

An Autobiographic Ethnography of Performance in Everyday Discourse

Ronald J. Pelias

To begin, start with a simple question: How to describe the performative in everyday speech? Rule 1: Make sure the self is at the center of the report. Rule 2: Make sure the self is sufficiently in the background. Self-indulgence is not permitted. Being boring is even worse. To continue, find a label: autobiographic ethnography.

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After asking my seven year old daughter to help me brainstorm for a solution to a family problem, she replies, "I would like to help but in my brain, it's a sunny day." We laugh in shared recognition.

* * *

To engage in an autobiographic ethnography is to enact the old aestheticism. It is to create a rhetorical dandy, who, as Geertz tells us, must more than anything else present an engaging persona, one who seduces readers into believing that they are in the company they wish to keep. The scholar as aesthete is nothing more than and nothing less than a negotiation of personality, an actor who turns life into art.

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A colleague offers a course entitled, "Teaching as Performance." The comparison, like teaching is an art, seems obvious. I stop to consider poet Al Young's lines:

The face out there
 Interacting with yours
 knows how to grin & play with its pen

but misses the point so charmingly
and Theodore Roethke's strange fixation on poor dead Jane's neckcurls.

* * *

Kevin Costner in his role of Robin Hood had another actor stand in for the scene in which his bottom is exposed. What does this do to the notion of presence and absence to call upon a stand-in butt?

* * *

I write a line, "Some ease in, tense." It serves as a beginning for a little poem that compares entering water with entering relationships. The poem is finished, the line is gone, like O'Hara's orange.

* * *

A friend described a time when she asked her daughter to tell her about a party she had just attended. Her daughter replied, "I can't. I haven't remembered it yet."

* * *

A sneeze. It evokes, if one were to work through just some of the "a's," argument, affirmation, awkwardness, assault, approval, aggravation, assiduity, awareness, applause, action, adoration, avoidance, assimilation, aggression, appreciation, authorization, anger, attention, appeasement, agitation, attack, adjudication, authentication, abhorrence, affinity, astonishment, apology, agony, adoration, assurance, alacrity, alignment, anxiety, anticipation, adjustment, affection, assistance, alienation, advice, annihilation, allegiance, adversity, altercation, amusement, admiration, ambivalence, ambiguity, admonishment, amity, altruism, amazement, and autobiography.

Meaning is radically contingent.

A sneeze again. This time strategic, an action seeking audience. Its design is sympathy. Let's not forget who is feeling sick here.

* * *

These are confessions of an apprehensive performer. To confess demands an audience. Yet, to solicit an audience is to invite apprehension. It comes sure as the winter's sleet, slicing through all speech. I write in fear. I speak in fear. I cannot escape the other's gaze, the look that examines or discards like male lust. In their eyes, I read my sorry self. Like Prufrock, I have worried that "my hair is growing thin." I have "measured out my life in coffee spoons." I count my vita lines and go to bed.

An invitation comes to perform some of my poems. I'm given a few days to consider the offer. The opportunity is too alluring for my ego to refuse. I am seduced by the promise. But for two days I see poems shaking in my trembling hands.

Your hands shake. Your mouth feels dry. You sweat. You feel the rings form under your arms. Your voice quivers. Your eyes blur. You cannot focus. You're warm. Your knees lock. You begin to walk. You think you might fall. You fix your clothes. You put your hands in your pockets. Your pulse races. You're aware of the pounding of your heart.

Here are the words: stage fright, apprehension, nervousness, anxiety, reticence, shyness, fear, trepidation, dread, panic, agitated, uneasy, phobic, queasy, timid, distraught, scared.

Here are the politically correct words: communication disadvantaged.

* * *

Young Boy 1:	I know how to spell "soldiers."
Young Boy 2:	No you don't.
Young Boy 1:	Yes I do! "Sahfirtbv." "
Young Boy 2:	Oh.

I am still spelling soldiers.

* * *

There is a tradition: Charles Baudelarie, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Oscar Wilde, H. Norman Schwartzkopf, Anais Nin, Josephy Beuys, Madonna, Charles Bukowski, Ronald Reagan, Piero Manzoni, Walter Cronkite, Tom Wolfe. Is

turning one's life into an art work more than a marketing strategy? Is it genuine incarnation? Is it the individual answer to theatrical spectacle?

Madonna, truth or dare: Do you believe what you say? Are you genuine? Are you putting us on? Are you sincere? The cross hangs between your pointed breasts.

* * *

Freed from the burden of logical argument, I offer contingencies, random thoughts, tenuous connections, solipsistic references, feelings (petty and otherwise), personal impressions, selected notes, private confessions. The new burden: hold interests, engage, be witty and startling, hold interests.

The postmodern mandate is the Sophists' proof.

* * *

Helen Hayes says she knew how to play a particular character when she remembered a Joseph Conrad line: "she had the awesome power of intimacy."

I have been a victim to such power.

* * *

"Fly, fly" I say with W. S. Merwin, for I too "have always believed too much in words." Yes, I want to be seen as someone who knows poetry, or better, someone who uses poetry.

* * *

As I read the opening chapters of Michael Kirby's *A Formalist Theatre*, I watch his struggle toward a definition of theatre and acting. What to rule in; what to rule out. The boundary cases are always the most interesting. He argues that the key to theatre is intent, the intent to create an event that will affect an audience. Dinner is served.

* * *

A black man works the crowd in New York City: "Give to the United Negro Sausage Fund." Some laugh and he continues: "If you won't give to the UNSF, then give because it was a creative try." We all move on. So much for art.

* * *

A friend tells me the following story: A couple who had been married for fifty years were to be honored by their church. Just prior to the service, the priest identified three different times when they would be asked to do something. The husband became quite concerned that he wouldn't remember what to do when. In an effort to comfort him, the wife leaned over to pat his hand and said, "Don't worry, even those big Hollywood stars forget their lines sometimes." They don't need Kirby to know what theatre is.

What really happened was that the husband comforted the wife, not vice versa. Details may be changed to protect the genders. Details may be changed to protect ourselves. Details may be changed to protect me.

* * *

The Question: "I am an older woman coming back to school and I would like to know what you can tell me about Public Speaking?"

The Reply: "It is a course designed to help you prepare and deliver public speeches."

Imagined Reply: "You give speeches and make sure that you don't talk about baking tuna casserole for your demonstration speech."

So much for being politically correct.

* * *

If I get it, it ain't avant-garde. The avant-garde at Lincoln Center is an oxymoron. The avant-garde exists on the margins. It knows what is at stake in rearranging the pieces. When we (or should I say, the bourgeois) understand, all is lost.

David Gordon's "Mysteries and What's So Funny?" was the first presentation of the fifth annual Serious Fun series at Lincoln Center's Tully Hall. I was only one of a handful of people wearing a coat and tie.

* * *

After buying half-priced tickets in Times Square, I hear a man's plea for donations for the homeless. I am persuaded by the passion of his speech and drop a dollar into his box. The next day I hear his plea again and wonder if he is legitimate. I walk past. So much for art.

* * *

The liturgical debate concerning what substances should be used for communion is a question of representation. It is a semiotic debate: "grape juice/wine/blood" and "wafer/bread/body." Props count.

* * *

I enjoy telling the story of how my wife went out one day and bought herself a jeep taking me completely by surprise. I am at my male best (or worst) in the telling. It makes for a good story, a moment in conversation that plays fairly well. It is, of course, a lie. We knew then and we know now what was and is happening. The fiction we allow is a shared public performance, a light comedy we stage periodically. All art is ideological.

* * *

This piece is about my performance in everyday interactions. Our interaction is a performance about alternatives to scholarly representation.

Scholarship and fiction are more than related; they are incestuous cousins.

* * *

Once there was a man who wanted to tell a story. So he began and as he spoke he wasn't sure if he was telling the story he wanted to tell. There were many tales he could tell but he could only tell one at a time. He had picked a story to tell and had already begun to tell it when he wondered if it was the story he wanted to tell. Even more, he wasn't sure who was doing the telling. He

wondered if it was really him who was speaking or if he was just a storyteller. He spoke more loudly trying to find out but he was still unsure. He held a mirror up to his face but that didn't help either. He repeated what he had said; he tried whispering; he invited others to listen. Nothing helped. He wondered if anyone would believe the story he was telling and if they did believe, who were they believing. He wondered if he was telling the truth or if he would know if he wasn't. Then he thought about why he wanted to tell the story and he began again. Once there was a man who . . .

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Just making conversation, Clifton asked, "What are you working on these days?"

"Oh, a couple of things. The one I'm having the most fun with is a piece I'm calling 'An Autobiographic Ethnography of Performance in Everyday Discourse.'"

"Pretty loose use of the term 'ethnography,' isn't it?"

"I suppose so, but it does capture some things I like—doing fieldwork on oneself, acting as a participant/observer. You know, that kind of thing."

"Why do you think," Clifton said becoming even more suspicious of the project, "that people would care about you as a subject? I mean, what do you offer the reader by exploring your performance in everyday life?"

"I hope the piece moves beyond a simple self-report. The piece is really about modes of proof."

"Well, good luck with it," said Clifton, escaping to his office.

* * *

I put *Les Miserables* on the Walkman and turn the volume to ten. I sing. I orchestrate. It is a religious experience. What bleeding heart liberal can resist?

* * *

My daughter shows me her day's work: a puppet made from a lunchbag, arms colored and glued, one placed near the hip and the other exiting from the ear. The eyes, nose and mouth are best described as variations on a circle. All are in red crayon, seriously contrasting with the orange hair. The puppet, spotted with extra glue, has been oddly folded and stuffed in her lunchbox for the passage home. I think I detect some grape jelly on the forehead. "It's wonderful, darling," I say.

* * *

Between fact one and fact two is reading.
Between reading one and reading two is interpretation.
Between interpretation one and interpretation two is understanding.
Between dialogue one and dialogue two is truth.
Between truth one and truth two is presence.
Between presence one and presence two is performance.

* * *

I can best describe my performance behavior by thinking of a continuum from simple action to staged action. The simple action end of the continuum acknowledges that I can view all of my behavior as performance. In this sense, to do is to perform. Or, to adapt the familiar claim of one cannot not communicate, I can say that I cannot not perform. There is often a difference, though, between those acts I simply do and those acts I do when conscious that I am being observed. Awareness of spectator presence often alters my action. I feel a pressure to do the action right. The presence increases even more when I invite others to focus upon my behavior. When I do such actions as taking the floor in informal conversation or calling attention to some physical feat, I establish performer/audience roles. I also change the dynamic when I suggest to my audience that by focusing on me, they will encounter the aesthetic. I tell stories, jokes, puns; I mimic others for comic effect; I make mock threats; I tease with transparent lies. In short, I engage in a myriad of conversational behaviors that I offer as aesthetic. At times, moving further on the continuum, I offer public presentations, created for anticipated audiences. I lecture to my classes, give speeches on various occasions, read papers at academic conferences, and so on. These, too, are potentially aesthetic acts. Marking the end of the continuum are my staged actions, those events typically considered theatre. I usually present these actions in designated performance spaces and frame them as theatrical events.

This scheme is a phenomenological report. It tells of my sense of everyday performance, my sense of what actions are more or less theatrical for me. It empowers spectators, making my own and others' intent fundamental and establishing the communicative frame essential. It forgets, as I do in my everyday life, that I am bound by my culture and history.

* * *

A doctoral student comes by who I have not seen for several years. I am both glad to see her and protective of the time she might demand. We give each other a cautious hug. So much for teaching as an art.

* * *

Account 1:

He has not escaped his gender. He is a white North American male doing the best he knows how. He makes mistakes; he offends, but never intentionally. He has changed significantly.

Account 2:

He has all the typical biological drives—he eats, sleeps, makes love and so on. These drives, as many anthropological studies have led us to expect, become evident in more or less elaborate rituals. Eating, for example, demands the execution of certain rules of preparation and consumption. He also goes about his business in keeping with the familiar white North American male behavior. He is loud, takes up considerable space, and acts as if the world is his. Like others of his kind, he holds a position of power and has been known to use it. He knows enough to appear sensitive to those who have been marginalized but goes about his affairs without much real concern. He lives in suburbia and manicures his lawn. When he speaks, he expects others to listen without interruption. He has been known to hold forth, to offer truth, and to silence others. He has little regard for . . .

Account 3:

When we speak, I am aware that he is a large male but he carries himself in gentle manner. He likes women and I never feel intimidated when we talk. We have had some rich conversations. Most often, he plays the role of devil's advocate and I respond. We engage in the academic game very well. We follow its rules, privilege its logic, trust its values. We knead ideas together.

Account 4:

He's an ass.

* * *

To end, finish with a simple question: Has the story been told? Rule 1: Ask if it was worth telling. Rule 2: See if the dandy's clothes are wrinkled. Rule 3:

Try again. The greatest dishonesty is the illusion of disclosure. To continue, provide a summary: This performance is an ethnographic account presented on behalf of myself in the hope of some understanding. To finalize, stop with T. S. Eliot's line: "But I gotta use words when I talk to you."

Southern Illinois University

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Price per volume — 2 issues yearly
Institutional Rate: \$76.00
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ISSN 0276-2374

EM9/93

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26 Austin Avenue, P.O. 337, Armitville, NY 11701
PHONE (516) 691-1270 FAX (516) 691-1770
Orders only — call toll-free (800) 638-7819