking about that because when you described it as an avoidance
and last week I was very reluctant to describe writing as an avoidance it was actually
a diagnosis that I didn't necessarily agree with and similarly here when you were

saying do you be passive as an avoidance I mean certainly it has to contribute on some level but I for some reason would insist that it's a choice that carries certain values with it in other words it's not just oh I'm not sexually aggressive because I'm really afraid x y or z will happen rejection or whatever doesn't worry me it's more that the traditional or conventional subject position that I'm setting up as my strawman here the position of the alpha male or the Casanova is a position that you know it's not just that I want to be passive because that's how I am it's that there's something a little problematic or distasteful about certain other ways of being and actually that feels very much related to the desire to remain above the fray that I articulated last week I mean I can recall telling a friend several years ago and at the time it felt like a big revelation to me I remember saying to him that I felt like there was no way of being in the world that wasn't fundamentally absurd in some way

T: it might be helpful if you could get a little more specific about what you really mean here it's very interesting when we talk about these things abstractly but it's harder to know what we're really talking about that's why I'm trying to get a little bit more specific about what you really mean whether it's about sex or about other things and then we have something to grab onto to really kind of fill out what it is you're trying to get across what comes to your mind when you're talking about your passivity in a particular situation what does that look like how does it manifest itself what are the consequences of it how do you feel about it

L: here's a recent example a couple of weeks ago I was at a reading um and the reading ended I'd been sitting near a couple of people that I'm acquainted with so I talked with them for a few minutes afterwards and by coincidence there were more events at the same venue on the next two consecutive nights and I was very interested in seeing those events as well but for me that's probably more readings than I want to attend in that span of time I had a lot of other work to do during that time I also just like to be at home and rest so I decided beforehand that I wasn't going to stick around after the first night's reading so as I was excusing myself from the conversation and getting ready to go home I noticed there was a writer in attendance whose work I like and know really well who I've written about etcetera so I have reasons to be in conversation with him and have wanted to meet him for a decent while but hadn't gotten around to doing so for one reason or another so this was this opportunity where he was just standing there sort of putting on his coat with that cocktail party "oh I don't really know anyone in the room" sort of look which is actually pretty unusual for this guy since he's well-connected and knows lots of people so this would have been the ideal time to say a few words to him and something in me I mean partially it's that I've cooled a little towards his writing from when I was really into it a few years ago but part of it too was I had reached a point in my aspirations in terms of the social aspect and being connected and meeting people in that way where I just didn't care anymore that like and here I should say to make this scenario even clearer that since I've started identifying as a poet and a writer and going to more and more readings and having reasons to talk to people there you know on a semi-regular

basis when I'm at an event with someone whose work I really like or is related to my dissertation I'll go up and introduce myself and sometimes interesting things come of that but more often I associate a feeling of abjection with doing that that often when I do that I feel really wretched

T: about having introduced yourself to someone

L: no the introduction is fine it's the fact that I don't know as many writers as I might like or that I'm not well-connected that sort of thing specifically and that in an effort to try to be not passive I went and introduced myself and you know the truth is like many writers and intellectuals I have a little social awkwardness but the truth is I've lived in contexts with lots of social normalcy I can carry a conversation just fine with most people it's not really a big an issue for me it varies depending on the context or my mood but in truth particularly when I at least know or am acquainted with others I can be very easygoing in public in that way so it's not even a matter of oh I really clam up and have nothing to say and make a fool of myself or something it's just that to me that form of interaction is not that meaningful I'd rather talk with interact with people on more intimate terms and so the upshot of that story about the reading a few weeks ago was that I just went home because I wanted to go home and it felt like a private acknowledgement that it's ok if that kind of interaction feels frustrating to me isn't particularly meaningful and it's ok if I don't want to bother doing it and not beat myself up over that fact because I've done it for years and it never feels that useful to me I mean

sometimes it is very useful so it is something that's probably not bad to do but so that was kind of a long-ish story about a very small non-incident but I think wrapped up in it is lots of dynamics about activity and passivity when I walked out of the building I thought "oh wow in the past I never would have let that opportunity go by"

T: well would you say that you have mixed feelings about what you did because on the one hand you're saying you know I really didn't feel like it it's not important to me so much anymore and so I didn't have to do it but on the other hand you're saying well you know I guess these things really are useful to do

L: they are

T: so I'm trying to locate what your own feeling is about this kind of behavior

L: yeah it makes sense I think more than anything else the reason that made me feel ok with it is that I've cooled a bit to his work it sort of felt like old news to me at this point I know it well you know if I had something specific where I'm like I'm working on project x

T: so you don't really value him so much anymore

L: exactly the other thing I'll say I don't mind cocktail party contexts readings departmental parties art openings those sorts of things but I only really like them when I know a sufficient amount of people in the room it doesn't have to be everyone there well what I'm trying to say is I only like social interactions when I have a baseline level of comfort with people and I realize that all current friends were once strangers but I prefer to let whatever friendships happen however they happen I don't like to force it so that felt vaguely relevant and I was thinking also this week about ideas of being above the fray and one thing I haven't said is that this is actually it's hard to know how much of it especially at this point I've picked up from Shari but she is someone who *very* much carries herself as being above the fray which I sort of like I did and do find it attractive in various ways but it's also isolating you know for her it works as best as I can tell but what was interesting to me is not that Shari is or isn't a certain way but I know very clearly from being on intimate terms with her that [heh heh] it comes with a pretty strong sense of superiority that being above the fray is never just about not wanting to participate I mean I don't particularly care about vague personal feelings of superiority which I don't have many of like for example you could say that my decision to write a non-academic dissertation is a way of trying to remain outside the fray of academic discourse and there absolutely is a sense in which and I'm reluctant to admit it and this will probably be the only place in the dissertation where I will but there is a sense in which I consider what I'm doing "better" or more interesting than academic scholarship otherwise why take the pains of doing it this way so there is that but at the same time ultimately

I really don't care which is better or worse neither is they're just different things and that kind of hierarchial better-worse sort of thing I think it's actually completely irrelevant so I think those dynamics are in play and the other interesting thing I thought this week is that unlike Shari my father who's definitely someone outside the fray nonetheless doesn't consider himself *above* the fray either that's not a common distinction I'm really parsing hairs here but I think it's a useful distinction in relation to the stuff we've talked about in past weeks about my father he's just an outsider by nature but it doesn't insofar as I can tell it doesn't stem from feeling better or different or worse or rejecting people it's just temperamentally how he operates so I thought that was interesting as well and I had said oh when I write I'm like my father but I think it's interesting that these people who are very close to me and I've been around for long periods of time operate in this way if I started off today's session by saying that constraints have to do with passivity and enabling that or giving myself permission to do that it's interesting that I've unconsciously been around a lot of that in my life at various points how are we doing on time

T: there's about five minutes

L: the one other major well this is definitely the most sort of calculated and scripted session I've recorded but to me it feels like it's getting at the heart of some stuff

T: is this the third or fourth time

L: this is the third I'd still like to have at least another week to be able to reflect on what I said this week though I guess that could go on forever because then there's another week after that and another and so on but let me read this last thought that I'd written because there's no context for it in terms of our conversation so far I wrote that "to write you can't not expose yourself put yourself on the line and stake something meaningful" and I can't remember in what context oh you know why because I've been revising the whole project this past week and what I realized is some of my new revisions and some of the introductory materials I already had are framing the project in gambling terms as a kind of wager or gamble to me at least it underlies what I'm doing here how I imagine intellectual discovery happens taking chances weighing risks using constraints as a way of taking calculated risks things like that it sort of to me almost accounts for why from the first time I ever published something I included almost as a throwaway a line in my bio that I'm a part-time professional poker player you know it's factually correct I make more money from poker than I do from teaching which is more a commentary on my teaching salary than my poker prowess but it's a little off-color to include that in my bio is it necessary and it's not necessary strictly speaking but there must be some part of me that imagines that it is in terms of how I imagine myself not just as a person but as a writer um and you know I don't know that seemed really suggestive to me in relation to passivity and not wanting to be visible that when you write you can't not put something on the line and I think the something that's being put on the line

the thing that's being wagered is yourself you know I've always sort of felt that way and I've always sort of felt and I think this relates to what I consider my fundamentally passive nature I've always sort of felt that that's the *real* difficulty of writing as a vocation and that's why it feels like so much is at stake at least to the writer him or herself

T: so do you feel like the technique of constraint and the different ways you have of recording what you're saying and transcribing it all these ways that you've described as passive forms of getting writing done do you see them all as ways to try to grapple with what feels difficult with putting yourself on the line

L: they almost feel like solutions to me given that it's the case that you can't not put yourself on the line and given that I don't particularly like that aspect of it but I still like doing the thing for some reason then how can I do the thing in a way that works for me and actually working with constraints makes writing like doing a puzzle or playing a game which as I've said to you part of what I like poker and game playing in general it's not just the repetitiveness but the use of logic and the winnowing down of choices you know maybe the last thing I'll say quickly is that my advisor had said talking about that feeling of embarrassment or revulsion that I previously mentioned he said he has a roughly similar feeling and he said something to the effect that um for him it's just part of the process he doesn't know how to eliminate it from the process which makes sense to me but that to him it's usually a sign that something interesting is happening that if you're not

having those feelings of humiliation or antipathy about what you've written in a way he didn't formulate it this way but it fits with what I've been saying if you're not having those feelings then you actually aren't taking risks that are in some way meaningful enough

: Week Four

March 24 2011

L: um yeah I'm not doing too well this week [sigh] I mean I don't even know if I just feel like I have a lot of things converging right now between the pregnancy the dissertation job concerns and other stuff this past week I've been waking up every morning at seven am before or with Shari and that's not normal for me at all [heh heh] normally I sleep till ten or so when I go to bed at two or three as I've been doing I mean really this is the *most* stressed I mean I very rarely get stressed at all you know this is not going to be particularly relevant to my feelings about writing so I think I'm going to shut this off

T: sure I mean why feel constrained by the recorder

L: truthfully I don't feel constrained by it on my way here I thought that maybe I'd be able to tie this all in to writing somehow but I don't think that's going to happen

T: just talk about what's on your mind

Dissertation Defense

: Context

This final chapter is a transcription of my dissertation defense, the process by which a departmental committee ratifies one's considered spumings.

: What was I trying to do?

At no point during the dissertation process – not at the defense, not even now – was I trying to make a definitive, comprehensive claim about the nature of literary constraint. I was, instead, simply trying to put one foot, surely, in front of the other, trying to figure out, not *if* I would survive the writing – since the end could come, thankfully, wherever I wanted it to – but *how*: how to move from point A to point Z, prospectus to defense, in the most convincing manner possible. I still haven't quite figured it out, but the answer, I'm sure of it, requires work, even – especially – when I'm pretending otherwise.

Dissertation Defense

CUNY Graduate Center

April 29 2011

4:02 pm

Ammiel Alcalay: I was telling Joan Retallack about Louis' project just now and she had a very good comment she said that the constraints apparently didn't work in terms of length

All: heh heh

Louis Bury: yeah that was one theme of it among many too many perhaps

Wayne Koestenbaum: do you want to launch shall we begin

LB: yeah

WK: we've already begun so the way this goes as I think you know is that you make whatever kind of statement you want to make of any kind about the process what you learned what you like what you don't like where you want to go state of the art and then we make our comments and then we have a conversation and we go from there

LB: sure well first I'm very relieved to be near the end of this and second what I'm most excited about in getting to do this defense as I think I've told all

of you my plan is to record this defense and make it the last chapter in the project because so much of the project or parts of it at least is about the fact that it's a dissertation so given all the other recorded materials I thought it would be interesting to record the defense itself but what excited me the most about the defense other than just making it official and completing the project is getting to hear responses to the project from three readers I really respect I feel like particularly with the character of Giombrotto the project's fictional editor I feel like I was often interpreting my own interpretations which presented certain advantages in giving a little bit of context at points perhaps adding to the entropy at others so much of the project is about theorizing itself so what interests me the most at this point is hearing it talked about by others how it strikes others and going forward in terms of future plans for it there's still a chapter here or there that needs doing and then after taking into consideration all the advice and recommendations that come out of the defense my plan was over the summer to start revising it and submitting it to publishers and as I do that I'll have to think about is it submittable as a complete entity if I'm only submitting parts of it what parts do I want to submit and so forth and I haven't thought too hard about it but I have various feelings about what would be an ideal situation and what might be more realistic perhaps so that's sort of where I'm at at this point a lot of relief

WK: you've powered you've created I think Bloom would have called it something transumption or I don't know what it is but that you've so

powerfully used to take the transcript as an art and critical tool in here you have interpolated everything that we say already in a very powerful and scary way

All: heh heh

WK: you have interpolated us and what we say is already in your book and that's sort of an uncanny and not totally pleasant feeling

AA: ha ha

LB: yeah I wondered not just in terms of you three but in terms of all the other people that I brought into the orbit of the project I did have qualms at various points about if not the ethics of it if that sounds too grand just how they would feel about it it came up in relation to my immediate family when I did those chapters on my father

WK: that was almost like a joke because I'm going to allow my colleagues to begin and take up most of the time

AA: Mary Anne you want to

Mary Anne Caws: I'm deeply embarrassed I have not seen this because I got the wrong one and so *mea culpa* a thousand times I'm fascinated by Oulipo and all

that I see here I seem to have gotten the wrong thesis and I don't know what to say except I'm deeply embarrassed but never mind that will probably fit into what you're doing

All: heh heh

LB: I think it will

MC: Ammiel I noticed the last line in your copy of the dissertation "I feel constrained by the recorder" me *too*

All: heh

MC: will I ever see it in as it were a hard copy I thought I got it but I must have gotten somebody else's

LB: sure at whatever point you'd like I can do that

MC: well I'm deeply embarrassed but that's happened to me before not like this

WK: wait maybe I supervised the wrong dissertation

All: ha ha

AA: ok well hmm I don't even know where to begin I guess I would begin with maybe a provocative question if one of the practices of traditional scholarship has to do with authority where are you getting your authority from

LB: I think it's a great question to start there are a few places in the project where I theorize what I'm doing in terms of essay writing and as Wayne knows I had intended to study the essay form when I entered graduate school and I'm inclined to think about that question in similar terms by which I mean one of the things that theorists of the essay who are mostly essayists themselves so one of the things that essayists often say about their practice is that without any sort of expertise in one particular area essays take on a whole variety of different topics the writer may not be authoritatively expert on a given subject the essay then has to provide authority within itself so without saying I've necessarily done that within my own project that would be one provisional answer I'd want to try to offer that I'm not prov establishing authority "establish" might be the better verb there I'm not establishing it through demonstrating mastery of all the secondary literature I think I do have expertise in those things and the primary material itself obviously but it comes more from sort of gestures I make within the project itself so that would be I think one possible answer another thing that comes to mind might be and this seems like a somewhat easier response perhaps but there are poetic traditions beyond just the Oulipo itself traditions of writing about or approaching subjects poetically in the last several decades various American poets have called it "applied

poetics” using poetic techniques outside the realm of poetry proper and so I think that methodology would necessarily have a complicated relationship to authority which is where your question becomes important

WK: can I ask a piggyback question because how I would have answered that on your behalf is different can you say something about your tone the by and large *not* colloquial tone that you strike in this because my immediate thought was that one way that you get authority is through a kind of “imperial” isn’t the right word but you have a kind of syntax and a kind of gravity of voice despite there’s a lot of jokes and a lot of colloquialisms but you’re quite constrained within a formal and somewhat baroque way of expressing yourself that claims authority even if it’s sometimes a Nabokovian mock-authority I don’t know if that’s something you want to elaborate on

LB: yeah I don’t know if that’s exactly by design as an authority cultivating gesture I feel like it’s almost the default way I write and I try to unsettle that or force myself out of rigidly working that way and I do that because I almost feel like it’s too serious in some ways

WK: you don’t write like a guy who just got drunk in High School and played sports as you described it’s almost antiquarian

LB: I’m probably compensating or have been for the last decade or something

MC: and that was exactly the question I was going to ask not having read it

All: heh

MC: no yeah but it was about voice if you faked an authoritarian voice might that not at some point give you the authority which you didn't think you had and then you would have I mean could you accumulate authority through a voice which you would pretend to have issuing from yourself and didn't

LB: I think the larger question of voice is a really important one to the whole project and to questions of constraint I felt at points during the project that I was almost trying through writing in so many different ways to act like a ventriloquist which is something Gilbert Sorrentino does a lot in his novels but the one voice I don't adopt by and large is the voice of what I'll call for simplicity's sake normal scholarly prose and I've always found that a really hard way to write from the time I entered graduate school whenever I tried to write a normal seminar paper it never came out sounding right to me I never felt like I knew all the moves or the appropriate tone I mean who do I consider an authoritative literary critic

WK: the three of us

All: heh he

AA: we don't exactly write classic scholarly prose either let's say George Saintsbury

LB: yeah or someone I mention in the introduction to the dissertation would be David Reynolds

All: right

LB: that way of writing always felt foreign or difficult to me

WK: let me just say one more thing and then I promise I'm doing the worst you cannot say you're not going to speak and then speak which is what I'm doing but let me just say this one thing and then I'm going to take the total vow of silence isn't though if one took the 670 pages and found all the sentences that actually do sound like regular academic writing you would probably have a 200 page thesis some of which would be mock-academic writing because in fact what's strange again you don't write like someone who got drunk in high school you actually have a very formal stately kind of academic writing style that's the dirty secret of this dissertation you *don't* write like an impressionistic druggie you have a very formal syntax you like pointing things out you like doing it though in a mock-heroic way you like making fun of it you don't like really doing it because you know you do it a lot but by accident

LB: this is why I was so interested in hearing your responses because I'm not aware certainly not on a conscious level that that's what I'm doing

AA: I guess maybe I need to clarify what I might mean by "authority" to me authority has something to do with evidence and with a certain how can I put it an unquestionability not an unquestionability in any authoritarian sense but in the sense that the way you have stated something is there's no other way to state it and maybe the question I'm asking is that probably in the process of this I'm sure you yourself went in certain directions just to try it out and so I'm interested in having you think about what you said in the preface as you start to think about this as a block of work what are you actually going to do with it that's where I want you to find your authority in the sense of being able to say "ok this was fun but it's not really where I'm aiming this it's not where it needs to go" and I think that's something you really will need to think about because there's a lot of temptation in the fun because some of it is really fun but I don't know where it goes in the sense of your larger project which I think is important and useful and I think you really need to see where your own process has led you to be able to make those calls "this thing really holds water for me and it's saying something and this other thing was an amusement maybe that helped me to practice a certain kind of style maybe dispose of some questions" in other words if you're thinking about doing revisions on this that would be very weird because I think the revisions would be much more ideological or much more structural in terms of decision-making as far as what you think where your points are being made and how they're being

juxtaposed and what the narrative is I mean that was one of the things in the beginning when you were going through things and you were in a block I said “is there a narrative here” and your Giombrotto kind of handles that but I’m not sure if he handles it

LB: sure and I only exacerbate the problem in the way I work in that I acknowledge that everything I’m doing is by nature contingent so as you were saying “was this being said in the only way that it could be said” the whole project is sort of screaming “this could be other than it is it’s provisional it’s contingent it’s arbitrary”

AA: yeah I mean one of the things that happens in a narrative I mean just off the top of my head Stephen Crane will do a thing with time where it takes thirty pages to get through five minutes and then the next section it will be fall or winter or next year I’m talking about pacing pacing not in terms of the internal pacing of each chapter which is generally really there regardless of what it is but pacing in terms of how are you making how do things appear things that in your own I’m sure mind are of a different weight and value how do you put them on a scale that will give them that weight partially it happens very dramatically in that interview with your father a lot of stuff starts to snap into place that brings the thing to a different place but I think it’s something you need to think about

LB: I sort of felt like that last section the miscellaneous section without me realizing it was doing a lot of that kind of work and I mean this is not a strength of the project but I feel like for a lot of this to work you'd need a really generous reader

All: ha ha ha

LB: no really but at the same time it's very much in keeping with a lot the work I'm writing about a lot of these books make demands upon the reader for me this is most apparent in Raymond Roussel in New Impressions of Africa all the footnotes and the parentheses within parentheses within parentheses within parentheses it's unreadable in the sense that you can't follow the grammatical thread of the sentences

MC: parenthesis did you know it's being translated right now by Mark Polizzotti isn't that interesting can you imagine translating that that's just a parenthesis

WK: it's an interesting one

LB: so it was really driven home to me with Roussel I mean New Impressions is this extreme act of digression but even something easier-seeming like Locus Solus is completely tedious to read he describes everything in painstaking detail if he were describing this room which is pretty plain it would take him fifteen or twenty pages

I'm exaggerating but only a little it occurred to me through Roussel something about an aesthetic of deliberate difficulty and I think that relates to what you described earlier as my baroque style

WK: baroque in the sense that the embrace of constraints is the embrace of screens and the screen you arrived with in a way was the tone of I think if I remember from your very first essays that to you the essay in a way was a kind of it seemed to me a device of a certain sobriety and formality you seemed to find in the essay not because it was a place to gush and let go but because it was a place of a certain poised tone and I think what's also profound in many ways about this dissertation is how rich the transference issues are on a stylistic and ideological level meaning for example you have a transference relationship to tedium

All: heh heh

WK: what you were just describing that's a very abstract kind of transference so for example like you were saying "oh this Locus Solus is really hard to read" exactly and that is the topic you have chosen you've chosen that it's fascinating and it's Perec's I feel that you're very close to Perec in many ways

LB: yeah in the way that like Perec is very distant and austere as a writer but I find him incredibly touching and poignant you'd expect someone who's reserved and at arm's length not to be that way but I do there was also one more thing I wanted

to say in response to that question about authority and that was thinking about how to shape the project going forward on the one hand I feel like the structure I gave myself the ninety-nine chapters sort of makes having an accessible narrative through line almost an impossibility there are just too many things it's just too busy but the way I wanted to answer that question was and I feel pretty clear about this and I feel like it's a direction I'd like to go for future work was of all the hats I tried on of all the approaches I tried out the ones that felt immediately at the time I was doing them and now afterwards to be of the most use for potential future work and you know the Oulipo is about potentiality and generating and making new things that are useful although actually I think it's ironic that one of the not invalid critiques of the Oulipo is that they haven't I mean they've done some work that creates some pretty interesting avenues of discovery and literary possibility but a lot of the stuff that they've created are complete dead ends they lead nowhere they're just idle literary games and that is something perhaps I transfer or enact in various ways but to finish what I was saying one type of work that really excited me and that felt useful in the way Ammiel was describing were a lot of the recordings particularly even more so than my monologues which can get a bit tedious to me and I can imagine certainly to others the conversations I'd really like to keep working that way not to record any old conversation I have but to focusedly talk about books not just books but ideas and culture and art things like that

AA: I've got three or four more things and then we can but yeah one of the things that I liked the most were your notes things that didn't make it in things that were bugging you things that came up those were actually very revealing and very indicative of what kind of work had gone into the work and that was nice to see I always like that record of the process it just was really useful the narrator in a weird way reminded me a little bit of if you know Joe Sacco's cartoons do you know Joe Sacco

WK: no who is he

AA: he did Palestine he's a brilliant journalist actually he's a historical journalist but he does it in the form of graphic novels and his persona is always this guy who is kind of like looking around and kind of a little naïve and checking things out and getting this side and that side and presents himself this way and obviously you're looking at the thing and there's months of research for every frame it's all very meticulous so you might want to look at his persona as a character that takes you through some very dense historical material which is interesting in and of itself but a couple of things that I was thinking as you spoke one larger question that you kind of address here and there but that I think needs to be more fully thought through you did it with the sonnets and Keats and Wordsworth and a couple of other things but all literature has been a literature of constraint pretty much and to think about that more seriously in terms of an emperor's new clothes kind of thing in terms of some of these movements and to think about what have these histories of constraints yielded

and not to short shrift them in other words not to think “well it became the figure of this or that or it became a sonnet” it got to be that way somehow somebody figured that out “I need to write fourteen lines and I need to do it in this way” why did that happen why are these constraints part of literary production what does that actually mean in other words I think it might actually be a way for you to think about how all this work that you’ve done might begin to start talking back to a history of literature that may not be looked at that way

LB: so if I’m fond of making claims about the dubious use-value of what I’m doing one possible

AA: it’s not even to seek legitimacy it’s just to explore constraint

LB: yeah no no it’s sort of the logical next step of so much of what I’ve done it’s something that Wayne and I had talked about early on in the project you had said “consider the sonnet consider received poetic forms” I feel like I was wrestling with that question not in a wide-ranging literary historical way but more in relation to what counted as or didn’t count as recent American constraint which is sort of the core focus of the project I noticed that a lot of the writers I included and a lot of the writers that most interested me in my reading around for this project were not always closely associated with constraint and the Oulipo and it became apparent to me fairly early on in the project that pretty much anything could go in terms of what I wanted to look at and how it might be related to what I was doing you know it

was the kind of project and other projects work this way as well if you're writing about walking everybody has experience with walking and so people are going to make suggestions but you know this is this weird fairly obscure avant-garde French group that I'm writing about and yet when I would describe it to people people I know well or complete strangers almost everybody would have a suggestion that I should look at or something that the topic brought to mind for them and I think it's a roundabout way of saying that what you're talking about suggests not a universality but a pertinence to fields way beyond the narrow focus of my dissertation

AA: I think there's also a way in which you know there's a certain arbitrariness in the choices that creates a quotient that you might want to think about in which sometimes things stand for other things and you might want to figure out how you can make each practice stand for itself that's a very difficult thing to think about but I think it would be an important thing to think about it may just involve going back to your own process with each piece and trying to figure out what you were actually trying to do so that one thing doesn't become a stand in for another is that making sense

LB: I'm not sure when you say "each things stands for itself" I'm not sure I

AA: in other words the uniqueness of each piece comes out by its form and what you're approaching but there is a problem at some point in which some of them seem

to kind of stand for each other their specificity gets a little lost do you know what I'm saying

WK: yeah I think I do I'm not sure either what the I did understand but now suddenly I can't paraphrase

All: heh

MC: it slipped away

WK: I understood it when you were saying it but now that I have to paraphrase I'm speechless

AA: I guess what I mean is well that's the thing what did Williams say "all sonnets say the same thing" well do all Oulipians say the same thing do all your essays say the same thing or do they not

WK: well maybe the way I would put it because I had a question about the conversations even though I understand that it's a direction that counteracts solipsism there are many reasons for wanting to proceed in that way I found actually the monologues the David Antin-esque monologues just more effective as writing and as thinking than the conversations whether it's because your ideas get muted or formally largely because I didn't understand why a collaboration was a constraint

so when Ammiel said that I thought “what is the specificity of a constraint within the collaboration” like when you and Robert looked at that artwork and then talked about it at Trestle what’s the constraint there

AA: yeah there was nothing particularly constraining about it it was a conversation

WK: the chapter with Leah was a constraint

LB: there were nominal

WK: there were nominal constraints and maybe if there were only *one* conversation then I could buy that the conversation here functions as a constraints but that’s where I heard Ammiel’s question

AA: that’s where it emerged from but then it spread a little more

LB: I think in the one Corey and I did we talk about conversation specifically that it has to do with having your intentions redirected

AA: but ok in the Corey one for instance one thing that came up that Corey said which I would have wanted the respondent you to say “no” which is where Corey says “well Jon is the Neal Cassady type” and I wanted you to say “no he isn’t Neal Cassady grew up on skid row and stole cars as a kid” in other

words that level of specificity where the form propels itself out of a critical response is that making more sense

LB: yeah a lot more which forms are more efficacious in that way which have certain blind spots it's interesting to me I don't know why I'm so fascinated by the conversations maybe just because I enjoy working with other people in a realm of endeavor where you don't get to do that too often

WK: and maybe you don't need to do any more conversations maybe you've done them

LB: whereas the monologues are not news to me but it's occurring to me hearing your responses to the conversations that yeah like that Neal Cassady comment isn't a perfect description of Jon but in the course of a conversation it's not such an important point that you're going to dwell on it you're just going to gloss over it that actually as much as I'm claiming that conversation redirects your line there's actually a way in which it slides right past there's less friction

AA: that's what I meant about the authority of scholarship in a really hyper made up dissertation you would footnote that conversation and you would then have a fake scholar come in and say "well you know this is not"

LB: oh god this is dizzyingly Borgesian

AA: ok that's what I'm saying you've gone this far maybe you need to go further

WK: it might actually be that there's a sur-authority above Luke

AA: yeah or anything in other words you've done this much you've got a superstructure you've got a framework now you can think about where you want to go with it and I think it could be very liberating and actually allow you to use so much of what you know in other ways that would be very odd and potentially unsettling more unsettling than some of this might now be I mean unsettling in the best sense in a provocative sense

WK: I had a technical question though I was clearly interested in and moved by what seemed to be a kind of notebook of your grandmother's it looked like a transcription project as I read it of your grandmother's notebook that had to do with learning English as well as her own accounting of what went on in the '40's was it a transcription that was one case where Luke's foreword did not explain so what was the methodology of that chapter

LB: well most of it like the grammar exercises and then those lists were from her notebooks reading notes that she would keep by her bed things like that that after she passed away I inherited and I sort of culled through them for material

that seemed interesting it started in relation to the dissertation in that I was trying to think about how to write about her the Holocaust trauma and constraint which is relevant not just to me personally but to various Oulipians and I was having a really hard time of it I so wanted it to be “right” I don’t know what being “right” would mean but to do justice to my memory of her that anything I wrote myself always felt inadequate so then I had the idea to just use her own material which as I started sorting through it I noticed all these things that at least to me sounded vaguely poetic intentionally or unintentionally so that’s where some of the material came from the timeline running through the poem comes from a letter she wrote to a friend in Israel who had asked for an account of her experiences in the Warsaw ghetto

WK: but it is all found none of it for whatever reason it became very and I absolutely respect poetic documents where one doesn’t but the gravity of that material I wanted a little bit of an announcement or a framing that made it clear to me because I intuited that it was found but then I didn’t know and somehow it diluted the possible gravity and kind of success and austerity I don’t know what you felt

AA: I felt something very similar but it still worked for me in other words I felt a little doubt there about where is it coming from but I felt that it was so strong in itself that it worked and actually what you just said is incredibly revealing because it actually to me opens up such another different level of questioning

I mean we've talked about it a little bit I was thinking of my from the warring factions which is totally a constrained thing but it would never be considered within this realm of constraint because it's leading very elsewhere and actually this ending coda of the project leads you very elsewhere from a lot of the stuff you've been working through and that's a very interesting rupture that I think should be examined and talked about you've gone through all this stuff and then you hit this material which is found material and you yourself said you wanted to leave it as it was and that's really interesting

LB: it felt like I couldn't add anything that would enhance it

AA: you've essentially arranged it so what does that mean in terms of how people deal with materials what makes something trivial what makes something have some weight that's the kind of relative value I was trying to talk about you've kind of performed it within the thing and maybe now you need to interpret it in some sense

LB: yeah I find having done all this stuff that a lot of it needs interpretation in its own right I also think a frame for this particular chapter would be easy enough to do

WK: like three sentences even less than that would be fine just so that I know and I basically knew but there were so many changes in discursive register within it

and I'm happy to give your grandmother I'm thrilled to give your grandmother credit
for all of them

All: heh heh

WK: but I was a little surprised I didn't get you know it's a remarkable
document and I just was distracted by my own questions

LB: one other discursive register I had done a quasi-interview not an interview
but um we sat down and talked about her experiences and she said she had never
done that with anyone and had wanted to do it with me and she said she wanted to
talk with me because I'm a writer which is also why I felt this kind of weight so
the things that are in quotes are direct quotes from that conversation but I think the
um yeah I had another thought about the project as a whole but it's escaping
me

WK: I was curious and it's not just because it was originally my suggestion but
I'm *thrilled* that it bore this fruit the interview with your father

AA: I thought it was tremendous

WK: it's extraordinary really extraordinary it's unbelievable and as you say
in your later account the way your questions you say that "at least four or five
of his silences are pitch perfect"

MC: ooh I'd love to read this

WK: it is really amazing and I must say also I find the dialogue with the
therapist to be really interesting it's another example I think where there's something
really quite unsentimental in your basic aesthetic and so you're able to take that most
dangerous of discursive situations and take it in an utterly *un*-lachrymose *un*-
codified direction it has a kind of rigor that was moving and fully magnificent it
was the strongest by far of the conversations it was in a class of its own because
it was a commentary on the rest of the dissertation

LB: it's almost not even a conversation I sort of do that normally in therapy and
I did it even more in these sessions I think she didn't like that actually but by the
third session I just went in there and launched into a monologue because there were
so many issues that I wanted to get to and that reminds me what I wanted to say in
response to Ammiel about that whole ending section originally I had seen it as places
for miscellanies that I was just sort of tacking on but what I ended up putting in there
and the tenor of it and how it was functioning in relation to all the previous stuff
ended up being way more important than I realized it was going to be it just seemed

to tie together a number of things again that presumes you have a reader generous enough to go all the way through

AA: well it also exposes something that I always say that all dissertations no matter how dry and scholarly are very personal things the choice is personal the trajectory is personal and you get there in the most poignant ways that whole thing about your parents with the book it's tremendous "you're published" it's great

All: heh heh

WK: and I also find the gambling stuff riveting and really idiosyncratic your line maybe your best line in the whole dissertation is when you say "that maybe I'm the second philosopher of poker"

All: heh heh heh

WK: you say that "so-and-so was the first philosopher of poker I think maybe I'm the second philosopher of poker" it's really quite something it's also you arrive at a very authentic kind of humor and historicity and poignancy through staying as far away as possible from it

LB: yeah that stuff about a dissertation always being personal I think it's important for a dissertation about constraint which isn't considered a personal way of writing in that Q & A at the Oulipolooza talk that's in the last section someone asked that exact question about the evacuation of the subject in constraint and Conceptual poetry it could even apply to Language poetry which is in the same rough lineage but it's absurd to say that these kinds of writing aren't personal which is the common party line on this way of writing and Perec again is the one for me where this is glaringly obvious right that it's impersonal because he can't handle how personal it is or that's his way of dealing with personal matters it relates to the therapeutic context where I raise my anxieties about communities and so on

MC: can you say a word about because you mentioned before how Oulipo in the American version has changed recently has it changed can you tell me how it has changed

LB: sure yeah yeah it was somewhat surprising to me at least when I started researching this project how many sort of "experimental" American writers poets especially but also others

MC: is this post-Harry Mathews you're thinking

LB: yeah yeah yeah I would say nineties and aughts Mathews to me I see him as closer to coeval with the founding Oulipians

MC: yeah classic Oulipo

LB: so this is post-Mathews kind of a second generation and it was surprising to me that so many people claimed the Oulipo as some level of influence

MC: well yeah

LB: well not surprising that people would claim it but that there was a lot of work happening under that banner but no American analogue I mean one of the important things about the Oulipo is the sort of supper club aspect of it it started as this group of friends and this is part of what I really like about it they didn't have ambitions to take over the French literary world they just wanted to have a little bit of fun together and it's sort of mock-serious from the start so I think that clubbiness of it becomes something very different in an American context where these techniques get more polemicized and in an American context too uh the figures the people who you could say are "major" North Americans working in this tradition would be like Christian Bök Harryette Mullen Doug Nufer is another who comes to mind I mean one thing about this project is that it's so sprawling that I can't even remember who the heck I've written about

MC: that's great

WK: Gilbert Sorrentino

LB: yeah he's kind of generationally a little in between

MC: so do the constraints change what interests me is also the rules how the clubbiness or non-clubbiness works with the ruliness or non-ruliness

LB: I think that's an interesting question because I think just as a matter of my own taste I like a lot of the constraints that some of these writers have invented let me make it more concrete Doug Nufer for example wrote Never Again which is a 200-page novel in which no word gets repeated no article no verb so there's no Oulipian who ever attempted that before but their example obviously inspired him to veer off in that direction but you know the pyrotechnics in that book exceed I mean it's hard too because my reading French isn't the greatest so I'm not always reading the Oulipian works in the original but in terms of magisterial literary I mean it doesn't have to be magisterial but just genuinely interesting or impressive literary accomplishments a lot of the Americans do pretty useful and novel things

AA: it's an American thing bigger and better

All: heh heh

LB: yeah yeah yeah it is how do you top a constraint in terms of degree of difficulty Never Again is about as hard as it gets and what I wanted to say too in response to your question I think what you could vaguely call the politics of it I think changes as well although I will admit that in my project I sort of make that claim a few times and then never really follow up on it

AA: yeah yeah

LB: I don't know why I do that but I do think it is more or less the case at least at first glance there are a fair amount of politicized American constraint writers even movements or groupings too the one that particularly stands out to me in this regard is that Les Fignes collection the Noulipian Analects which contains Juliana Spahr's and Stephanie Young's *foulipo* manifesto where they critique the group's androcentrism and uh these are you know not just isolated books or texts but ideologies of constraint that are politically motivated in a way that Oulipian constraints are often less so

AA: you may want to think about having some unfriendly voices in the mix

LB: do you mean

AA: it was curious to me that you didn't take that tack that you didn't have a vitriolic critic doing a hostile review

LB: ohh it would you know partly it's just that I'm not confrontational by nature

AA: yeah yeah but I mean Swiftian

LB: the one book I had planned to do something like that with was by this playwright Mark Dunn who I know nothing about other than that he's a playwright and he wrote this constrained novel called Ella Minnow Pea which is the name of the protagonist that's a pun on LMNOP and it's this novel where there's some sort of placard on the town square under a statue of this town's founder and the placard is a pangram which is a sentence in which every letter of the alphabet appears once in the shortest space possible and so this placard provides sort of the governing ideology of the town the town is just off the eastern coast of the US it's an independent commonwealth so they live according this placard but letters start falling off of it and then as the letters fall off those letters become unavailable for use in the narrative and it changes the laws of the society

MC: oh that's very nice

LB: well my description is as exciting as the book gets I've talked to other people about the book and they've felt the same way

MC: it sounds fascinating is it deliberately uninteresting

LB: no no no

MC: so he doesn't know or what it wanted to be interesting but isn't

AA: he just couldn't pull it off

LB: you know what it is I hate to use this as a put down but it's very middlebrow that's more a reflection on my own tastes and values I don't know I contemplated I mean it was bad enough that before I ever even talked to anyone else about it as I was reading it I was writing angry notes in my book it really annoyed me like "oh this is really cheap or saccharine or whatever" and I did have designs on writing something venomous but then as I went on I kind of decided that I only wanted to deal with things that I like

AA: well working against your own instincts could be another form of constraint like here's something you love write a vitriolic critique of it

MC: or a parody

LB: yeah your comment earlier Ammiel suggests to me that there are all sorts of Borgesian possibilities I've so far dipped my toe in the shallow end of the Borges pool but I think you could take a dive in the deep end if you really wanted though I'm not sure I want to

WK: just also I think that the pleasure for you as I imagine it will be in the next step in exiting the labyrinth rather than further embroidering the labyrinth that's not just about you but generically about projects that seem to ask for more and more layers of Borgesian complexity and that sometimes really the exit is the door that should be opened

MC: with a big sign "I'm leaving"

AA: "Fire"

LB: I'm at that point I don't know where the door is but I'm running for it

WK: I think something that Sontag quoted Barthes saying is that "the aesthetes' prerogative is to move on"

All: heh he

WK: “move on” those are important words to me

LB: yeah I deeply feel that right now

WK: the urge to flee a project is often a very smart urge

AA: yeah yeah

LB: and that was if I didn't say this earlier in response to Ammiel's point about the final section that was one of the most interesting aspects of putting that section together the therapy the familial stuff stuff like that they were signs to me that I had moved on the most interesting development to me in the last year is that I couldn't give a crap about constraint

All: heh he

LB: I'm exaggerating but it's what happens I've been reading Geoff Dyer lately for inspiration the one I've been re-reading is Out of Sheer Rage which is a book about his failure to write a book about D.H. Lawrence

AA: that was a telling thing where you said that Lawrence's Studies in Classic American Literature was a book that you *have* re-read a number of times

LB: all those you know I remember your list of classic works in American Studies all the books I've encountered that are kind of errant forms of criticism or slightly ex-centric those are it for me that was what I wanted to do even if I didn't fully articulate it until down the road the Dyer point was just he says he's very confident that in writing his Lawrence book he won't want anything to do with Lawrence again it's almost like purging yourself of it

AA: in terms of what Wayne said about moving on I totally agree my point is more you don't want to overembroider it but you will want to do something with this because it's a big piece of work and I think tracking your own exit out of it will be very telling in figuring out what to do with it

WK: because that's the entrance for the reader actually when *you* see the light at the end of the tunnel that's the light that you can shed back to show somebody that it's worth stepping into the labyrinth

LB: I think that's important to me too because my whole methodology these past three or four years has been to just blindly walk ahead in the dark and follow interests and whims and you know have some vague sense of duty in terms of topics and texts I'd like to cover but more just see where it leads and then see where that leads and so if it's a labyrinth that I've been walking through I think it would behoove me to be mindful of how I'm getting out of it and then frame it in that way because readers I have to throw them some sort of lifeline

WK: and you were good about and then we should probably wrap up but that's just to say that you were very good about keeping each chapter quite tight they rarely overstayed their welcome and that was in terms of a reader's endurance a very important strategy because in the earlier versions they were sometimes too long

LB: I did try you know you get attached to certain things and they don't easily get shorter but I did try to make each individual piece manageable

AA: just one thing that I'll forget to say when you said you wanted to keep thinking about transcription what I would highly suggest you do and I'm sure you've done it I'm thinking of some of the Penn Sound things I was thinking particularly of Robert Creeley just listen to his rambling and grasp the quality of speech and the quality of what he's saying regardless of what he's talking about and think about that in relation to some of the transcripts you've done and just try to think about the qualities of speech from different times I just find his quality of speech astonishing

LB: when you say "the quality of speech from different times" are you implying that in different historical eras

AA: well I mean some of your transcripts I'm reading them and saying "what is the quality of speech here" like the Antin thing was very well done because I think you were emulating a certain quality of speech

LB: the introduction

AA: yeah

WK: there are also other things you do that are in an Antin mode

AA: right that emulate that level of quality of speech but I think some of the transcript wasn't you know it was more casual

LB: you mean the conversations

AA: yeah it might be an interesting thing to think about you could go all the way back to Johnson

LB: can I say without being presumptuous not to say I was totally satisfied with the quality of my own speech but I felt like in working that way I became very aware of its properties and of the ways in which I think out loud was or was not working I mean teaching in a way does that for you too but if I was conceptualizing these exercises as a kind of training I would do a transcription and then the quality of

the next one would maybe improve a bit and then my extemporaneous talking would improve in my teaching too I feel bad in non-literary contexts when it's always the mode in which you talk

All: heh heh

LB: I think it's an interesting thing how that happens it reminds me of that line about how intellectual conversation is similar to public displays of affection in that they're both great to be a part of but kind of hard to stomach as a witness

All: heh he

WK: no no no I I yeah so um now this is what happens is that you step out of the room and we have a little discussion about procedure

LB: do you want

WK: oh no way

All: heh he heh

WK: no way the tape recorder goes with you this is one of the constraints this is the last constraint

Bibliography

- Abish, Walter. Alphabetic Africa. New York: New Directions, 1974.
- Abramovitch. Rhythm 0. 1974.
- Addison and Steele. The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator. New York: Bedford, 1998.
- Adonis. An Introduction to Arab Poetics. San Francisco: Saqi, 2003.
- Alcalay, Ammiel. from the warring factions. Los Angeles: Beyond Baroque, 2002.
- . Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing. San Francisco: City Lights, 1996.
- , ed. "Lost and Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative." New York: The Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center, 2010-11.
- Amis, Martin. The Information. New York: Vintage, 1996.
- Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. New York: Verso, 1983.
- Andrews, William L. To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 1988.
- Antin, David. Talking. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2001.
- Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998.
- Aristophanes. Aristophanes I: Clouds, Wasps, Birds. trans. Meineck. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998.
- Augustine. Confessions. New York: Penguin, 1961.
- Austen. Sense and Sensibility. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Austin, Mary. The Land of Little Rain. New York: Modern Library, 2003.
- Bangs, Lester. Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung. New York: Anchor, 1988.

- Barnes, Julian. Flaubert's Parrot. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Beard. X20: A Novel of (Not) Smoking. London: Vintage, 2005.
- Bellamy. Cunt-ups. New York: Tender Buttons, 2001.
- Bénabou, Marcel. Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books. Trans. Kornacker. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- Berger, John. Selected Essays. New York: Vintage, 2003.
- Bishop. The Complete Poems: 1927-1979. New York: FSG, 1984.
- Blake, Lillie Devereux. Fettered for Life. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1996.
- Bök, Christian. Eunoia. Toronto: Coach House, 2001.
- . 'Pataphysics. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2002.
- Borges. Labyrinths. New York: New Directions, 1988.
- Brainard, Joe. I Remember. New York: Granary Books, 2001.
- Brotherston, Gordon. The Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas Through Their Literature. New York: Cambridge, 1992.
- Brown, Dee. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West. New York: Holt, 2001.
- Burroughs, William S. The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- . Naked Lunch. New York: Grove, 1990.
- Burroughs, William S. and Allen Ginsberg. The Yage Letters. San Francisco: City Lights, 2001.
- Camus, Albert. The Fall. New York: Random House, 1956.
- de Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life. Los Angeles: University of

- California, 1988.
- Condon, Richard. The Manchurian Candidate. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1983.
- Conrad, CA. "(Soma)tic Poetry Exercises." Blogspot. Ed. CA Conrad. August 17, 2011 < <http://somaticpoetryexercises.blogspot.com>>.
- Corbin, John. "Drift." Lynn Crawford, Curator. CUE Art Foundation. 511 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001. January 18, 2001.
- Cotner, Jon and Andy Fitch. 10 Walks/ 2 Talks. New York: Ugly Duckling, 2010.
- Cotner, Jon. "Prospect Park Jogging Poem." Textsound: an online audio publication. Issue 9: March 2010.
- Crawford, Lynn. Fortification Resort. New York: Black Square Editions, 2005.
- D'Agata, John, ed. The Next American Essay. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 2003.
- Derrida. Dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering. Jane Doe Films, 2002. Film.
- Derrida, Jacques. The Politics of Friendship. trans. George Collins. New York: Verso, 1997.
- Divine intervention. Dir. Elia Suleiman. Gimages, 2002. DVD.
- Dorn, Ed. Gunslinger. Durham: Duke University, 1989.
- Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Dubus, Andre. The Last Worthless Evening. Boston: Godine, 1997.
- Dunn, Mark. Ella Minnow Pea. 2001. San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage. 2001.
- Dyer, Geoff. Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence.
- Ehrhart, W.D. In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays, 1977-1991. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991.

- . Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995.
- Eliot, George. The Mill on the Floss. New York: Penguin, 1979.
- . Silas Marner. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996.
- Ellison, Ralph. Juneteenth. New York: Vintage, 1999.
- Fielding, Henry. Tom Jones. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- Fish, Stanley. "Rhetoric," in Critical Terms for Literary Study. Ed. Lentricchia and McLaughlin. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1995.
- Fitterman, Robert. This Window Makes Me Feel. Ubueditions. Ed. Brian Kim Stefans. August 17, 2011 <http://www.ubu.com/ubu/pdf/fitterman_window.pdf>.
- Foucault, Michel. The Archaeology of Knowledge. trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972.
- Friedlander, Benjamin. Simulcast: Four Experiments in Criticism. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Garréta, Anne. "On Bookselves," in McSweeney's, No. 22, Book 2.
- Ginsberg. Howl and Other Poems. San Francisco: City Lights, 1959.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. Day. Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003.
- . Fidget. Toronto: Coach House, 2000.
- . Head Citations. Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2002.
- . No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96. Berkeley: The Figures, 1997.
- . 73 Poems. Sag Harbor, NY: Permanent Press, 1994.
- . Soliloquy. New York: Granary, 2001.
- . Sports. Los Angeles: Make Now, 2008.

- . "The Tortoise and the Hare: Dale Smith and Kenneth Goldsmith Parse Slow and Fast Poetries," in Jacket Magazine 38, Late 2009.
- . Traffic. Los Angeles: Make Now, 2007.
- . The Weather. Los Angeles: Make Now, 2005.
- Glaudes, Pierre and Jean-François Louette. L'essai. Paris: Hachette Supérieur, 1999.
- Greetham, David. Textual Scholarship: An Introduction. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Harper, Frances E.W. Iola Leroy. Boston: Beacon, 1987.
- Harryman. Adorno's Noise. Michigan: Essay Press, 2008.
- Heidegger, Martin. Poetry, Language, Thought. trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial, 2001.
- Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell to Arms. New York: Scribner, 1995.
- Herlihy, David. The Black Death and the Transformation of the West. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1997.
- Herr, Michael. Dispatches. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Hickey. Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy. Los Angeles: Art issues, 1997.
- . L.A. Noir: Dave Hickey in Las Vegas. Other Times 2, Special Issue, December 2009.
- Howe, Irving. Politics and the Novel. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.
- Hoy, Pat C. II. Instinct for Survival. Athens: The University of Georgia, 1992.
- Huizinga. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon, 1955.
- Hukanovic, Rezak. The Tenth Circle of Hell: A Memoir of Life in the Death Camps of Bosnia. trans. Alcalay. New York: Basic, 1996.
- Jakobson, Roman. *from* Linguistics and Poetics, in The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001.

- Jung, C.G. Modern Man in Search of a Soul. New York: Harcourt, 1955.
- Kerouac, Jack. On the Road. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Kilito, Abdelfattah. The Author & His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture.
trans. Michael Cooperson. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2001.
- Koestenbaum, Wayne. Hotel Theory. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2007.
- Kubler, George. The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things. New Have: Yale
University, 1962.
- Lamb. Essays of Elia. Iowa City: Univesity of Iowa, 2003.
- Lawrence. Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places. London: Penguin, 1960.
- . Studies in Classic American Literature. New York: Penguin, 1977.
- . Twilight in Italy and Other Essays. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Leiris, Michel. Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility.
trans. Richard Howard. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992.
- Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph. The Waste Books. New York: New York Review of
Books, 2000.
- MacConnel, Kim. "Abracadabra: New Abstract Enamels." *Quint Contemporary Art*.
7547 Girard Avenue, La Jolla, CA 92037. January 14, 2011.
- Mac Low, Jackson and Anne Tardos. Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces, 1955-2002.
New York: Granary, 2006.
- Mathews, Harry and Alastair Brotchie. Oulipo Compendium. London: Atlas, 1998.
- Mathews, Harry. The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays. Normal, IL:
Dalkey Archive, 2003.
- . Interview with Susannah Hunnewell. The Paris Review, No. 180, Spring 2007:

73-102. Print.

---. The Journalist. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1994.

---. A Mid-Season Sky. Manchester: Carcanet, 1992.

---. Selected Declarations of Dependence. Calais, VT: Z Press, 1977.

---. Singular Pleasures. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1988.

Maud, Ralph. Charles Olson at the Harbor. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008.

McAlister, Melani. Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000.

Mehmedinovic, Semezdin. Sarajevo Blues. trans. Alcalay. San Francisco: City Lights, 2001.

Miller, Perry. Errand into the Wilderness. Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1956.

Morgan, Kate. Circles and Boundaries. New York: Factory School, 2011.

Motte, Warren F., Jr., ed. Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature. Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Mullen, Harryette. Sleeping with the Dictionary. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.

Nabokov, Vladimir. Pale Fire. New York: Vintage, 1989.

---. Pnin. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Neihardt, John G. The River & I. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1997.

Nufer, Doug. Negativeland. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

---. Never Again. New York: Black Square, 2004.

O'Brien, Tim. Going After Cacciato. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.

- . If I Die in a Combat Zone. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.
- Olson, Charles. The Maximus Poems. Los Angeles: University of California, 1985.
- . Collected Prose. Los Angeles: University of California, 1997.
- Outram, Dorinda. The Enlightenment. New York: Cambridge University, 2005.
- Pascal. Pensées. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Pearsall, Judy, ed. Concise Oxford English Dictionary. Tenth edition, revised. New York: Oxford University, 2002.
- Perec, Georges. A Void. trans. Gilbert Adair. London: Harvill, 1994.
- . Species of Spaces and Other Pieces. Trans. Sturrock. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall," in Jacket Magazine 23, August 2003.
- Place and Fitterman. Notes on Conceptualisms. New York: Ugly Duckling, 2009.
- Place, Vanessa. Dies: A Sentence. Los Angeles: Les Figues, 2005.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. Essays and Reviews. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- Ponge, Francis. Soap. trans. Lane Dunlop. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University, 1998.
- Pound. The ABC of Reading. New York: New Directions, 2010.
- Queneau, Raymond. Exercises in Style. Trans. Wright. New York: New Directions, 1981.
- De Quincey, Thomas. Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. New York: Oxford University, 1998.
- Retallack, Joan. Errata Suite. Washington, D.C.: Edge Books, 1994.
- Reynolds, David. Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville. Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1989.

- Richey, Joseph, ed. Ed Dorn Live: Lectures, Interviews, and Outakes. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2007.
- Ridge, John Rollin. The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1977.
- Roubaud, Jacques. Poetry, etcetera: Cleaning House. Trans. Bennett. Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2006.
- Roussel, Raymond. How I Wrote Certain of My Books. Trans. Ashbery, et al. Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1995.
- . Locus Solus. trans. Cuningham. New York: Riverrun press, 1983.
- . New Impressions of Africa. Trans. Monk. London: Atlas Press, 2004.
- Rukeyser. Willard Gibbs. Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow, 1988.
- De Sade, Marquis. The 120 Days of Sodom & Other Writings. New York: Grove, 1994.
- Sacco, Joe. Palestine. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2002.
- Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. Le Petit Prince. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2007.
- Sanders, Ed. Investigative Poetry. San Francisco: City Lights, 1976.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. Nausea. New York: New Directions, 1975.
- Shields, David. Reality Hunger. New York: Vintage, 2010.
- Shōnagon, Sei. The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon. trans. Morris. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.
- Simpson, Christopher. The Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960. New York: Oxford University, 1996.
- Sorrentino, Gilbert. Gold Fools. Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2001.
- . Something Said. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2001.

- Stein, Gertrude. Writings, 1932-1946. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- Seuss, Dr. Green Eggs and Ham. New York: Random House, 1960.
- . The Cat in the Hat. New York: Random House, 1957.
- Tanselle, G. Thomas. A Rationale of Textual Criticism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992.
- Tolstoy, Leo. The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Short Stories. New York: Dover, 1993.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age. New York: Hill & Wang, 2007.
- Trinidad, David. Plasticville. New York: Turtle Point, 2000.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. Cat's Cradle. New York: Dell, 1998.
- Waugh, Evelyn. Scoop. New York: Back Bay, 1999.
- Werschler-Henry, Darren. the tapeworm foundry. Canada: Anansi, 2000.
- Werheim, Christine, and Matias Viegner, eds. The noulipian Analects. Los Angeles: Les Fignes 2008.
- Whitman, Walt. Leaves of Grass. New York: Norton, 2002.
- Wilde, Oscar. The Artist as Critic: The Critic Writings of Oscar Wilde. Chicago University of Chicago, 1982.
- Williams, Roger. A Key into the Language of America. Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1936.
- Williams, William Carlos. The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. 1: 1909-1939. New York: New Directions, 1991.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. The Blue and Brown Books. New York: Harper, 1965.
- The Philosophical Investigations. trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell,

1991.

---. Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus. trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. New York:

Routledge, 2002.

Zoss, Joel and John Bowman. Diamonds in the Rough: The Untold History of Baseball.

Lincoln, NE: Bison, 2004.