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Sunday, November 30, 2014

[#Alt-Academy](#)

Autobiography b

[In Media Res](#)

by Louis Bury — Hostos Communit

[\[in\]Transition](#)

Context: The following essay [s in Criticism:](#) [The Theory and Practice of L](#) MediaCommons Press [key Archive](#) Press in Spring 2015. First w [in English at](#) the CUNY Graduate Center, t [The New Everyday](#) te poetic and autobiographical criticism ab [Georges Perec's La Disparition](#), a novel written without using any word that contains the letter “e,” and Gilbert Sorrentino’s [Gold Fools](#), a novel written entirely in interrogatives). The essay itself—written as an ad hoc recorded monologue, then transcribed and edited—outlines the personal and intellectual background that led to the book project’s conceit. The original voice recording of the monologue, which differs from the transcribed version in ways small and large, has been published alongside the transcription so that readers can experience the performance in its unedited state. My dissertation demonstrates that even while staying within the general frame of the protomonograph, there is enormous potential for innovation of both form and content.



Introduction

August 7, 2010

3:15 p.m.

this book had its beginnings in a workshop about three or four years ago at the CUNY Graduate Center where I’m a student in the English PhD program it was called a “Dissertation Workshop” but it was actually more a professionalization workshop where instead of coming in each week and exchanging dissertation chapters 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 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 diagnose where this project came from why I undertook it but the point I want 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 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 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 it seems more and more personal than I initially realized 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 more thoroughly more airtight anyway the point I want to make is that my project takes it as axiomatic that [phone rings] not only oh Jesus 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 two where are you well do you 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 so yeah what time do you want to go I don't know let me check the weather let me check when sunset is where do they have it on here "Details" you think here it is sunset at 8:04 so why don't we plan on going 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 couples of hours okay sounds good see you later okay sorry about that interruption it was Shari and actually 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 project 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 cut it down into something else although I will say 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 an example a book that for whatever reason probably because I know the author he teaches at the Graduate Center is David Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* and I remember reading it and thinking 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 and so forth and it was just this prodigious effort measured in a crude way by the sheer size of the book that took a topic I knew a fair bit amount and completely illuminated it in ways that hadn't been done before though I do recall thinking about it a conversation with David 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 about my apartment like I do when I'm on a phone call I'm excited about 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 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 sorts of pointers that you'd have a hard time getting getting all in one place at any rate so I'm taking this course and as useful as I'm making it sound it actually threw me into my first of two minor 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 against the very spirit of the enterprise 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 PhD program" but the passage of so much time is involved and who you are at each point is so different that it's impossible to predict where the process is going to take you actually for our school newspaper I wrote an essay evaluating the humanities PhD as a kind of wager or gamble looking at 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 online poker than I could teaching 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 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 get tenure and so forth that the majority of refereed academic journals and the articles in them I mean I'm not against scholarship per se there's loads of wonderful scholarship that gets done but the current system seems designed 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 I don't know

I'm getting carried away the point is and actually another important aspect of the personal intellectual history that I'm trying to recount is that I had these feelings well before I entered graduate school and I'd actually like to go a little further back in time because this seems important when I was an undergraduate I took a couple of electives on essay writing with Pat Hoy the Director of the Expository Writing Program at NYU who's a dynamic engaging orator but also

a stern no nonsense professor I've met few other teachers more capable of getting the best possible work out of every student in the class and Pat attended West Point and ended up having to serve reluctantly as an officer in Vietnam after he left the military he went to graduate school to study literature and I don't want to speak on behalf of Pat but as I understand it when he began sending out pieces of his dissertation for publication he realized that his academic work didn't bear the stamp of who he was as a person 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 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 really my own not Pat's but it's an insight I first had through him even if most academics wouldn't be flattered by this notion and it is an unflattering one but I think it's true too 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 geez I'm really putting a lot of words in his mouth ventriloquizing him because I know him and his work so well it's like when you're teaching and you say in response to a student question "well I think Kant would argue" 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 highly concentrated academic work Pat was doing on E. M. Forster and what his broader 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 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 book 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 it's funny the things

I'm recollecting as I talk are not things I thought of or imagined as all that 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 them would be a disservice it's not that mentioning them 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 an academic book 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 okay 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 project from this point of view is basically 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 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 my interest felt a little touristic 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 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 of how they would situate me to get a job and not because I 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 schoolwork 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 literature and tried to make a life or career out of it or something in between because I liked doing it I had started college in the business school but it didn't take long for me to

develop intellectual interests before college I didn't read or write much and suddenly I really started to enjoy doing those things so 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 I'm having this crisis and I think if I'm going to continue on and get a PhD 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 and I'm not saying it's not flawed but I felt that if I was going to do things that I didn't like or that I felt lukewarm about or that were unpleasant then I may as well not get a PhD at all that the only reason to get a PhD in the humanities was because you were doing something you like work-wise if I was going to do something I didn't like I'd at least do something that made me real money I don't know maybe the poker money I started making was going to my head a bit but it just seemed that in academia the payoff was too unlikely in terms of the likelihood of getting a job and even if I were to get one tenured or not the rewards were likely still too paltry the sacrifices too large 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 way for me 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 a useful corrective to the careerist pressures that have only escalated in the past decade 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 that sounds like an obvious thing to say who doesn't want to read things they enjoy but it's a hard principle to follow when you're studying something study by its nature saps some of the vitality from what you're studying but so at this time most of the reading I was doing was about Oulipo and constraint Oulipo being 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 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 affecting and touching 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 writing poems on the subway and so forth so I was having these thoughts about the importance of pleasure I haven't used that word in this introduction yet but it's an 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 Oulipo and in keeping with my prior intuitions about the nature of academic writing 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 Oulipo specifically because my French isn't good enough but I'm glad actually because I think Oulipo's legacy is the more interesting topic at this point in time English-language writing that's broadly in the tradition of the group and that's what this project is about I mean this introduction is really it's not much of an introduction in that it doesn't frame what the project is about but how I arrived at it maybe I'll have to write a second introduction like Oulipian Marcel Bénabou in his *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 literary constraint I was going to do so using constraints my dissertation would itself be constraint-based and one rationale for this approach beyond just the principle of self-pleasure is that criticism is the one area of creative endeavor and notice I'm describing criticism as a creative endeavor it's the one area of creative endeavor Oulipo hasn't explored using constraints not to write a novel or poem but to say something critically substantial so that's what this project is and I guess the question at this point isn't how to describe the project since it seems pretty apparent that this introduction won't quite do that 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 it indicate about the project itself about criticism why is this background relevant 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 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 his 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 a defense of his project needs to be made and I 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 inflammatory 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 but when I first read his arguments I found them so gripping that I failed to notice how rooted they are in the personal I specifically remember in my rereading a passage where he mentioned his skateboard and I thought "who would admit in a work of scholarship that he used to ride a skateboard" in other words 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 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 scholars by nature are actually very naturally constrained obeying an elaborate almost bureaucratic system of discipline and rules protocols and these issues relate to the contents of Friedlander's 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 and I'm reminded too maybe this will be where I wrap up I remember when I began this project talking to Wayne Koestenbaum who 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 is that when you've abandoned certain safety nets and maybe I have others 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 well I've definitely lost my momentum at this point I've arrived at a sheer cliff-face 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 I also love rules find them comforting in the way I imagine well-behaved scholars must the more grandiose 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 one of the ones who're cute in their shy quaintness and sincerity 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 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 I saw that he teaches at UNLV and then I saw that my former lit professor 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 his criticism with his life 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 we were both buying beer and I was completely startled by it not by the fact that she was buying beer or that I was under-aged and buying beer but that there she was on a Gristede's check-out line out in the world 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 the most prominent conceptual poet makes the point that the simple act of moving information from one place to another is in our culture a prominent form of writing is a creative act and that's a lot of what his artistic practice involves 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 context 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 transference well of course it's been done before it's been done for centuries there's often an historical amnesia in their pronouncements about their practice which I suppose is an inevitable part of avant-garde posturing 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 the ideas of others better than I do just creating something myself out of the 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 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 its 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

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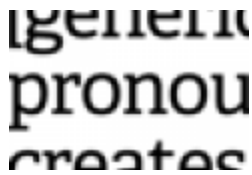
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