

## OUT OF THE CELLAR

A review of William Gillespie's *Letter to Lamont*. Providence, RI: Spineless Books, 2005. 83 pages. \$10.

*Letter to Lamont* can truly be called an underground novel, for William Gillespie wrote it in a cellar. He wrote it in 1993 in Providence, Rhode Island, and published it with his own imprint, Spineless Books, in 2005, having in the meanwhile learned just how hopeless it was to submit this book to ordinary channels and the prescribed reading practice of literary dopes.

H. P. Lovecraft, also from Providence, never had to live in a cellar but would have made a different use of it if he had, writing us into the cellar, its walls and the bones in them, the further subcellars hidden inside those walls. Gillespie works to write us out of the cellar, which is a poor place for lovers. *Letter to Lamont* thus initiates the genre of Notgothic. Gothic creates a monstrous edifice of narrative in order to displace secret guilt into horror, but Gillespie seems mainly to feel shame, which he expresses without too much displacement: for the death of his gerbil, Jean le Necre, for instance.

I found him today upon returning from a feed store with 10 pounds of fresh cedar-shavings and .5 pounds of sunflower seeds. He and I were going to spend our first afternoon together in months and I was going to let him be warmed by sunlight, cooled by breezes, overwhelmed by grass twice his height filled with weird stuff to eat and be eaten by... I could have been a better father to him I admit. (57)

As for architecture his book has a snail-shell's, spiraling outward till it meets the walls of a cellar. He senses something outside it, a world where a woman named Lamont ranges, doing what has to be done. Gillespie hasn't constrained her to act or be in some way that meets his needs. He merely wants to join her.

That's when he saw Lamont. She had just been thrown out of a bookstore for asking why the area marked LITERATURE was not instead marked MEN'S STUDIES. The tattooed bouncers had flung her in the snow where she now sat reading a stolen *The Wall Street Journal*. "They really butchered my article ..." she muttered. William gave her a funny look and went over to sit in the snow with her. (12)

We understand the funny look, since what free woman reads the *Wall Street Journal*, much less writes for it and sees her work in print? And then has to steal a copy in order to complain about the editing? While sitting in the snow? This Lamont is evading any sort of frame we might use to compose her.

Publishers don't care for this sort of thing. "I don't think you've completely understood your character, Mr. Gillespie," we can hear them say. "I can't identify," they repeat. Publishers wish to identify; rather, to issue identities easily grasped by tired readers. Well, they have their own work to do and must get on with it. They won't find time for the randomly assembled details of a relationship with

one Lamont Perkins, who might be a woman and lover or might be a drug: "Someone handed me a cup of punch. It turns out there was Lamont in it. Nobody told me. I've been up for three months. It's this Lamont. It just won't quit" (48). Or she's a figure apostrophized as follows: "You are four inches tall and sit at a small desk atop my computer."

I'm on page 2 and am asking myself: Why can't she be the sort of adventurous woman, ballsy but beautiful, shown searching her body in the mirror to let us know what fine breasts she has? In the case of such a protagonist I can identify and, imaginatively, fondle. But how am I to smack my lips over a Lamont who seems to hold the place occupied on my desk by the magnetic hedgehog bristling with binder-clips? How am I to use the headlong voice and shifting point of view of this "William"? He may be a white male, yet he shirks his work, inventing a discourse less hegemonic than hedgehoggic.

This word must serve to define a prose that knows how to do one thing and do it so well that the reader's satisfaction is overreached and recast as delight. "Spineless," Gillespie calls his press, but what that means is that the spine of writing has slipped from its function as fixed structure, one that constantly goes out of alignment because of the dead weight of autobiography it must carry. It has instead extruded itself in

quills that shoot to any length and in every direction to stab at objects. These it brings to our bemused attention in an order so inconsequential, so innocent of subtext and of any calculation of a reader's interest, that we are reminded of what chance means in life.

You can't consume writing like this. All you can do is watch your attention span bulge, morph into a living creature bristling with pointed particularities.

I want to be the woman while you be the man: I'll be Tinkerbell you be Peter Pan. You could interrupt me, fail to introduce me to your friends, dismiss my ideas, refer to me with condescending monikers referring to youth animals and my appearance, act as though all my emotions are symptoms of hysteria or menstruation, explain economics to me with harsh unclear impatient descriptions, put me on a pedestal, watch wrestling matches or discuss philosophy while I cook an elaborate vegetarian dinner for your friends which they will reject in favor of hamburgers, accept credit for my childrearing with a smug glow of authorship, or even say that it is time my gender solved all the problems your gender has instilled throughout the centuries by electing me to offices in your existing hierarchy in order to justify your continuing oppression of me with this staged failure. (31)

This book is built in riffs of roleplay, *I* and *you* never the same character twice.

Being a star seems nice and warm, really bright and industrious, till you grow cold and collapse. Then when the gravity is so strong not even light can escape, the other particles start to get really irritating. (53).

The result is to encourage disidentification, to expose "identity" as a commodity and possibly a fetish, impossible not to desire, but far beyond our means.

"Look," he said, "I have feelings for you which in the English language can't be given but only sold. So I'm suggesting we write a language together which is relevant to us." "Yeah, okay," she replied absently, skimming the editorials. William sighed with relief. Lamont looked up. "Wait, what do you mean?" (12).

Gillespie has some ideas about this.

In the composition entitled *Letter to Lamont* one method he has toyed with without so far understanding very clearly is the Point of View Transfer. This can be used to shift the perspective from which a scene is being witnessed. Essential to the technique thus far is transferring the point of view to an inanimate object, an abstraction, a very large scale, a very small scale, and through self-reflexivity revealing the scene as a scene. (33)

We need to know that our cellar is a cellar and palpate its walls to feel their solidity, since, like the Abbé Faria digging his way out of the Chateau d'If,

I'll have to knock down walls to fit these characters into the letter I'm writing... I want to knock down some walls, they have channeled my thought into a maze of relevancies that will never touch paper. (51)

Yes, those relevancies, that detailed attention to lifestyle and identity have found their way to paper already through other writers' pens. Someone must not-write that; Gillespie steps up to the plate. But he will write. How?

How does one escape from English in English? Where is that language to be found? If the cellar is built from the stones of a literary discourse laid by a community of readers, teachers, editors, publicists, bestowers of grants and prizes, reviewers, and critics, all increasingly locked inside the cellar of commercial publishing, how can a writer escape it, and how to survive outside?

William Gillespie knows about one way to go about it. He administers the Fitzpatrick O'Dinn Prize for constrained literature, that is, writing that accepts unusual formal constraints, what Gilbert Sorrentino called "generative devices" in the famous writing class he taught at Stanford, and which have been codified (and many of them invented) by the French group OuLiPo, founded by a writer, Raymond Queneau, and a mathematician, François Le Lionnais, to impose math-derived algorithms on writing. Georges Perec was a member; his *La disparition* (*A Void* in English) is a full-length novel written without using the letter *e*. *La vie mode d'emploi* (*Life: A User's Manual*) relates the stories occurring in every apartment of a ten-storey Paris building by circulating among them according to the constraint called the Knight's Turn, a chess move whereby a knight visits every square of the chessboard without landing twice on the same one. Many of Italo Calvino's

novels were written in similar ways. The constraints were not always as complex as the Tarot-deck narrative *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. For his novella *The Baron in the Trees*, Calvino simply followed out the rule that his protagonist must never touch ground.

But in order to see how to escape English in English the best Oulipian text to go to is Harry Mathews' early trilogy *The Conversions, Tlooth, and The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*. The principle becomes clear; it's simple enough and as old as rhyme or fixed form in verse. The constraint compels you to say things in a different way from what you would choose. Behind this is the idea that we don't always choose how we say things. The first sentence out of our mouths is usually a piece of the hegemonic discourse, dictated by the powerful pattern of assumptions we call normality. This was Greil Marcus' point in the Prologue to *Lipstick Traces*:

The Sex Pistols made a breach in the pop milieu, in the screen of received cultural assumptions governing what one expected to hear and how one expected to respond. Because received cultural assumptions are hegemonic propositions about the way the world is supposed to work – ideological constructs perceived and experienced as natural facts – the breach in the pop milieu opening into the realm of everyday life...  
(3)

To overcome the constructed voice that fits us all, that comes to us most readily, we need to find another, contrarian voice.

Marcus finds it in Johnny Rotten's howls and curses, which he links back to voices from Dada and the Situationists, tracing the "secret history of the twentieth century."

Oulipians find it in constraints. Interestingly, it is a voice less for writers than for readers. Writers do not turn to constraints in order to "find their own voice," as they say in the schools. They use them to grow language-crystals so weird as to force the reader to make uncommon sense of them. To read a text in which every noun has been replaced by the noun seven places after it in some dictionary (the famous "N + 7" procedure) is to be confronted with the task of fitting words into a syntax never designed to contain them, to follow the text where it leads, however strange. Constrained writing is thus a letter to the reader, but one enfolded in a curious envelope that deforms normal speech and challenges the reader to get the letter out of it in one piece.

Gillespie does not use this sort of constraint. There is no secret formula more algorithmic than Point of View Transfer behind *Letter to Lamont*, about which he has told me:

The formal considerations of [Calvino's] books seem to overrule the author's personality. So I meant for *Letter to Lamont* to follow its own rules, to be written by its own private author, whether or not I would consider those rules now or at the time to be 'constraints.'" (personal communication, 21 April 2006)



Either way, the effect is the same, to have the book "follow its own rules," to bring into being its "own private author."

Writing this way involves following directions from somewhere besides the hegemonic propositions. It's harder to follow the directions generated from the text itself by reading your own last sentence and letting it direct the writing of the next one, in its turn the springboard for your next plunge. It requires a certain speed, a certain wildness, or the language can't escape the backward pull of "the writer's voice." Gillespie's writing is fast, wild, and dense. His letter flies out of the envelope.

So Gillespie takes up the work that no one else will touch, I mean the clowning, the vagabonding, the traipsing through an endless fugue state, his sentences so many highly verbal viruses fanning out along vectors of infection, stealing here and there bits of the American language of information sharing or product placement, highly infectious, and planting it where it will breed unintended consequences of great, sometimes lethal comic effect.

More urgently, how can I express the extent of my foolishness with a mere 26 letters predictably capitalized and punctuated? Well? Give up yet? The next paragraph is **3-D** and you will need special glasses to read it! But wait that's not all! Be careful when you turn the page because this is a **Pop-Up letter!** That's right there are paragraphs in different planes but that's not all! This next sentence has scratch'n'sniff nouns. Be careful—this

letter has real stainedglass panels. Every fabulous letter of this fabulous letter can be yours! (65)

It's the comma-free hurtling style, it's the abuse of the typefaces and endmarks devoted for emphasis, it's the bunching of new monsterwords, it's the mimicry of the huckster's voice that marks this prose with the voice of the American Fool.

As such, Gillespie launches his fluency at the barriers, and it escapes, though "William" never makes it out. Lamont is still beyond the cellar; the letter may reach her, but William can't pull off Keats' "viewless wings of Poesy" trick, can't mail himself in his letter, because Lamont exists only outside the confines of prescribed wanting.

You were on the outside of the bulletproof glass and we spoke through a phone line being monitored by guards. You were telling me that you had baked a typewriter inside the cake you brought for me so I would finally have a weapon. (75-6)

Only her simulacrum is inside, her eidolon, an occasion for writing. Since he cannot speak to her face to face, having only English instead of a language freed because mutual, there is no way for this book to end, unless as his reimagined ending of another great love story:

... [A]nyway like then Romeo kills himself by ingesting a poisonous substance but like in my production he ingests fake poison right so then when Juliet wakes up and sees him lying there like asleep right she kills herself too but like she ingests fake poison to so

like then a couple of hours go by then like Romeo wakes up and sees like yknow Juliet kinda lying there and he goes wow man shes dead id better kill myself again and then a couple more hours go by and then when the audience starts getting sorta restless Juliet like yeah you got it wakes up and discovers Romeo and and the whole thing repeats like one of those thingamajiggers whatchamacallit thingamabobs... loops.  
(74)

Towards the end we begin to feel Lamont's approach, or the intensification of William's wish, and as she gets nearer, the scenarios of their meeting become more and more overdetermined, the characters more and more overdressed ("You were wearing that dress, you know, the one with the periodic table of elements. Or was it the one with the tessellation of Escherlizards?" [79]), so that they must constantly change uniforms. The scene builds towards a meeting, anticipates the pleasures of an elaborate Italian meal, a civilized smoke, a kiss, a courtship dance, the scream of a power tool, a phonecall from the office, mushrooms frosted with psilocybin... the reverie turns dark before it is cut short by the closing salutation  
(80).

In the postscript William is heading for a Mexico City with no discernible Mexican content. To get there he must erase his citizenship in Cellarland; he must, for instance, be "walking out the door right now and realize with a sniff that I left the oven on and the pilot light isn't lit" (83). And he must make

some important changes in the intervening geography: "...and then I will rent a car and drive across the Gulf of Mexico—I've always wanted to do that" (83). A fantasy to close with; fantasies are usually false escapes, but this is one of that rare kind whose substantiality has been earned by the honesty with which realities have been displayed; a Notgothic fantasy no longer in the service of narcissism, since there is no face in that mirror; a fantasy that lingers like a trail of smoke in a cellar that someone just fled. We can use it to read our own flight.