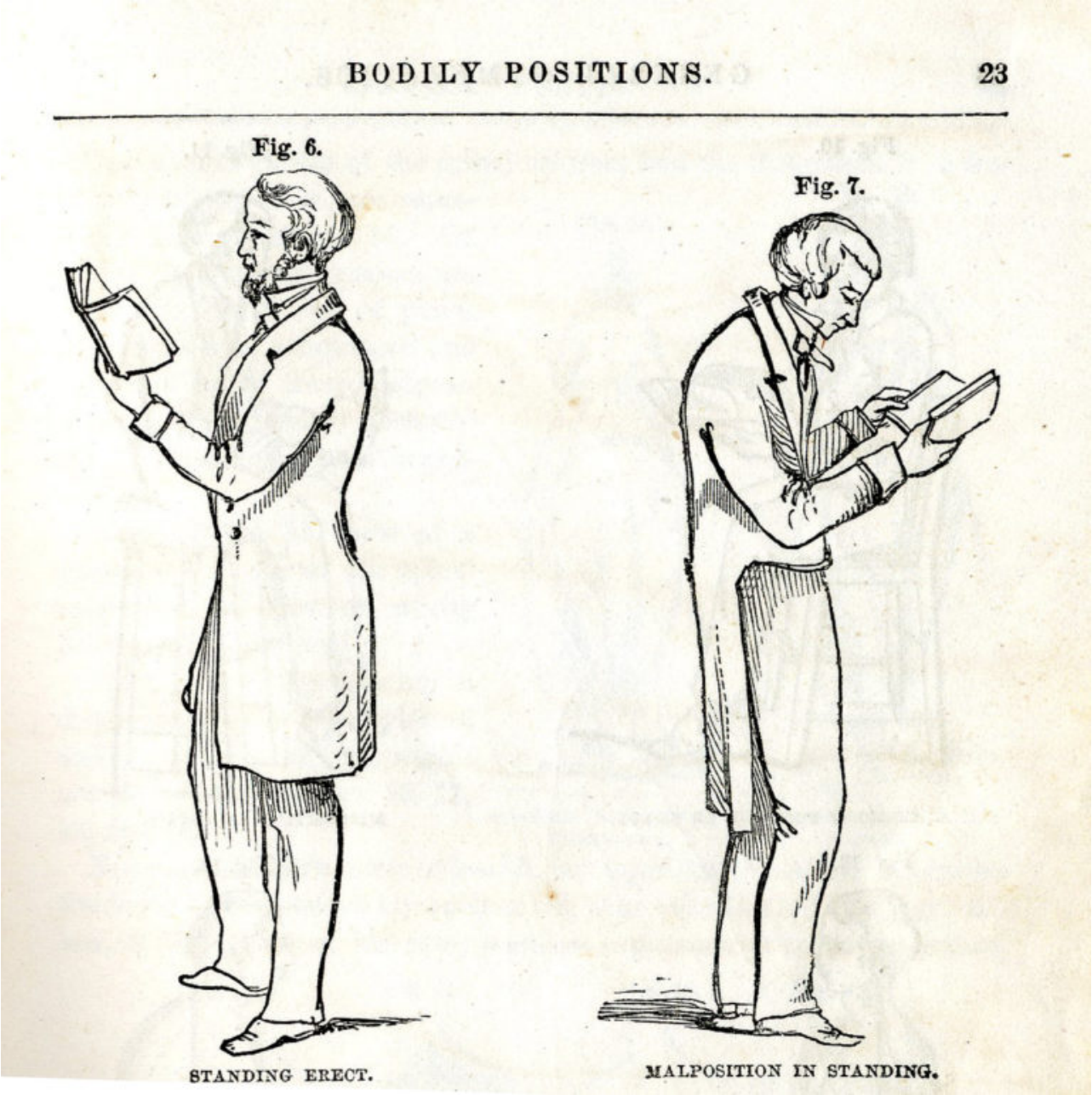
Undisciplined Reading



Finding surprise in how we read

There are moments, usually late in the evening, when I can imagine a voluntary reading life. The bulk of my day is spent among memos; undergrad papers; endless, endless e-mail; committee reports; dissertations; course texts; grants; evaluations; that one, slightly annoying piece of e-mail that gradually and then obsessively overshadows every aspect of my institutional and personal life; lecture notes; petitions; quizzes; department updates; exams; job applications; and graduate student portfolios. Did I mention the e-mail? But late in the evening, I can finally read . . . what? I am equally scattershot at these moments, grazing among the magazines—*The New Yorker*, *The New York Review*

of Books—and newspapers—the *New York Times*—to which I subscribe. Then there are the half-read books by Dave Eggers and Karen Armstrong, the dutiful, incomplete readings of Steven Pinker. Well, there's always *The New York Review* for Pinker. And does anyone ever finish a book by Dave Eggers?

My hunch is I am describing habits of the tribe, reading practices familiar to academic readers of *Common-place*. The welter of reading we do within the profession seems at first glance chaotic but no doubt hails us into a larger disciplinary structure, one enshrining hierarchies of knowledge, competence, and validation, and shared by the other learned professions. The late-night moments might also be familiar. They, too, might be part of a discipline, patterned on the wonted behavior expected of enlightened intellectuals across the learned professions. Those organs of New York media are gatekeepers and tastemakers for the overeducated, mooting the latest in policy and aesthetics, science and religion. As to those books, well, substitute Richard Dawkins for Karen Armstrong, Natalie Angier for Steven Pinker, and you know what I mean. The discipline here is to forage across ranges of information, in a set of steps opening the reader up to worlds of knowledge that, at the sequence's end, confirm, for the liberal obeisant, his or her worldliness.

My reading life isn't always and hasn't always been this way. Over a decade ago, I dropped the needle on a set of Bob Dylan biographies. When I became a parent, I suckled at the breast of a mommyblog. More recently, I've had my head turned by graphic novelist Chris Ware. But these metaphors of addiction, consumption, and fascination only describe reading in the conventional language of passionate absorption—what we've come to term being "lost in a book." The norm for this kind of absorptive reading is that longish, self-contained, page-turning form passed down from nineteenth-century reading practices: the novel.

I read and teach novels regularly. But is the linear novel the only way one gets lost in a book? Consider those reference works that captivate you: a cookbook, a sports trivia volume, or a recordings guide. You open these books and escape into the pleasure of the cross-reference, the serendipitous, the transport to the known and the unknown. When I open David Thomson's *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, forty minutes later the hard-boiled eggs are hard and boiling over, the cats are draped over the sleeping three-year-old, the dishes are still in the sink. Other than in Thomson's massaging, prickly prose, I know not where I am. The faint motion sickness I feel is from the cascade of ideas, memories, and anticipations, so different from the psychological and physiological response to channel- or Web-surfing, comparable fragmented modes of consumption. But reference-book reading of this sort assumes connoisseurship—that fancy word for heavy-panting, lighter-waving fandom—a habit of mind profoundly disciplinary.

I should feel shame about my disorderly reading, but I don't. In fact, I'd like to defend it as a reading practice of depth, rather than superficiality. Disorderly reading mimics the mind's generative activity of thought and discovery, those instances where you know something is happening but you don't

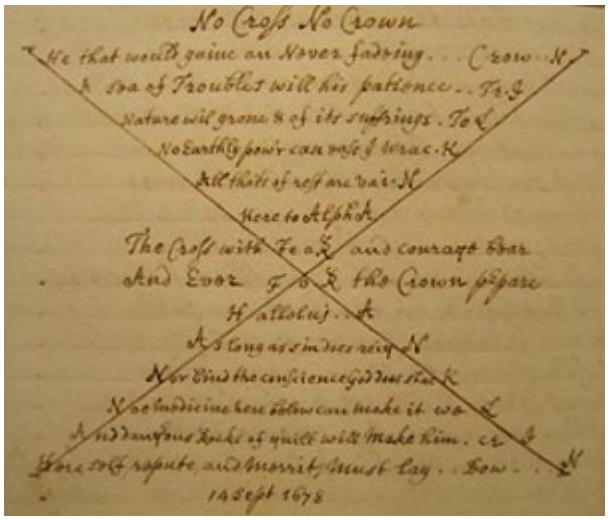
know what it is. We might better call it discontinuous or nonlinear reading and acknowledge its long history, a history that reveals the fact that nonlinear reading lends itself to routinized procedure as well.

Reading seems ineluctably bound up in discipline, in customary behavior that precedes and structures the significance of the reading. But how then does reading become a means to the new, the unknown, the undiscovered? If even messy reading falls into predictable patterns and outcomes, how might what we read, or rather how we read, surprise us?

My contention is that one might use discipline to escape discipline, that freeing the mind is achieved by entering into restrictive procedures that liberate thinking. Let's begin by assessing that literary form most associated with the unknown, the undiscovered, or the novel—that is, the novel. Then we'll turn to early modern disciplines, finding analogies in them for contemporary reading scenes. Our guide here will be that Other to the twenty-first-century secular intellectual: the seventeenth-century English devout, those bigoted regicides and colonial Malvolios known—not without controversy, now and then, now perhaps more than then—as "Puritans."

Consider the novel. It is here that readers imagine the unimagined. An author invents a fictional world, and in this invention a different contract obtains between reader and text. Unlike the expectation of nonfiction—that it is tethered to reality, to history's determinants—readers enter the novel as a zone unburdened by the documentary, as a product of artifice and design, a place of play and fate. In this imaginative escape, authors plot events that move readers relentlessly forward, seeking answers to the mysteries established, gratifications for the desires incited. No recent thinker has better captured the pleasures of novel reading than Sven Birkerts in his collection *The Gutenberg Elegies*. Plenty of digerati have lambasted these beautiful essays, but Birkerts finds language for the consciousness we inhabit when being "lost in a book." For Birkerts, the novel provides a deep time unavailable to us in our moment-to-moment existence. In the novel, plotting, detail, character, and closure create an inevitable destiny, a fatedness missing from daily life. We are attracted to the novel for its linear design, a particular kind of escape that, with the godly language of "authorial design" and "fated destiny," broaches the sacred.

The experiential world of novel reading Birkerts recreates is itself built on religious connotations. When an "author's language [is] resonating in the self," the self becomes "the soul" and the immersive, deep-time consciousness prompted by novel reading is patently meditative. Whether through Muslim *tawil*, Zen koan, or Christian closet, meditation requires training, a point Birkerts allows is true of the reading practice he describes as well. You don't need *The Gutenberg Elegies* to understand that sustained attention to linear fiction requires discipline—try teaching long novels to undergrads these days. Page-turning absorption, so reverently evoked here as a trance world, is hardly a natural way to read.



The personal miscellanies of Benjamin Franklin's uncle are organized with navigational aids for discontinuous reading. They contain procedural works as well, such as a shaped poem akin to Herbert's "The Altar," the senior Franklin's psalm translations, and this double acrostic, diagonal verse prompted by his wife's name, Hannah Franklin. From "No Cross, No Crown," contained in Notebooks, 1666-1725 vol. I (ca. 1783). Thanks to Peter Stallybrass for the reference to this material. Courtesy of the Manuscripts Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

As cultivated by the nineteenth-century novel, cover-to-cover escapism of this sort is an anomaly in the long history of reading. And, really, it is the legacy of the traditional novel that has given this anomaly sway, for nineteenth-century authors from Dickens to Stowe were read serially of course. Moreover, with its destinies of death and marriage, novel reading may feel predictable, where novelists ring the changes only to sound increasingly one-note. A more enduring practice and one equally generative of surprise might be called collative reading. Early New England clerics would collate passages from various tomes in their libraries to compose sermons. Yet it wasn't only the learned who would follow such nonlinear reading methods. Typology, where readers traced Old Testament foreshadowings of New Testament events, is profoundly collative, and the comparing of Hebrew Bible and Christian Gospels was at the heart of practical piety. If you think those prescribed schedules that allowed the devout to complete the bible in a continuous read over the year were the norm, think again: Cotton Mather recommended in his 1683 almanac that readers spend each day discontinuously sorting through the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Psalms. Commonplacing—the collection and transcription of discrete passages from one's reading under alphabetical or topical heads within personal miscellanies—was as important to Reformation pietists as it was to Erasmian humanists. Each of these nonlinear methods was a source of fresh insight, which would help the reader create oratory, apply scripture, or deepen faith.

In our time, collative reading provides the foundation for the anxiety-inducing

genre with which humanities academics are especially familiar: the monograph. A humanities monograph usually fails as a linear read, and not only because scholars tend to impose their own continuities on the material, from-to narratives that are especially clumsy in the hands of literary scholars. Instead, a monograph finds its utility as a nonlinear resource, with chapters or smaller units serving the user, a fellow researcher selectively mining the work for his or her own original integration of primary and secondary materials. In one of the best books I've read this year—I know, it's not saying much—Rob Sheffield smartly parses Walter Benjamin on this topic. As Sheffield puts it, Benjamin argued, in 1923's *One Way Street*, that "a book was an outdated means of communication between two boxes of index cards. One professor goes through books, looking for tasty bits he can copy onto index cards. Then he types his index cards up into a book, so other professors can go through it and copy tasty bits onto their own index cards. Benjamin's joke was: Why not just sell the index cards?"

Put less dismissively, the intellectual historian James Burke explains collative reading in terms of the equation 1+1=3. For the active reader, two disparate pieces of information—found in separate items across the shelves of a library or even across the leaves of a single reference work—add up to a third, unknown category of thought. The real thrust of the Gutenberg revolution lies here rather than in movable type, mechanical reproduction, or standardized knowledge. The product of the printing press meant there were radically expanded opportunities for nonlinear access to written ideas. The revolution happened very slowly at first, in dribs and drabs. The navigational aids and organizational schemes of, say, word separation appeared roughly in the seventh century CE; concordances, in the thirteenth century; and tables of contents, in the fifteenth century. And then it happened all at once, beginning in 1450, with a multiplication of copies submitting to these aids and schemes. The intellectual consequence of the collative reading enabled by such systems of access is the 3, the sum of 1+1 equaling a newly arrived at truth or a practical synthesis just realized. Whether in these rarefied terms or in the collative life of the library rat, my graduate school training—when a discipline made me a disciple—was about learning these techniques.

An image of a prayer conventicle. The hounding “informer” in the tree recreates the sense of martyred embattlement felt by schismatic puritans. Joseph D. Sawyer, The Romantic and Fascinating Story of the Pilgrims and Puritans (New York, 1925). From the collection of the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

Another reading discipline of surprise derived from Puritan mores is the conventicle. Conventicles were extramural religious meetings of select congregants within a church, most famously practiced in early America by Anne Hutchinson during the Antinomian controversy. (A quiescent version of conventicling from contemporary church history is the cellular model of Rick Warren’s organization, the Saddleback megachurch.) Rooted in the idea that reading matter rather than institutional authority could be a source of spiritual sustenance, conventiclers absorbed scripture, repeated sermons, and sang psalms. Conventicling operated along a spectrum from conservative to separatist. And, like *puritan*, *conventicle* was a rhetorically charged word that could mean devout private gathering or conspiratorial unlawful assembly, depending upon who did the labeling.

Pious or riotous, conventicling illuminates a classroom dynamic familiar to current undergraduate literature professors. My rough sense is that in research universities and non-elite colleges, a majority of the students in each course are cats we herd unsuccessfully, while a largish minority learn something in a rote way. The remnant is the conventicle, actual or virtual students who meet with their minds in class discussion, with each other outside of class, and with the professor after sessions. When I read Susannah Rowson or Herman Melville or Toni Morrison or Richard Powers for class preparation, I have the majority in mind, as I gather the three points I want to get across in the fifty minutes. Reaching and teaching this majority is one of the real pleasures of my professorial life. But, in the reading prep, I have the conventicle *in mind*, for that is where the surprise happens.

Such groups are true to the ambiguous history of the term. The classroom

conventicle is both pious enough to submit to the syllabus, and fold the minister-teacher into the exchange, and heretical enough to be always in dissent from the preacher-pedagogue's orthodox readings. (Professors, not always unwillingly, have cults gather round them, but with conventicling, I mean something other than this phenomenon.) The conventicle is often populated by a student demographic, the successful English major, that stays within its comfort zone. But fettered by teachers and foxed by peers, this demo can evade its complacency, and unanticipated knowledge can happen in the critical exchange. Overtly disciplinary, the effective conventicle outstrips its protocols to teach all anew.

Another means to the new in my reading has been attending to modes of writing that are almost absurdly mechanized, modes following restrictions and constraints, modes generating the unexpected by virtue of their combinatorial surprise. I refer here to that literary conventicle, full of library rats, circa Paris, 1960, or OULIPO—though Oulipians would be the first to tell you such procedural writing has a long history. A collaboration between artists and mathematicians, the OUrvoir de LItterature POtentielle (workshop of potential literature) objected to the romanticism that still lingered in the twentieth-century avant-garde, whether it be High Modernism, Dadaism, or Surrealism. OULIPO instituted rules for the production of literary work—very arbitrary rules, such as "write a novel without the letter 'e'" or "compose a note using letters lacking tails and limbs" (that is, letterforms contained by the *x*-height of a typeface, namely *a*, *c*, *e*, *i*, *m*, *n*, *o*, *r*, *s*, *u*, *v*, *w*, *x*, and *z*). It also acknowledged the precedents in literary history for its method, often creating new works from older source texts and fondly labeling Lewis Carroll and George Herbert "anticipatory plagiarists" of Oulipian art.

There was no lack of rule-bound literary expression in Renaissance culture, from sestinas to chronograms to sonnets, an Oulipian favorite. Other than Edward Taylor, however, we do not think of the Puritans in this vein. But anagrams saturated their poetry, and Psalm 119—the epitome of the psalms and essential devotional reading in its own right—was an abecedary, each of the twenty-two stanzas organized around its prescribed letter in alphabetic sequence. Anthony Somerby transcribed a Bible translation in verse that proceeds (dropping the *j*and the final five letters) as an alphabetic acrostic.

At first Jehovah with his word
did make heaven earth and light
the firmament, the moone and starres
the glistering Sunne so bright.

By him the earth was fruitfull made . . .

Creation ended, God then rests, . . .

Dust of the ground was man made of . . .

The first page of Anthony Somerby's manuscript transcription of the Bible, adapted to the procedure of the alphabet, with each letter beginning a new four-line stanza. In The First Century of New England Verse (1943), Harold Jantz attributed the poem to Somerby, though the source is Simon Wastell's Microbiblion, or the Bible's Epitome: In Verse (1629). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Drawn from Simon Wastell's *Microbiblion, or the Bible's Epitome: In Verse*, it continues in twenty-unit cycles of this sort for sixteen hundred lines before the manuscript breaks off at Psalms.

More fundamentally, ordinary New Englanders were repeatedly exposed to a deep structure of verbal expression that was radically procedural: the plain style sermon, with its schema of biblical Text, extrapolated Doctrine, and applied Use. Is it hard to imagine John Cotton at one of the monthly meetings of the OULIPO, reporting to Italo Calvino or Harry Matthews a constraint for literary production? Well, yes. Yet Puritan sermon dictates certainly sound Oulipian: "Take a fragment from a source work. Dramatize or contextualize it in five ways. Then develop three philosophical propositions from it. Then create three rules of behavior based on it. Do this every week for the rest of your life."

The rules are designed as guidelines for authors, but both the Oulipians and the Puritans strove for authorlessness: the Oulipians through their rebuke of romantic avant-gardes and through their embrace of mathematics, the Puritans through their deference to the divine Author that should properly guide human expression. Oulipians and Puritans likewise shifted the burden of meaning to readers. Oulipian art makes its audience resourcefully aware of the prison house of language, of limitations that transform themselves into possibilities. Raymond Queneau's definition of OULIPO—"Rats who construct the labyrinth from which they propose to escape"—applies as much to readers as to authors. I am one-third of the way through Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, and by the time this is published I may be two-thirds there. Reading Perec requires extraordinary discipline, but by now you know that, for me, that's no excuse.

With its minute descriptions of the persons and rooms within a Paris apartment house, *Life: A User's Manual* is both a trance-like experience and limitless invitation to narrative, a giddy rejection of aesthetic transcendence and a textured reveling in things, as if its Oulipian constraint is the very gravity of the world.

The religious culture of the Reformation inherited by Puritans in New England similarly made readers the locus of meaning. The role of literacy in Protestantism's self-definition; the doctrinal principle of *sola scriptura*; the inscrutability of God's will for the probing devout; the semiotic power of portents and wonders as providential signs from God; the Uses at sermon's end as behavior modification—all denote a Puritan society oriented to the audience. This larger ideological script was complemented by reading disciplines, by practical procedures. Along with the collative techniques mentioned above, there was the nonlinear collecting of sermon heads and scripture "evidences," as well as the linear attention to biblical narrative and sermon series that likewise burdened readers with the creation of meaning.

Indeed, one comes to see devout Puritan readers as imaginative weavers of textual fragments, humble but hardly passive, caught within scriptural grids yet impelled by the voluntarism that supplied zealous Protestantism with its identity vis-à-vis the traditional church. If they were not rats in a maze, then they were perhaps the mice John Winthrop approvingly observed chewing at a composite, single-volume binding of religious works: the mice devoured the Book of Common Prayer, while leaving the Psalms and New Testament intact. We are unaccustomed to seeing these Puritan collative habits as an exercise of the imagination, but like most readers across the millennia, the New England devout reacted creatively to the labyrinth they found themselves within.

Might there be a lesson here for cultural historians? Our stories of the past default to human intention as a guarantor of meaning, as if intentionality were not vexed and mutable. Literary history is even more bound to author-based conceptions of meaning. Whatever literary theory might proclaim, a survey of monographs, journal articles, and syllabuses suggests that the author is alive and well. Reader-based approaches to cultural history have stepped into this vacuum, though not with the fecundity one might have expected twenty years ago. The only critics of reader-based approaches harsher than certain nonspecialists are, however, historians of reading themselves, who tend to be excessively skeptical of their own mission, doubting the status of the field's evidence at every turn.

Why are scholars seemingly so hesitant to credit the discipline, and creativity, of past readers? This hesitancy emerges in part from its own kind of romantic investment: a desire to retain a notion of reading as mysterious and unknowable. If reading remains a mystery known only to the isolated individual, then we can continue to confirm familiar clichés about the emancipatory results that literacy nurtures, as well as the freedom we believe we bring to our readerly acts. But with an approach sufficiently grounded in

cultural context—in ideological scripts, circulation data, and practical procedures—and in evidence of actual readers reading, might we reach plausible, indeed demonstrable, stories of the past organized around readers? The history of reading might even proudly call itself a discipline: one, like every good discipline, ever ready to kick away the ladder that brought it to its wonder.

Further Reading:

Mary F. Corey's *The World Through a Monocle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999) discusses readership of *The New Yorker* at midcentury in ways that suggest the problems behind a liberal, cosmopolitan reading practice. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* (Boston, 1994) is the ill-appreciated Sven Birkerts volume (though it made the careers of certain digital zealots). James O'Donnell's *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998) examines the role of the library as a site of collative, nonlinear reading. Rob Sheffield's funny, moving, and endlessly wise book is *Love is a Mixtape: Life and Loss, One Song at a Time* (New York, 2007). Conventicles are, as David Como puts it, "highly resistant to historical voyeurism"; but Patrick Collinson's "The English Conventicle" in *Voluntary Religion* (Oxford, 1986) is a good place to begin peeking. One can get one's feet wet with OULIPO through the *Oulipo Compendium* (London, 1998); and one can plunge and sink happily in Georges Perec's e-less novel *A Void* (London, 1994) or in his *Life: A User's Manual* (Boston, 1987), each astoundingly translated for English readers by, respectively, Gilbert Adair and David Bellos.

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