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WORK

Writing by Tom Lutz and Gertrude Stein

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Tom Lutz: Writing, by Tom Lutz and Gertrude Stein

To write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write.

I'm going to do a little writing about writing. I'm going to write about my writing as a way to write about teaching writing.

Repeating then is in every one, in every one their being and their feeling and their way of realizing everything and every one comes out of them in repeating.

The first half of my academic career I did what all young writers do: I imitated the writers I was reading. I ventriloquized literary and cultural theorists, concocting a stew of other people's phrases and syntax, trying, in small ways, to put my own stamp on it. This personal stamp usually meant adding a dollop of something else I'd read, making for quasi-plagiarized cakes with quasi-plagiarized frosting. I found each of these steps—assembling, mixing, baking, icing—deeply pleasurable. I was copying my masters like art students in museums, then scribbling “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” on top.

Nature is commonplace. Imitation is more interesting.

None of the mimicry was particularly conscious. I wasn't trying to sound like Foucault or the American academics imitating Foucault. I was enamored of theory and theory-speak, and I did my best to reproduce it, performing in the proto-professional way expected of me. I was beset by anxieties, of course, by dyspeptic worrying about how far I could push my pretense to knowing an underread book or underassimilated theory or archive, by dreadful, panicked, last-minute searches for my citations in the lateral and terminal moraines of paper and books on my kitchen table. But as I learned to weave a New-Historical discursive web, all dressed up in regulation vocabulary, syntax, and voice, I felt no anxiety of influence to speak of, didn't feel like an impostor. I loved it.

A writer must always try to have a philosophy and he should also have a psychology and a philology and many other things. Without a philosophy and a psychology and all these various other things he is not really worthy of being called a writer.

We read theories of “mimetic desire” and worried not a jot about the fundamentally plagiaristic nature of every sentence we wrote. We worried instead about whether we could adequately professionalize ourselves and still speak truth to power, whether we could theorize class struggle and still speak to the people. We didn't want to be condemned to talk exclusively to other academics, to remain in a purely academic relation to our own culture and society. We watched as the jargon-laden discourses of criticism were routinely mocked and belittled in the press, as the humanities were marginalized by curricular and budgetary decisions, as fewer PhDs were hired each year, and worried about ivory-towerism. Influenced by Marxism and Foucauldian power-politics, we felt a duty to have some effect outside the walls of academe. We had no idea how, but we exhorted each other, constantly, to try.

And so this brings us to other things.

A couple times I attempted to break out of the academic box in my graduate papers. For Renato Rosaldo's seminar on the use of narrative in ethnography, for instance, I wrote a 30-page piece called “Narrative/Analysis” (it was in those sad days of forward slash abuse) that had twenty-five sections, each also titled with a

slash—”synchrony/diachrony,” “structure/process,” “metaphor/metonymy”—addressing one of the antinomies we had discussed in the class. In every very short section I started arguing for the front of the slash—the need for diachrony in the description of a historical event, for instance—and imperceptibly slid into arguing for the back—the importance of context, and thus synchrony, in representing that same event. Each section argued out of both sides of its mouth, but rhetorically privileged the second half of the slash, as did the essay as a whole. The middle section, section 13, titled “analysis/narrative” was the pivot, after which a new set of self-canceling arguments were laid out in sections mirroring the first—”metonymy/metaphor,” “process/structure,” “diachrony/synchrony”—undoing at the essay level what had been undone in the individual sections. The whole thing, I thought, was incredibly clever and provocative, a laugh riot of competing ideas and claims that were resolved in their own metafictional limbo.

Slowly every one in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation, comes to be clearer to some one.

What was the point of that? At the time I would have claimed I was making a point about the false nature of the “debate” between structuralism and narrative ethnography and, at the same time, playing a game. Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault were full of linguistic and formal gamesmanship, why not play myself? I was using the kind of formal play I had been imbibing from literature, from Gilbert Sorrentino and Borges and Nabokov and Joyce and Djuna Barnes—and adapting it to scholarly uses, or at least to scholarly play. I was having fun.

Sentences are called sentences.

That paper was the seed of my dissertation about the year 1903, conceived as an elaborate joke about throwing the structuralist baby out with the poststructuralist bathwater. While writing it, though, I became more interested in history and less in theoretical games, and so the project gradually became something we hadn’t yet learned to call “cultural studies.” Still infected by the academic malaise of my generation, I was determined to reach beyond a few scholars strewn about the college towns of America to a general audience. When I sent the manuscript off to a university press, I said as much in my cover letter, that I hoped to see the book make its way into bookstores and not just libraries.

I am writing for myself and strangers.

But I was already professionally deformed. After an undergraduate thesis on Lacan and six years of graduate school theory and academesse I knew less about writing for the common reader than I did when I started (despite knowing many theories of the common reader). My editor at the university press, an excellent man in every other way, was equally out of touch on this, so he didn’t find the idea of a general readership for the book, as he should have, immediately preposterous. He splashed a big “*WHY 1903?*” on the back cover and some bullet-pointed highlights from the year (*the first World Series! the first Teddy Bear!*), marketing the book as if somebody might, in fact, pick it up in a bookstore and read it. Someone at the *New York Times Book Review* liked it and put it on the front page and an interview on *All Things Considered* and reviews elsewhere followed. On the strength of such attention, the press did a second printing, bringing the total number of copies to 3000 in hardcover.

When you are writing before there is an audience anything written is as important as any other thing and you cherish anything and everything that you have written. After the audience begins, naturally they create something that is they create you, and so not everything is so important, something is more important than another thing.

I imagine someone in a bookstore, having read the glowing *NYTBR* review, picking up the book and reading this sentence on page 14: “The economic plot is not a language that captured the speaking voices of economists or consumers: the plot is a rarefied abstraction that itself represents an imaginary relation to whatever symbolic order existed in the nervous America of 1903.” I’m not sure I even entirely understand what that means; my editor and I were deeply deluded to think this was meant for the average reader. Those copies and a few thousand in paper lasted for some twelve years. I was talking to the people, in other words, at the rate of around five hundred people a year, 475 undoubtedly academics. I’ve since written what in the trade are known as a trade book and I still haven’t quite cracked it—the latest is still way too academic for the average educated reader, still too infected by the academic virus.

Everything is the same except composition and time.

When I sold my first trade book I thought to myself I am free at last, free of all those academic protocols, free of the requirements to check every damn thing every damn person had ever said about topic x, free to wander through fields where I hadn’t earned credentials. But then I was introduced to the vicissitudes of commercial publishing. My editor and I, well, let’s just say we didn’t see eye to eye. The book was about tears, with chapters based on themes. The first, for instance, was called “Engagement and Escape,” about the way tears can be the most intimate form of communication, and yet also a way for people to avoid interaction, to turn inward, to indulge in feeling, in bodily sensation. It mixed philosophy, literature, the social sciences, painting, film, examples from the fourteenth century BCE and yesterday’s news. I thought it was pretty good, really, and the researching and writing had been an extreme source of pleasure. When I handed in the first draft of the manuscript, my editor hated it.

My sentences do get under their skin, only they do not know that they do.

She said no, no, no, this is not the book I imagined when I read your proposal. She said, “People don’t want to know what *you* think about crying, they want to know about crying.” She decided that what I should do in the next draft was start over completely, and have chapters based on each of the disciplines: there was to be a chapter on the sociology of tears, one on the psychology of tears, one on literary representations of tears, one on tears in film. This was anathema to me, trained interdisciplinarian, my entire intellectual life spent thinking in exactly the opposite way. But I had resigned from half my academic position, I needed the money. I had no choice. I was a prisoner of the market. I wrote the book she wanted. It had, for a trade book, disappointing sales.

Think of a sentence.

I began writing that book during the glory-days of the memoir, the first flush of that publishing boom, so my editor told me to add a first-person introduction talking about my own tears. I wrote it, she loved it, and had me add a first-person

anecdote at the beginning of each chapter. The week I handed in the fully revised manuscript, though, *Publishers Weekly* declared the memoir dead and my editor had me excise all the first person stuff. *PW* has announced the memoir craze over so several times since, also prematurely.

When you write a thing it is perfectly clear and then you begin to be doubtful about it.

I went back to academic writing, and I thought now, now I am free at last, free from arbitrary, mercenary, whimsical followers of fashion dictating the shape my work, free to write whatever and however I want. Each time I've moved from one kind of writing to another, I've had the same sense of returning pleasure. My most recent project is a novel and talk about being fun! No research, no necessary shape, no rules. It was, like all my genre switches, exhilarating. It felt like freedom. We have yet to have our souls crushed, my novel and I, by the process of publication. But I don't doubt we will.

The conclusion of any sensible human being is that everybody writes the way everybody writes.

Four years ago, after a career teaching in humanities and literature programs, I moved to a Creative Writing department. To teach creative writing classes for undergraduate majors and MFA candidates has forced me to retool and rethink what it means to teach writing. At the University of Iowa I watched the staff and students of the Writers' Workshop draw farther and farther from the English department, the rift between creative writing and literary scholarship widening by custom, culture, administration, and finally geography when the workshop moved into its own building across campus. In the early 1990s, I always had a Workshop student or two in my American literature courses, but over the next decade that simply stopped happening. The Workshop students had nothing but contempt for what the scholars were up to, and in return many of my colleagues in English had scorn for what they derisively sneered at as "*Literature*" and disdain for what they saw as the excessive naiveté of the poets and fiction writers, the unwillingness to think about their own activity in rigorous ways.

Grammar. Fills me with delight.

One sign, the scholars thought, of that lack of rigor was creative writing pedagogy. No narratology, no structural linguistics, no semiology, no literary history before 1960—how could these poets and fiction writers possibly know what they were doing? And the workshop model itself—what was that? Adopted from the studio model of art education, in which students practice their craft together under the eye of a master and participate in on-the-spot critique, the workshop has been at the center of MFA education since the founding of the Writers' Workshop in 1936. The English department found this procedure lax, at best, not the meat itself, but a side dish, the kind of thing we did at the *end* of a seminar—critiquing each other, talking about our own writing.

Composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations.

Once I started to run writing workshops regularly myself, I came to appreciate what they can accomplish, the way they give students an audience, make them

experience something like the terror and exhilaration of publishing, and allow them to gauge rhetorical effects, each session a laboratory experiment in literary sociology and reader response. But I also became aware, as have many of my colleagues in the field, that the classic workshop is an imperfect pedagogical instrument. Especially at the undergraduate level, the advice students get from their peer readers can be astoundingly ill-informed and wrong-headed, and one charismatic or hot student can singlehandedly destroy everyone else's work, doling out distressingly persuasive opinions that undermine the best student impulses and reinforce the worst. If the charming but muddled student has enough mojo there's little you can do to counteract the evil. At the graduate level this is somewhat less of a problem, but the artificial nature of the environment—the weekly deadlines, the near-instant reinforcement, the predominantly nurturing, supportive group—ill equips students for the demons they will actually face as writers. I helped start a low-residency MFA program specifically for this reason. The low-residency model gives students some workshop experience, but decenters it, replacing it with the loneliness of long-distance tutoring, putting students through a practice that more accurately mimics the writing life.

Taste has nothing to do with sentences.

To fight the runaway undergraduate workshop, I now use a much more structured program, with less emphasis on critiquing whole pieces of work. Strictly proscribed exercises and short, directed assignments focus students on technique and tools rather than self-expression. We concentrate on the sentence, on syntax, and I feel less like some hapless coach in youth league soccer, watching strategy-less kids kick bundles of memoir around the table.

The one thing that everybody wants is to be free [...] not to be managed, threatened, directed, restrained, obliged, fearful, administered, they want none of these things they all want to feel free, the word discipline, and forbidden and investigated and imprisoned brings horror and fear into all hearts.

When I talk with my colleagues around the country about these things I get many sage nods about how this is the right way to go. But who knows? In so structuring the workshop, am I enabling anything like the learning experience I had, however accidentally? Am I letting students find, through experiment, the various ways they might write? Am I letting them find the ways writing discovers itself, the ways writers discover their own abilities and limits? Am I giving them the freedom to write the kind of weird and horrible stuff I wrote as I figured out what I might be able to do?

Write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting.

My colleagues and I also worry about the scant reading many of our writing students do. How can they plagiarize if they don't read? The answer, I have decided recently, is to exploit the other part of the studio model, the copying grand masters part, and have students write in conscious and studied imitation of writers I make them read. I have tried this in workshops and classes at the MFA and undergraduate level. Write a piece like Anne Carson, I tell them, and come in able to discuss what it was you were imitating—syntax? structure? some other element of style? Or

write a piece like Lydia Davis. (I'm not sure this wouldn't be an excellent way to teach PhD surveys in contemporary literature, by the way.) The results have been surprisingly good—the writing the students produce may not be any better or any worse, but they say they have a feeling of accomplishment and increased understanding, a sense that they have added tools to their toolbox. They think it is fun.

It takes a heap of loafing to write a book.

I was once asked in an interview why I wrote, and I said, only half-facetiously, “Because I feel worse when I don't.” I doubt anyone writes very much if they can stand not to do it. But that belies the delight. When things are flowing, I find pleasure in the evolving line, pleasure in the developing story, in the endless surprises that result from pushing thought and image into the form of sentences and paragraphs. The essential efficacy of my plagiaristic pedagogy, my use of imitation in my classes, may be due simply to the pleasure students find in it. In erasing the anxiety about “finding one's voice,” that most dubious of ventures, and allowing them to feel, however falsely, that the burden of creation has been lifted, they enjoy themselves. That pleasure may be the result of the mimetic impulse itself (the Lacanian in me dies hard), may be the submission to the law of genre, may be the Halloween freedom of it all, but in any case it works. They develop more good habits than bad, they think through issues of constraint and freedom, they learn tricks, they learn structures, they learn style.

One does not get better but different and older and that is always a pleasure.

After the novel, I've decided now I'm going to imitate the way people write photo essays. But I'm going to put my own stamp on it. And I'm going to have fun.

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Alvin Snider: What Is an Editor?

When I first took on the editorship of *Philological Quarterly*, a colleague from another university, a veteran editor, asked me what I planned for the journal, how I would redefine its mission and my goals in realizing it. An awkward silence followed as I joked that I had no idea what editors actually did but thought they enjoyed cushy sinecures. Today I could rhyme off a list of activities subsumed under the catchall term “editor” but still would not venture a definition. Much like the study of “literature,” which *PQ* historically has served, the term remains elusive. My predecessors, the first editors of *PQ* at the University of Iowa, who brought it into existence some ninety years ago, could not have foreseen that philology would fall into disrepute and editing itself start to resemble a sort of genial (or surly) professional doorkeeping. If not as minor functionaries, colleagues tend to regard journal editors as akin to Samuel Johnson's lexicographers, harmless drudges who provide a worthy public service. The language you most often hear invoked in praise of successful editors is a discourse of anonymity, self-abnegation, and tireless industry. Editors represent the antithesis of Romantic expressivity, commendable in their