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"The Invention of Fact": Autobiography, Biography, Fiction

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Lou Rowan

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- 1 I write for money. Once I received \$50 from a prominent poetry journal for an essay on Gilbert Sorrentino's *White Sail* and *Orangerie*. Accepting it, the editor wrote that my language "soared into eloquence." Months later he decided not to run it, and sent me a check. Sorrentino informed me this editor paid only these consolation prizes. Welcoming my comparison of the *Orangerie*'s sonnets with jazz, he added, "I'm glad you wrote this, not me." That's my lone payment for publishing "serious" work. *Pace* Dr. Johnson: I'd be a blockhead to try to make a living from poetry, fiction, and essays like this. If, as Johan Huizinga argues, literature is play, this pay-scale is appropriate, at least in the world of independent publishers.
- 2 Then there's *freelancing*, a term applied originally to the mercenary soldiers, noble and below, who have provided their "services" since the Middle Ages. My freelance verbal services have paid, and the work provided the incomplete range of satisfactions familiar in any job—until recently when I was engaged by artists and art-patrons to write the biography of the outrageously colorful and acutely entrepreneurial Seattle art dealer, Linda Farris. She was a character if ever there was one, the Peggy Guggenheim of the Seattle art world, and she took me beyond the usual routines of freelancing.
- 3 A "character": fruitfully ambiguous term across our languages, and one of the notions for which, uncharacteristically, English provides a single word and French at least three. Writing my perhaps-autobiographical novel *A Mystery's no Problem* and *Her Soul on Display*, a short biography of Farris, were encounters with paradoxical issues and conventions centered on understanding and representing contemporary and historic *character*.

- 4 A personal issue here: I was a man writing about women. Consider the post-feminist evolution of English usage: the section of the novel called "Twisted in Arrears" attempts earnestly and sincerely (in a comic novel) to create a woman to whom I referred mentally as both "heroine" and "hero." We have settled on calling both theatrical males and females "actors," but which term for my protagonist was correct, both politically and in the usage which ultimately becomes lexical meaning? Did I want a general word for outstanding nobility and prowess, or did I want the word to focus also on what women "go through"? And if the latter, how could I as male represent that convincingly?
- 5 Well, I lied extensively about the woman on whom Alina Simyonon was based, a friend whose originality and determination I have admired from the moment I met her and her partner at the dinner preceding a Seattle poetry-reading. When poets here get together with out-of-town readers, they often exchange local gossip assiduously enough to exclude the guest, who is left to enjoy the often-dubious cuisine of spots where poets and academics gather. But not my model! She and her partner—a male artist who'd asked her in vain for decades to marry him, only to be refused by her sense of self allowing her to devote her life not only to autonomy and her therapy-practice but also to him and his daughter and granddaughter—both graciously and easily included not only the visitor but me (new to Seattle and to this gathering) in a substantial, humorous conversation. A small, small-minded occasion leading to a lasting impression.
- 6 My model is of western European lineage. She comes from a violent rural family in the sparsely-populated Eastern region of Washington State. She refuses to drive automobiles in Seattle, an American city planned around them. She will "ruin" social situations by confronting absurdities from anyone, no matter how near the top of the artistic pecking-order. She maintains a vegetable plot in a city whose devotion to wholesome agriculture manifests itself primarily in a minority's willingness to pay high prices for organic foods and to support absurdly-expensive farmers' markets.
- 7 Because I am a native Californian, the country-sized state emblematic of every danger to our planet's survival, it was natural for me to turn my friend into an Armenian from The Golden State's agricultural Central Valley, and to translate the prejudice a young male Armenian friend from the valley experienced at Pomona College in the early 1960's, when fraternities treated him so cruelly and violently that his father, an important businessman in Fresno, rushed to rescue him—to translate that aggressive prejudice to undergraduate men at the University of Washington "coming on" to the exotic Alina, my heroine. That father's automobile tire business, whose name and motto I borrowed for the story, is long gone, but the son developed a successful legal career, leading to a successful political career as a neoliberal (or "New") Democratic representative from his valley district to the U.S. House of Representatives. Unlike Alina, unlike her model, compromise came naturally to this fortunate son, despite or perhaps because (like Barak Obama) of his strange family name. The bottom of the pecking order in the Central Valley is occupied by a few Blacks and a multitude of Hispanics. One can only speculate what could have happened in college and later to a *daughter* from this well-heeled Armenian family in Fresno, a small city surrounded by agribusiness: most likely the society charity-circuit, like Linda Farris's mother in San Francisco.
- 8 Alina's and Linda's parents were roughly coevals, about whom one can only speculate, as fiction does, playing with the question "what if" that we've been asking since childhood games of "let's pretend"—enthusiasms leading to a play-world far more engrossing to children than serious fiction is to most adults. For do not we adults give our selves over to

entertainment and sport, but preserve our supposedly-mature judiciousness, our resistance to confusion and mystery, as we encounter the arts?

- 9 My boyish project of creating a Seattle heroine out of my friend required me consider what she'd be up against in psychological, sociological, and political conflicts, while preserving, if not a sense of fun, at least a sense of her *élan*. Her attributes and her early trials constitute the opening section of "Twisted," whose plot remained a mystery to me when I had finished those first three pages. All I knew was that I would subject Alina to dangers created by Seattle's upper middle classes.
- 10 Linda Farris, a personality so locally-notorious that in her weaker moments she could be dismayed to meet people who'd not heard of her, came ready-made with a wealth of episodes ranging from her aggressive acquisition of lovers to her daring marketing invasions of the offices where male business and civic leaders reigned in dignity—episodes her biographer must edit, interpret and even judge, to rescue these factual tall tales from the turbulent eddies of local gossip and scandal my research uncovered. Her life and career had such a headlong quality that one needed to wheedle interviewees into specifics, into reflection, in order to create an accurate and balanced account from vividly "pro" and vividly "anti" Farris memories, many of which could seem like episodes from Evelyn Waugh.
- 11 For example, Farris habitually assigned her friends roles we might call caricatures. I met the "Conscience" jocularly inhibiting Farris's "Inspiration." I met "Married with Family," to whose children Farris assigned herself the role "Auntie." Auntie would habitually show up unannounced, frequently inviting herself to accompany mother and children to school events, dressed in her usual décolletage. (This friend told me, "I got *tired* of Farris's breasts!") Thus dressed, accompanied mother and children to a classical music recital at their dignified private school—an institution graduating the whipped cream atop Seattle's upper crust. At this high-cult event Farris announced that she would sleep with the young male pianist that night, gave him her phone number and address during the polite applause, and finished the evening with him at her modernistic home.
- 12 Conducting interviews with artists, journalists, patrons, close friends, former lovers, and the wheelchair-bound husband of the fifteen happy years before she died at 61 of cancer at their home, an illness she bravely flaunted about town—conducting these interviews could elicit tears, frustration, touching vignettes, and speculations about a "wound" driving Farris. Some wept in frustration at her perceived perversity, others from resurgent grief over losing her. The "hurt Linda" speculation drove me to learn as much as possible from her brother and from a few of her childhood friends about her young self, to find documentation of her reflections on herself. No one I interviewed perceived Farris as introspective, even when she was sharing personal confidences. Everyone presented Farris as philosophical about her parents' plans for her brother to inherit the family business, insouciant about her determination to avoid becoming the housewife they envisioned.
- 13 A childhood friend, who described her parents as absentees concerned more with their home decor than their daughter, gave me her lone letter from Farris, a gossipy 16-year-old's message from the bedroom to which her mother had confined her for gaining weight. Farris's family name was Bloch, and she assigns a "Bloch-house" number to her "jail-cell."

- 14 A private two-page biography of Farris's father and mother by her aunt is the chronicle of a Jewish-American family pluckily making its way through The Great Depression in the Northwest, the Midwest and California, finding wealth in the jewelry and other retail trades, and proudly grooming and displaying a large home slightly superior to a "McMansion" in an expensive, nouveau-riche development overlooking the Pacific in San Francisco. To "interpret" Farris's motivations, one can extrapolate rebellious impulses from this familiar sociological situation. This interpretation of Farris's drivenness fits the known facts and memories, but its primary support is one adolescent letter, a small fraction of the pages allotted my character Simyonon's diaries—diaries in which she shares, for example, her reflections on men in her life and on men in general.
- 15 And so the commercial project generated a presence, if not a clear and distinct character in my imagination, where I began, as many biographers do, boyishly to "root" for Farris as I tested the theses that she was Seattle's greatest female entrepreneur, that the disapproval of her flamboyance and her sexual adventures would dissolve had she been a man—notions solidly grounded in her business records and in the careers of the artists she fostered, and less solidly in my sense of our culture's lionization of male aggression: what would the scolds say if a man had slept around? The biography's basic interpretation was unavoidable if obvious: her parents' understandable materialism caused the emotional obtuseness that inflicted the "wound" driving her drivenness. Whether these interpretations betray male patronizing, or a politically-correct didacticism I am in no position to judge. But in Alina Semyonin, I not only strove to create a heroine but also gave her a "happy ending" involving a man—a denouement similar to the love of Farris's life's rolling his wheelchair into her gallery in 1985.
- 16 Evidently the biography allowed less freedom to play out boyish impulses than the fiction, but it did afford the perhaps-adolescent pleasure of "shocking the bourgeois": I caricatured, perhaps, both Farris's parents' materialism and Farris's patrons' conflating schools of art with sartorial fashion-trends. But many of Farris's patrons were the biography's patrons and sources, and because biography is "factual," I could pillory conspicuous of art-consumption only in editorial generalizations, avoiding the direct satire fiction allows. In the end, this project produced no more than a chapbook: the patrons failed to contribute the kind of money they spent routinely on the art-pieces, many bought under Farris's tutelage, decorating the chambers in which I interviewed them—a confirmation that raising money for something as little monumental as book-publishing is far more difficult than fundraising for tangible blazonings like museum wings and campus edifices.
- 17 Most of the money for this freelance adventure came from women, the largest number of whom were artists contributing both their work as prizes for donations and the modest sums they could spare. Since Farris's vocation had been championing these artists, inspiring and cajoling these patrons, and making her way forcibly through commercial challenges, I tip my hat to an entrepreneur who contended successfully with characters I failed to persuade. I leave you to decide whether Alina's and Linda's contests with Seattle's ruling classes make them "heroes" or "heroines."

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- 18 The sole "sex scene" in *A Mystery's no Problem* is a comic event enjoyed by two men in an imaginary Best (or "Worst") Western Hotel on a mountain in Nepal. Their fun is

interrupted by a man from housekeeping intruding to check the contents of their fridge. They giggle comparing his shocked dismay to Cortés, "silent upon a prick in Darien," indulging in a long spasm of erotic punning. One partner is there because his solving a murder in New Jersey made life in the Garden State so dangerous that he fled to pursue his spirituality in a village featuring Buddhist tourism.

- 19 Biography struggles with "private life," even in this age of titillating commercial confession and YouTube (suggestive name!) exposure. Fiction violates privacy routinely, freely invading characters' minds, not to mention their bedrooms, while biography requires testimony, which rarely documents these crucial aspects of our selves. It has long struck me as both suggestive and parochial that "learning the facts of life" refers in the U.S. to sex education, to "reproduction."
- 20 Further to muddy such impure waters, *A Mystery's no Problem* seeks to entice readers to guess whether overtly autobiographical episodes are "true." It does happen to be true that I have seen Jackie Kennedy's girdle with her inside it: many of the most seemingly-weird events in the book are factual, many of the mundane episodes invented. The publishers removed an accurate scholarly apparatus from the final chapter. Perhaps they were right that the hoped-for magic of magical realism should not be spoiled. In any case, verisimilitude isn't a significant distinction between biography and fiction—as Linda Farris's life makes clear.
- 21 The malleability of facts is routinely proven by demonstrating crescendos of distortion in stories passed from ear to ear. The facts of fiction can be as important as "real" information to the stability and dexterity we require encountering, deciphering and responding to vicissitudes, and distortions by retailers of events can be as meaningful to us as the facts, particularly when we are close to the storytellers or when they are in distant positions of power. Were we discover Linda Farris's diaries, Alina Simyonon's invented diary, *could* remain the more important "document"—her frankness, her sense of humor about herself and her antagonists could be more "truthful" than any "real" document. In personal confidences or therapeutic interactions, the raw material we divulge about our private lives can be less important than the edited and interpreted versions fictions supply. And this paradox proves nothing about art being "higher" or "deeper" than mundane existence: it proves how crucial the play, the deployment of imagination is to our integration and stability as we seek to influence the evolution of our own characters.

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- 22 The learning, wisdom, and panache of David Antin's talk-poem "The Invention of Fact" explore these plasticities and interactions—as well as the relationship of "character" to history. We learn from his discussion of three overlapping, and at crucial moments contradictory memoirs of the late 1940's, that the causes of the "Truman Doctrine" of 1947, rationalizing America's choice to indulge in The Cold War, were the characters of Dean Acheson and George Kennan. Acheson's eloquent pep-talk applying the "lessons" of prep-schoolboy fifth-year Latin as he compared the U.S. to Rome and the Soviets to Carthage overcame isolationist skepticism, and allowed the State Department to present President Truman the belligerent and expensive version of "containing" Communism he readily adopted. Acheson summoned as factual the fulsome version of ancient events in ancient histories known to us as literary, but crucial to the mental imagery of British and

American upper-class schoolboys. Antin does not call Acheson an "old boy," but his portrait of him refers to his Princetonian background and attributes his eloquence to his pleadings in appellate courts, the aristocracy of the legal system. Antin shows an Acheson living in the *a priori*, needing no investigation, study, or consultation to act on opinions to which he was seemingly born, like his social position (Antin 2014: 73–90). His account vividly focuses our general knowledge that leaders of the CIA and its predecessors the OSS tend to be educated at Yale, Princeton and their Ivy League ilk: modern *equites* must preserve their empire from the barbarians (Herken 2014).

- 23 The broad doctrine of "containment" originated in George Kennan's famous "long telegram" of 1946, and Antin's treatment of its illogicalities proceeds from his characterization of a Kennan who was more of an expert on Tzarist than Bolshevik Russia, who was given to thinking romantically of the Russian "soul" he'd studied in Latvia—the soul of a difficult, isolated mistress resisting "penetration" by Westerners. Antin sees Kennan's telegram resulting from a fit of pique against this difficult mistress, noting that Kennan frequently changed his mind about whether "containment" should include military measures.
- 24 Two characters, an aristocrat born to his certainties, and a "soviet expert" of whimsically vast views, the latter providing an interpretive milieu through which the former could stride: prime movers of the "Doctrine" that has endangered and depleted our planet. You can read thousands of pages of Cold War biography and history without coming to a characterization as forthright and realistic as this by a poet in a little-known "talk piece." In my own prep school, we were assigned Eric Goldman's *The Crucial Decade, 1945–1955* as an introduction to present. Goldman was a history professor at Princeton, and our teacher one of his students, who would go on to become governor of the New Jersey his father represented in the U.S. Senate. I received an "A" for an essay showing a firm grasp of the essence of Goldman's book: his optimistic acceptance of the Cold War, of Eisenhower's tempered continuation of it. We preppy future leaders were assured that our country had been guided to its pre-eminence by sure hands vetted by the Ivy League. Antin's unsentimental, unsparing characterizations of Acheson and Kennan is built meticulously from the detail of his sources, and it is his poet's acute eye for the characters revealed in the metaphoric language of the memoirs that affords such a trenchant interpretation, a convincing narrative.
- 25 Antin finishes "The Invention of Fact" with the "allegory" of a "fictional" being named "Nixon" over-inflating our "defense" budget, impoverishing most Americans, creating "waves of disaffection. . . that would ravage all parts of the nation" (Antin 2014: 89–90). Watching today's oligarchies in the U.S. and Europe exploit the prejudices of voters victimized by the income inequality fomented by Nixon and Reagan and Thatcher, we know that this "allegory" is painfully true—a realism Antin ascribes to the "viciousness of poetry." (Antin 2014: 90) "Vicious" for at least two reasons: the critical establishment prefers pretty and irrelevant verses, and optimistic Yanks revere their leaders and their culture, so that a poet blowing away our pink clouds can only be nasty. Many of Antin's routines end with sudden formulations challenging us to refresh our thinking.

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- 26 Antin's theory of narrative supplies the context we need to accept and to understand the dynamic overlapping of genres that this issue of *Itinéraires* addresses. Beginning at the

broadest level: "As far as I'm concerned there is the language art. That's poetry. All of it. There are then genres within it. Like 'narration.' And there's a subform of narration. Called fiction" (Antin 2011: 262). Antin's definition of *narration* engages its existential importance:

It is this sense of stake that should be taken as the center of narrative.

To articulate the meaning of this sense of stake, it is useful to redefine narrative away from story. So let's define narrative as the representation of the confrontation of a desiring subject with the threat or promise—or threat and promise—of transformation. From this definition it's easy to see why I'm claiming that narrative is a fundamental cognitive modality. Subjects are continually confronted by the promise and threat of change. But no promise comes without the threat of fulfillment [...]

This bridge-building across change is what I would suggest is the central human function of narrative. The act of reconnecting subject positions across the gulf of change is what constitutes the formation of self. All self is built over the threat of change. There can be no self until there is an awareness of one's subject position, which can only be created by the threat of change of the memory of change. Every change creates a fracture between successive subject states, that narrative attempts and fails to heal. The self is formed over these cracks. Every self is multiply fractured, and narrative traversal of these fracture planes defines the self. Narrative is the traditional and indispensable instrument of self creation. (Antin 2011: 262)

- 27 In this context autobiography, biography, and fiction become "subforms" of the "genre" narrative, and what distinguishes them is less important than the crucial purpose uniting them. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Linda Farris took part in the Free Speech Movement of 1964–65. Her father told her that if she was arrested he would not bail her out. She abandoned the occupation of Sproul Hall before the police cleared the protesters. This story might imply bad faith: I was unable to reach sources close to her during college. But a major aspect of Farris's narrative, of her virtually forcing modern art upon Seattle's isolated, cautious collectors, was her maintaining what I dubbed "parlor cred." Had she made a career of radical political action, she might have been an effective organizer, but the skills and graces she absorbed from her proper, anti-feminist family, through an evolution of narratives later biographers may uncover—her social skills allowed her, as it were, a variegated arsenal of feints and assault weapons to aim at the affluent.

- 28 Antin's distinction between narrative and story is the distinction between the purposeful and the flat deployment of "facts":

A story is the representation of a sequence of events and parts of events that articulate a significant transformation.

Example: A man and a woman came out of an old brownstone on a quiet street in the East 30's. A black Mercedes turned the corner and pulled up at the curb. A dog started barking across the street. Two men in black business suits jumped out of the car, grabbed the couple, forced them into the car, and drove away.

This account is sufficiently articulated to serve as the testimony of a witness in a murder trial, but it contains only the barest representation of anyone's experience. The witness has carefully refrained from indicating his or her feelings watching, has omitted any account of resistance or fear by the couple, and has only minimally indicated the urgency and violence of the kidnappers [...] (Antin 2011: 261)

- 29 Antin's scheme renders distinctions between autobiography, biography, and fiction less important than the determination whether they are *narratives* "bridge-building across change." And it allows us a basic criterion for evaluating them, for distinguishing them

from the stories in flat journalism, entertainment, unimaginative historiography. In conversation, Antin's habitual word of praise for creative work was "interesting": one can understand from this epithet's derivation from the Latin *inter esse* both why the word was basic to his usage, and how it coalesces with his definition of narrative. Antin locates the source of narrative in dreams, where Bergson locates the source of comedy, and it would take another essay to compare their formulations, to address Antin's discussion of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.

- 30 Here is Antin completing his description fiction within his taxonomy of poetry, "the language art":

... And [there's] a subform of that [fiction] called "the novel," a narrational form with an enveloping commitment to a certain notion of "reality," constructed out of commonsense intuitions about character and objects, and social and psychological events, and probability. That's not "prose." The idea of prose is only an additional prop for a novel. "Prose" is the name for a kind of notational style. It's a way of making language look responsible. You've got justified margins, capital letters to begin graphemic strings, which, when they are concluded by periods, are called sentences, indented sentences that mark off blocks of sentences that you call paragraphs. This notational apparatus is intended to add probity to that wildly irresponsible, occasionally illuminating and usually playful system called language. (Antin 2011: 215)

- 31 In the late '60's Antin told me he'd just finished reading *The Making of Americans*, and that he considered Stein's work as important as Joyce's or anyone's, and he writes of Stein, "She ... had a thorough awareness—shared by Joyce more than any of her English language contemporaries—of a ... fundamental structural ambiguity of language: that utterance is play before it is address or discourse or representation" (Antin 2011: 203).

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- 32 Antin's fusing the weight of narrative with the playfulness of its medium complements the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's anthropology of the arts in *Homo Ludens*, a study of the "play element in culture" written during the advance of National Socialism across Europe. Calling play "an absolutely primary category of life," Huizinga asserts:

[p]lay is only possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational. (Huizinga 1955: 3)

An apt summary of Antin's peripatetic work: an influx of mind refreshing literature, rescuing it from its high and dry commercial and conventional perch.

- 33 We haven't the space to follow Huizinga's argument demonstrating the play-elements in ritual, religion, philosophy, poetry, language, and legal systems, but his complement to the insouciant, learned radicalism of Antin's theories, helps us see it as no accident that the young David Antin's ambition was to be an inventor. Huizinga has an appropriately playful category for him, the spoil-sport:

It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself and others [...] In the world of high seriousness, too,

the cheat and the hypocrite have always had an easier time of it than the spoilsports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. (Huizinga 1955: 3)

- 34 And so it is a comfort to know that Alina Simyonin and Linda Farris, in the scintillae of their narratives I sought to capture, can be as free to flout the conventions of "subforms" as they were to flout social conventions. Harold Bloom, the imperial umpire of the U.S. criticism-game, walked out of an MLA session on poetry because it included Antin's work, angrily denying him the cloak of "poet"—an anecdote reminding me of the hypocrisies of the World Soccer Federation. For decades I've found Antin's and Huizinga's overlapping theories the most accurate representation of the—for sure my!—*experience* of writing and reading, and the shifty metamorphoses of tone, focus, subject, and form within Antin's talk-pieces as lively as any contemporary manifestation of what the language art can do. Is it not more interesting, more brave, more purposeful to scrutinize the game itself, to play with *everything* in our warming globe, than to be a good sport during this Anthropocene, the vicious narrative of whose history demonstrates that nice guys finish last?

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ABSTRACTS

Comparing the sources of a novel and a biography leads to the paradox that the freedom of fiction can allow a more "realistic" treatment of character than the restriction of biography to

documented facts allows. The distinctions and the paradox are asserted to be less poignant and crucial in the light of David Antin's theory of narrative and Johan Huizinga's exploration of the play element of culture.

La comparaison des sources d'un roman et de celles d'une biographie conduit au paradoxe que la liberté de la fiction permet un traitement plus réaliste du personnage que la restriction de la biographie à des faits documentés ne le permettrait. De telles distinctions et un tel paradoxe s'estompent dans leur mise en regard de la théorie narrative selon David Antin et dans l'exploration de la culture ludique selon Johan Huizinga.

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Mots-clés: autobiographie, David Antin, biographie, personnage, expérience, factuel, fiction, historiographie, histoire, Johan Huizinga, narration, ludique, culture ludique, poésie, diégèse

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