

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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BOOKS | JUNE 2015

Required Reading

By Johannah Rodgers

While most readers are certainly familiar with the sonnet and haiku as constraint-based approaches to literary composition with long histories, what may be less widely known is the fact that the lipogram,* a constraint-based literary exercise in which one letter is removed or avoided, is a compositional method used both by classical Greek poets, and by George Perec in his 1969 novel *La disparation (A Void)*, a book that conspicuously and rather famously excludes any word that includes the letter “e.” Given the long history of literary constraint as a method deployed in the creation of literary compositions, what then appears to be most noteworthy about the fact of literary constraint is not its existence, but the cultural import and interpretations assigned to its use in any given socio-cultural moment. For instance, whereas in the English Renaissance, the use of constraint-based approaches to literary composition such as the sonnet demarcated, at least in part, a specific thematic focus, i.e. romantic love, and a textual and historical field of reference, i.e. Italian Renaissance texts, for the OuLiPo, a French literary “workshop” (**Ouv**roir) founded in 1960 to explore literature’s (**Littérature**) potential (**Potenti**elle), the

constraints employed were intended to emphasize instead the relations between the functions and possibilities of language and other numeric and mathematical systems.

Bringing together a collection of short chapters, or exercises, each dedicated to applying the specific constraint-based technique used to create a literary work to the critical discussion of that work, Louis Bury's *Exercises in Criticism: The Theory & Practice of Literary Constraint* is not only one of the first works to apply such constraint-based methods to the writing of literary criticism, but it is also one that—as a work that originated as a dissertation composed using a series of literary constraints—gives Bury an opportunity to speak his mind about what it means to be trained as a professional literary critic and the very real personal and professional questions and concerns related to that pursuit.

As a result, this engaging, invigorating, and often very funny book will no doubt be of great interest to current or recovering graduate students in literary studies. However, it will also be of interest to numerous other parties, including teachers of writing, creative writers engaged with constraint-based approaches to composition, literary scholars, and general readers who

Louis Bury

Exercises in Criticism

The Theory & Practice of Literary Constraint

Louis Bury
*Exercises in
Criticism: The
Theory &
Practice of
Literary*

may want to understand more about contemporary constraint-based poetic works, as well as why it is that any writer or critic might be interested in constraint-based approaches to writing in the first place. For what emerges from the experience of reading and engaging with this book is a spirit of creativity that infuses and enlivens literary criticism, reanimating it in such a way as to remind you of the purposes and functions of much of the best critical work, namely to make you feel smarter and more interested in the works you are reading about than you were prior to reading about them.

Constraint
(Dalkey Archive
Press, 2015)

Harry Matthews, the first American writer admitted to the official ranks of the OuLiPo, has commented that constraints often allow what cannot be, or what was not intended to be said, expressed. In terms of the unexpected discoveries that arise out of Bury's application of constraint-based techniques to material usually left unconstrained and, therefore, for the most part, highly sanctioned and sanitized, is an inside look at the mechanisms behind the work and training of literary critics. Beginning the book with the dissertation prospectus was a brilliant stroke since the document functions not only to introduce the context for the book, but as a metaphorical lid to the contents that follow, allowing readers to consider what strict generic conventions, such as those associated with a dissertation prospectus, end up concealing. Furthermore, each chapter/exercise begins and is framed by the following headings: "context" and "what I was trying to do." This approach to openly exposing the rhetorical context for a piece of writing is one of the more ingenuous ones I've come across and something that all writers might consider doing to introduce their writings, both critical and creative.

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Laying bare the inner workings of its subject, Bury's book offers readers an experience akin to peeking inside a music box with only a glass shelf covering its moving, mechanical parts. The contents are not always pretty, but for anyone

who is currently involved in the pursuit of a Ph.D. in the humanities or for anyone interested in learning more about that endeavor, the book is both informative and revealing. Needless to say, what emerges is a decidedly mixed bag: We see a dissertation advisor who has not received and therefore not read the final draft of a dissertation she is to be assessing at the defense. We overhear the story of the dissertation that was not written by Bury about Native American poetry and the professional rationale for his graduate advisor's support for such a project. We hear about the academic job market and the lack of jobs and about the fact that there are, in reality, much better ways for a highly educated individual to make money. We also see and hear a lot about NOT writing, which is, in my opinion one of the most unique aspects of Bury's book. I can think of few published works that dedicate as much space and attention to the struggles and fits and starts that are part of writing any long or involved project, particularly a dissertation or book.

While, in its entirety, the book may be somewhat uneven—for instance, I struggled to understand why the brilliant exercise on the work of Raymond Roussel was followed by one dedicated to that of Joe Brainard, whose New York School roots and/or the over-application of his “I remember” technique in creative writing classrooms make his work an odd choice for inclusion in a book otherwise dedicated to discussing work that is distinctly avant garde—even this fact is a sign of just how much Bury's book is one in process, or an “open” book, which invites participation and allows its readers to feel very much like writers at one and the same time. **

Johannah Rodgers is a writer, artist, and educator whose work explores issues related to representation and communication practices across media. She is the author of 52WordDrawings (mimeograph, 2017), At, Or To Take Regret: Some Reflections on Grammars (2016), Technology: A Reader for Writers (Oxford University Press, 2014), and the digital fiction project DNA (mimeograph/The Brooklyn Rail).