

## On Writing on Walking (composed on foot, Wednesday, April 29, 2009, 2:48 pm)

Louis Bury

Aristotle says that the walk taken for its own sake is better than the one taken for a purpose. I'm unsure which sort of walk I'm on now: my purpose is to write about Andy Fitch's *60 Morning Walks*, a lyrical transcription of the walks AF took every day for two months, but I'm more than happy to be taking this walk for its own sake—it is a beautiful 66° spring day, the trees are in bloom, AF's book is delightful, and I've just entered Riverside Park. If this is work, it certainly doesn't feel like it.

Living in Manhattan, I do a lot of walking, even if I don't ordinarily think much about it. Most of that walking is done to get from one place to another: the subway, the grocery store, the movie theater, etc. For this reason, the pace of walking in NYC – at least *my* hectic, determined pace – is different from what we ordinarily consider to be the leisurely, reflective pace of the walker.

At the moment, I have no destination or obligations; my only purpose is to write, to think.

Georges Perec, on observing the street:

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you?  
Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.  
You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless. (50)

These questions, profound in their simplicity, animate *60 Morning Walks*.

In contrast to the commuters who seem “emotionally someplace else,” Fitch strives to remain “relaxed and

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## *The Project*

“On Writing on Walking” is a chapter from my constraint-based dissertation (in progress) about constraint-based writing, *Exercises in Criticism*. I define constraint-based writing, loosely, as writing that imposes rules and restrictions upon itself over and above the rules and restrictions (syntax, lexicon, etc.) that are always present in the act of writing—as writing that understands itself as part of an avant-garde literary tradition whose most prominent precursor is the work of the OuLiPo, a French writing group, founded in 1960 and still in existence today, whose goal was to devise arbitrary constraints for the purpose of generating literary texts. Well known Oulipian texts include Georges Perec's *A Void* (a novel written without using any word that contains the letter 'e') and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (a novel written using more elaborate constraints).

When completed, my dissertation will contain ninety-nine short chapters (after Oulipian Raymond Queneau's ninety-nine stylistic variations in his collection of short stories, *Exercises in Style*), each of which follows a different compositional procedure. In addition to being an exegesis of various constraint-based texts, the finished project is also intended as a laboratory experiment in the theory and practice of literary criticism: what happens to the critical act when its conditions are altered in various ways? Central to my methodology is an acknowledgement, one made too infrequently in my view, of criticism as a kind of performance. Customarily, the critic must perform mastery, a demonstration of interpretive aptitude, rendered in objective, authoritative language, whose payoff is the production of new, discursively situated knowledge; in my dissertation, however, mastery has been subordinated (though not abandoned) to other modes

<<http://liminalities.net/5-4/walkingpdf>>

emotionally present” on his walks, in other words, ponderous and slow, like the bird-watchers, or “birders,” he watches and wonders if he’ll one day become (15).

I’d be content to achieve roughly the same thing in this exercise, to sit, like the birders, comfortably somewhere between expertise and diletantism, insight and pleasure.

I will alternate between writing while walking and writing while sitting, as I see fit. This freedom – the freedom to pursue whim childishly, ecstatically – is a luxury of the walker.

Joggers, a familiar sight on Fitch’s walks, stand in contrast to walkers: their quality of consciousness is more harried, skittish.

Whereas meaning, for runners, only happens in fitful intervals, walkers remain steadily receptive to diminutive revelations.

AF describes his own habit of thought – a cross between walker and runner – as follows: “I decided that the closest man’s method of fishing—where you’re constantly casting or reeling—fit best with my temperament” (83).

It is easier to write sitting down than standing up: the writing implements are easier to manage, the posture more conducive to reflection.

But I need to keep moving. Motion is so pleasant on a day like today.

Literary walkers abound: Baudelaire, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Benjamin, the Wordsworths, et al. Their texts are all slow and considered.

Perec again:

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary... as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal... What’s really going on, what we’re experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and occurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? (209-10)

of critical engagement, including, but not limited to, pleasure, rapture, frustration, boredom, indifference, digression, failure, parody, amateurism, and irresponsibility.

### *The Essay*

Two simple rules governed the composition of “On Writing on Walking”: it was written while out on an afternoon walk, with no revision permitted afterwards.

### *Full Disclosure*

Before taking the walk to compose “On Writing on Walking,” I had essayed, using procedures centered around the number 60, several drafts of a chapter on Andy Fitch’s recent book, *60 Morning Walks*. Unsatisfied with those drafts, however, I put them aside until I had the idea to compose a small suite of chapters each written while doing a physical activity: running, walking, bicycling, riding the subway, attending a poetry reading, etc. The idea was to see what happened when I made my critical exercises a literal form of exercise, rather than just a metaphor for the use of rules, constraints, and procedures.

*60 Morning Walks* seemed a natural fit for the walking chapter. However, because I had already written extensively about Fitch’s book, I was at a comparative advantage when I embarked on my walk to write about it: salient quotes had already been culled, prominent themes or ideas explored. Thus, unlike in some of my other exercise chapters, I did not have to spend significant amounts of time, in the moment of composition, scrambling to find quotes or to think up new topics for consideration. In fact, in several places, often those introducing and analyzing a quote, I simply inserted previously written passages wholesale.

The plodding, humdrum categories Percec lists here are the terrain of writer's on foot, mucking around in the mundane.

AF's contribution to the literature of walking, small but not insubstantial, is to ritualize this desultory practice through the use of constraint—is to conduct an experiment, quasi-systematic, in the theory and practice of observation.

Eye contact, putative gauge of truthfulness, often arbitrates Fitch's sundry street encounters, particularly those with women:

I couldn't stop looking into a South American woman's eyes but the whole time I wondered Why do I look at people? (17)

I turned and almost stepped in a stroller pushed by an attractive blonde mother wearing plaid. The shyness of the encounter sexualized it. (43)

A Puerto Rican girl more than met my stare. (65)

A woman looked up from a New Yorker beaming. Our connection grew so strong I glanced off guilty. (65)

An old Japanese woman wore a bowler hat. The question Was she attractive? made no sense. I was attracted to her. She needed my gaze and I delivered it. (76)

Haniel Long: "The moment one accosts a stranger or is accosted by him is above all in this life the moment of drama." (20)

Charles Olson: "polis/ is eyes," that is, cities are defined by the awkward familiarities of perambulant intercourse (30).

Despite the gaze's inherently masculine, sexualized nature, the streets are, by and large, a sex-free zone, in which looks remain unconsummated, public tensions unrelieved. The exceptions to this rule only confirm it.

I am scaling one of those large slabs of rock that populate nyc parks. I am happy.

Even constitutionals can be considered purposive, in that the goal is to get out and stretch one's legs for the sake of physical and psychological well-being. That makes them no less beneficial.

In this way, "On Writing on Walking" is not an exercise in complete critical spontaneity, in the way some of my other exercise chapters are. I do not believe, however, that my prior preparations (which were not even intended as such) compromise the integrity of the experiment. Just as a jazz musician's improvisatory solos are not purely spontaneous but are based on extensive practice and preparation, so too was my walk, and the writing I did on it, an original improvisation some of whose movements were previously rehearsed. What's more, and perhaps most importantly, the process of taking the walk dictated, in important ways, the tenor of my thoughts and the directions in which they tended, such that the end result is not something that could have been obtained otherwise.

### *Writing and Walking*

In the considerable literature of writing about walking, very few texts have been written while out on the walk itself, and with good reason. It is difficult, more difficult than it might first appear, to write and to walk simultaneously. Not only is it tricky to handle properly the writing implements while in constant motion, but, even when the feat can be managed (in relatively untrafficked areas), its awkwardness produces clumsy, unfamiliar rhythms of thought. Writing and thinking, in other words, are eminently bodily activities; as such, any changes in the physical conditions in which one attempts to perform them will necessarily result in changes in their very nature as well.

Habituated to writing while sitting at my desk, I found writing while walking outdoors to be unsatisfying, which accounts for why I felt compelled, during my walk, to stop so often and, at times, for such lengths. What felt most unsatis-

Writing, too, should get out and stretch its legs from time to time. Constraint is one way to make this happen.

Remarkably for someone of my generation, Fitch didn't wear an iPod on his walks:

The sound of a street-sweeping truck made the scene more universal. (29)

Drivers honked benevolent rhythms. (31)

Back on sidewalk I couldn't stop loving how a woman's suitcase wheels clicked every square. (36)

A taxi door slammed, cars honked, drills thrust and pinged so that one tossed cigarette butt seemed so well-timed and colossal. (36)

An Acela train shot past soothing me more than silence would. (59)

For Fitch, the city's symphony of sound always creates a mood, imbues the scene with feeling and meaning—thickens it, somehow.

At the core of John Cage's insight about the world's inherent musicality is the desire for a greater alertness to the density of experience. Maybe this is an obvious thought—a dense one.

Of all the disciplines, philosophy is the slowest, the stupidest; of all the arts, poetry turtles most.

I have no desire to leave this rock. I want to lie out and sun my flabby length on it.

Doing so – lying back and closing my eyes – feels incredibly good.

This has stopped being a walk (I've been lying down for some time now) and I don't care. This, too, is a walker's luxury: to stop and start wherever.

In the same way that every walk is a dialectic between walking and not-walking, so too is every writer's life a dialectic between writing and non-writing, productivity and torpor, the preparations and their aftermath. AF's constraint – 60 minute walks on 60 consecutive weekdays, each essay 60 sentences long – is a mechanism to keep the two sides of the dialectic in balance. In the vast corpus of constraint-based literature, there have been surprisingly few constraints that function this way, that directly

fying was the effect walking seemed to have on the quality of my writing and my thinking: it became hasty, sloppy, and imprecise, similar to the way in which the quality of one's conversation deteriorates considerably when preoccupied with something else (checking one's email, say). In place of the more stately, measured rhythms of writing while sitting, writing while walking possessed a heedless forward momentum to it, demanding that my pen keep pace with my feet, regardless of the nature of its output. Perhaps this accounts for why the practice of walking has long been seen as a boon to cogitation: the slow, deliberate forward motion agitates thoughts into existence, rapid-fire, yet the motion is not so vigorous as to override or extirpate thought, which can happen with more demanding forms of physical exercise.

### *Writing and Thinking*

Writing this essay made me acutely aware of the way in which written thought has a different, more crafted feel to it than thought thought. In a sense, written thought is not thought at all but a sculpted representation of it, even when the writing is done as a stream of consciousness, a mode my essay occasionally skirts. My essay is therefore an exercise in the transcription of thought – what happens to my ideas when I try to transcribe them in an unfamiliar fashion – as much as it is an exercise in thought itself. Both activities – thought itself, and the transcription of it – are framed, through the acts of writing and of walking, as a kind of performance.

### *The Performance of Failure*

As I have already suggested, I'm not particularly satisfied with the quality of my writing in "On Writing on Walking":

intervene in the writer's life itself, as opposed to intervening only in the text's form.

I am still on the rock, but can sense it's time to go. I will allow myself a minute more.

For AF, or perhaps just for me, the connection between writing, the body, and constraint lies in ritual. Ritual is repetition raised to the status of sacrament.

If constraint is fundamentally about exercise, it needs to be pointed out that there are many different types of exercise.

The question now is do I go back the way I came. The answer is of course not.

One thing I admire about *60 Morning Walks* is its balance between lyricism and candor, two (secretly) oppositional modes.

Sometimes we say that we are going on a walk to chew something over, to clear our heads, to sort things out. That's never quite what actually ends up happening, but it's beneficial nonetheless.

Walking does not require patience. If you think it does, you are not well suited for the practice. Walking is about letting go and wandering, about indulgence and release, the opposite of patience. Unlike some other forms of exercise, a walk is not something you endure or suffer through.

Exiting a tunnel, the sky opens out on the 79<sup>th</sup> street Boat Basin, a glorious, sunny sight. Now— sailing is an activity concerned with the obliteration of thought. In this way, as well as in the more obvious ones, it is opposed to walking.

Consider the relationship of sunshine to thought. It is hard to do so.

Sunshine pertains to mood, which in turn pertains to thought. But I can assure you that the sun is sublimely indifferent to whatever it is you are thinking beneath it.

NY'ers make excellent runners because they are obsessed with moving fast. Paradoxically, this obsession is a consequence of walking so much.

too many sentences seem embarrassingly slack; too many thoughts insipid. The movement of the essay, from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, also strikes me as uneven. Re-reading a sentence like "I can assure you that the sun is sublimely indifferent to whatever it is you are thinking beneath it" makes me cringe a little, not because I once had the thought, which I suppose has the virtue of a certain unexpected weirdness, but because I'm displaying it, in all its inelegance, in print.

This brings me to what is perhaps the most important theoretical implication of my essay's methodology: the writing process was structured so as to short-circuit any possibility of a responsible, thorough exegesis of *60 Morning Walks*. By writing the essay while on a walk and then proscribing revision, I virtually ensure that my sentences will be unpolished, my engagement with the text roughhewn and slipshod. My chosen constraints create a set of conditions in which failure – to write well; to argue seamlessly – is inevitable. Herein lies the performative force of literary constraint: it stages the author's negotiation of impediment as a theme in its own right. The writing is as much about the conditions from which it emerges as it is about the ideas ostensibly under consideration.

For this reason, writing with rules and restrictions is, paradoxically, liberating. In the face of a constraint's demands, normative standards of artistic or argumentative quality recede. Questions of good or bad are placed on hold, lessening anxieties about artistic or intellectual production. As Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*." Obeying a rule blindly, the burden of complete freedom of choice disappears: my essay's clumsier sentences are toler-

I dislike cars, and yet even I can't deny the appeal of their utilitarian alacrity.

I will be exiting the park in a few minutes, having tired of writing and walking.

Approaching the steep incline near the 72<sup>nd</sup> street exit. Did I mention I love climbing hills, be it while walking, running or biking? The extra exertion required is always salutary.

One thing I haven't mentioned is the differences between the hike and the walk.

That at a hike usually happens in "nature," a walk in the city (or, I suppose, the suburbs), we all know. What is less obvious is that a hike is the form of purposive purposivelessness *par excellence*, requiring intense preparation for an aimless ramble. This is why hikers, like artists, appear so annoyingly serious to non-initiates.

The idea of an urban hike is an impossibility, a joke. You don't need to prepare for a walk in the city anymore than you need to bring sand to a beach.

I think I will pick up some food before I go home. That – the purposive act of shopping – will constitute the end of the walk.

But hiking—what of it? I like nature and find it soothing, but I am more interested in that hotbed of purposivelessness, civilization.

AF is moving to Wyoming and intends to continue there his practice of taking daily morning walks (for 60 more years!). It will be interesting to see what happens to his walk-essays in a different locale and over such a long span of time.

A convenient place to live, Broadway and 72<sup>nd</sup>, but a sordid intersection. This will be the end of my walk.

able to me because they aren't representative of my sensibilities as an unfettered writer, but were simply attempts to follow the rules of the constraint as best I could.

Ordinarily, there is little, if any, room in artistic-intellectual performance for failure, be it the well-rehearsed performances of traditional thespians or musicians, the precarious balancing act of a tight-rope walker, or the performance of a sober, academic study. Practiced excellence is expected of the performer; failure, an inherent risk, is a specter haunting the performance. Significantly, then, by creating, in my dissertation, a space in which failure is not only acceptable, but inevitable, I have jerry-rigged a set of circumstances in which I risk, apparently, nothing: I'm responsible for whatever virtues the chapter may possess, but I can claim immunity with regards to its shortcomings, as I was merely obeying a set of rules as well as possible—a curious situation in which my writing remains open to plaudits but impervious to slights. In gambling terms, this situation is known as a "freeroll": an unusual betting situation in which the bettor cannot lose but still has the possibility of winning, as in Blaise Pascal's famous wager that it is a good bet to believe in God because if you're correct you have everything to gain but if you're incorrect you have nothing to lose.

Without discussing the drawbacks and merits of such a contrivance, I will note, in conclusion, that the situation is further complicated by the fact that the conceit of my dissertation, in breaking with disciplinary conventions, could itself be seen as a form of risk-taking, a wager, on my part, that my heterodox methodology is a more useful contribution to the field of English literature (even if many of my contributions assert their own useless-

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ness) than any of the more recognized forms of contribution I'm personally capable of making. Within my work, then, is a dialectic, one whose implications I've yet to process fully, between risk-taking and risk aversion, between the desire to perform, sometimes quite extravagantly, in prose, and the desire to not have the performance judged harshly. I would go so far as to posit, in fact, that written language as a performative medium is particularly well-suited to handling this dialectical tension: the way in which the performer risks "putting herself out there" in prose is fundamentally different than the risks of exposure other types of performance entail, in ways that are more conducive to a shy or retiring personality. Written language, in other words, allows one to perform behind the mask of the page, and to spend as much time as needed revising the performance's particulars until they are just so.



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