

Western University

From the Selected Works of Steven Bruhm

June, 2008

What I Didn't Do on My Summer Vacation

Steven Bruhm



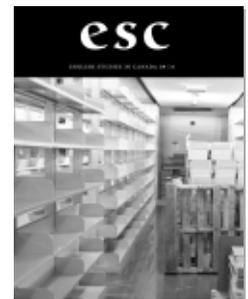
PROJECT MUSE®

“What I didn’t do on my summer vacation”

Steven Bruhm

ESC: English Studies in Canada, Volume 34, Issue 2-3, June/September 2008, pp. 21-24 (Article)

Published by Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English
DOI: 10.1353/esc.0.0136



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/esc/summary/v034/34.2-3.bruhm.html>

“What I didn’t do on my summer vacation”

Steven Bruhm
University of Western Ontario

IT’S ALWAYS THE SAME PATTERN. I produce a proposal for a conference, slamming out the major idea and chief evidence in five to seven hundred words. Before writing the paper—or as a means of putting off writing the paper—I then “prepare”: I read, I take notes, I look at books of theory regardless of how tangential they might be, I read things I’ve read before (rather than re-reading the notes I took on them the first time). Somewhere in this process I’ll also re-encounter the primary text, sure I’ll discover that winning quotation, that richly overdetermined moment when new insights will tumble forth, a new and strong(er) theory will emerge, a definitive problem will have been identified. Once I’ve convinced myself that I’ve drunk deeply enough of the Pierian spring in question or when the conference is coming so close that I’m beginning to feel hysterical, I write the paper. Ten pages, double-spaced; no more, no less. Then I compare the completed conference paper to the original proposal to find exactly the same structures of thought, the same argumentative ideas keyed to the same moments in the text. It turns out that I had been ready to write from the beginning, but that after almost twenty years in the profession I cannot, will not, remember that I was ready to write. The combination of imposter syndrome (where I must read everything in order not to be

caught out) and procrastination (where I must absorb without generating) has produced the habitual, compulsive detour of over-researching before producing my own text.

Do not hear me to speak against the importance of deep reading, responsible research, or an overall resistance to the commodity production machine that can sometimes be academia. Rather, it's the psychological texture of all of this that I want to mediate on. For as soon as I write those words "habitual, compulsive detour," the subject matter of my thoughts also becomes their *method*: I am compulsively and habitually taken to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and to Peter Brooks's argument about narrative as the mandatory detour we take from the inexorability of the end, of death, in order to produce *through the death drive* a "finished" narrative, a story or a thesis that finds completion on its own terms (Brooks). In this sense, my procrastination is my compulsive circling around the terminus of my own essay, my own completed offering. I will not die until my sacrifice is mature or until my gift is ready for exchange, my symbolic debt perfectly imagined. And to do this I must ignore—or rather forget—that the work of thinking has already been done. I must repeatedly and compulsively ignore that my new note-taking often replicates *word for word* what my earlier notes said, making me less like Wordsworth's organic poet and more like Poe's raven. In short, I must experience again and again the ways in which *forgetting* is a crucial part of research, or writing, and of writing later—that is, of procrastination.

STEVEN BRUHM is the Robert and Ruth Lumsden Professor of English at the University of Western Ontario, where he teaches courses in nineteenth-century literature and culture, queer studies, and the gothic. He is the author of *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Pennsylvania, 1994) and *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (Minnesota, 2001), as well as co-editor of *Curioser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minnesota, 2004). He is currently at work on a book exploring the queer temporalities of gothic dance, but he's procrastinating.

But am I really talking about procrastination here? Don't those words "habitual" and "compulsive," words that I said took me *directly* to the repetition compulsion, also take me away from procrastination and into the very heart of what I want to say? Isn't the Freudian mechanism really a strategy for getting the job done, for meeting the deadline? As my colleague Matthew Rowlinson has suggested, the agency of forgetting in procrastination is a strategy to replicate the *pleasure* of reading the material again, as if for the first time. Procrastination is in some respects a guilty pleasure, if "guilt" can be said to accrue around the responsible doing of one's job as researcher and thinker. Perhaps then there is no such thing as procrastination. Or, that "procrastination" as we use the term is misleading, for if we ask what we are doing under the sign of "procrastination" we find that we are often doing things that enable the completion of the primary task. For example, producing this essay in its first (oral) version shamed me into completing another piece of work that was due weeks before this one and that I had used "the procrastination talk" as a means of avoiding. Not surprisingly, that other piece got finished *before*

this one; by procrastinating on the procrastination essay, I finished the article that was already overdue—and was thus able to put off working on this one. Perversely, masochistically, shamefully, procrastination has that productive effect of producing in the absence of productivity, whether what gets produced is a stack of clean dishes, a reorganized desktop, or an idea incubated unconsciously through pathways that could not be willfully or consciously accessed.

Questions of procrastination and habituation are then inevitably questions of shame—shame produced by procrastination, shame producing procrastination, shame as procrastination’s “cure” (although never the other way around: procrastination never relieves shame). One could invoke here Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Elspeth Probyn, and Sara Ahmed, each of whom talk about the mechanisms by which shame renders a connection to, or caring about, the thing that produces shame or around which shame’s particles magnetically gather. Through this lens, procrastination would become a sign of one’s continued involvement rather than its thwarting; avoiding the job testifies to the writer’s engagement with it rather than his/her negligence or fecklessness. But there might also be something more ludic, more playful, more immediately temporal in procrastination’s cycles of delay and return, its “vacillating rhythm” (to use Freud’s phrase about the death drive, 41). As Ellen Degeneres implores us at the end of her *Here and Now* show, “Procrastinate now! Don’t put it off!” Here “procrastinate” is an active verb demanding passivity, an imperative for the immediate action of doing nothing, which is, by definition, not a doing nothing but the creation of a space that feels like nothing but is actually quite full. And if locating this paradox in Degeneres signifies at all, is there, we might wonder, a strangely *queer* resonance to this casting of procrastination, an engagement with futurity that, *pace* Lee Edelman, is *not* non-reproductive but that is not productive in any clear or linear way—because writing never is? Is it something closer, perhaps, to Kathryn Bond Stockton’s notion of a queerly “growing sideways,” where the subject pursues lines of expansion and dilation without bowing to the demands of the law to reach an already determined endpoint?

If procrastination invokes a psychoanalytics of the death drive and its registers of shame, perhaps then it also invokes topographies of narcissism, a libidinal investment that, as I’ve argued elsewhere, is shot through with the homo-erotics of (self-)pleasure. As psychoanalysis tells us, narcissism is one particular strategy by which the subject holds in tension the pleasures of the drive with the continual threat of their dissolution. At the site of suspension in which Narcissus beholds and adores himself, Eros

engages with death in pleasurable quiescence, bathing in the plenitudes of emptiness and of symbolization—a symbolization that Julia Kristeva calls a Tale of Love (Kristeva; Degeneres). Narcissus procrastinates: he postpones his *jouissance*, he postpones his death, he postpones his elevation to the symbol of the queer. In so doing, he forces us to attend to questions of production and their discontents, or to productivity defined in terms other than those of the publisher’s deadline or the university administrator’s metrics. Narcissus invites us, in other words, to ask, along with the psychoanalyst, “For whom does one procrastinate? Who, or what, is procrastination’s other?”

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Bruhm, Steven. *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Ellen Degeneres: Here and Now*. By Ellen Degeneres. Performed by Ellen Degeneres. Beacon Theater, New York. 28 June 2003.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. Vol. 18. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of Love*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Blush: Faces of Shame*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Stockton, Kathryn Bond. “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal.” Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.