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Playing with Constraint: Performing the OuLiPo and the Clinamen-Performer

The literary group OuLiPo, the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, which roughly translates as Workshop for Potential Literature, uses imposed structural constraints to generate writing. Founded in Paris in 1960 by 'inutilious researchers' of the Collège de 'Pataphysique (Hugill 2012: 1), the Oulipo comprised conceptual artists (Marcel Duchamp), mathematicians (Claude Berge) and chemical engineers (François Le Lionnais), as well as novelists, poets and literature professors. The group can be situated within a national lineage of French game-playing that started with the Dadas and Surrealists, subsequently spawning the Lettrists, Situationists and finally the Pataphysicists. The group's restrictive constraints, elaborative structures, and often scientific approaches are the result of the oulipian philosophy that, when operating under such conditions, is liberating and dispenses with the need for inherent artistic talent.[{note}]¹

That which certain writers have introduced with talent (even with genius) in their work...the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Oulipo) intends to do systematically and scientifically, if need be through recourse to machines that process information.

(Le Lionnais 2007: 27)

One of the most famous examples of oulipian writing is George Perec's La Disparition, translated as A Void, which is an entire novel written without using the letter 'e' (making it a Lipogram in 'e'). Other examples include Raymond Queneau's Exercises in Style, a simple narrative retold ninety-nine different ways, and Anne Garréta's Sphinx, a love story written without any gender markers for the central protagonists.

The imposition of constraint and removal of recourse to talent is a democratising ethos, one that flattens considerably the authorly hierarchy of writing as well as changes the relationship between the writer and their work. The act of generation becomes a game for the writer and the constraints become the muse. For the reader, there is value in both the encounter with these quirky texts, and in the observation of the constraints at play within them. It is rare that the work of the Oulipo moves away from words-on-a-page, but there are occasions when this has occurred. In addition to providing an introduction to the Oulipo, who are still relatively unknown outside of literary circles, the aim of this article is to consider the effects of generative constraint on performance practice. Specifically, this writing will consider what happens when a performer plays under oulipian constraint. I will introduce the 'clinamen-performer', a term I use to define the unpredictable, playful behaviours of a performer responding to oulipian restriction.

The longest running literary group in French history, the Oulipo differentiate themselves from their Dadaist and pataphysical roots by way of their complete allegiance to constraining devices, which leave nothing to chance, and their gaming practices of permutation and exhaustion. Indeed, the group's fascination with the discovery of new constraints through the trialling of the existing ones is characteristically game-like, with new configurations affecting potential future moves and the group's repertoire. Founder member François Le Lionnais, describes the method of the group in Lipo, the first manifesto of the Oulipo:

In the research which the Oulipo proposes to undertake, one may distinguish two principal tendencies, oriented respectively toward Analysis and Synthesis.

(Le Lionnais 2007: 27)

Analysis, in the oulipian sense, is about the mining and recognising of the potential in existing literary models. It is the capturing of existing ideas, texts and past models, ready to be used in a system of synthesis:

The synthetic tendency is...ambitious; it constitutes the essential vocation of the Oulipo. It's a question of developing new possibilities unknown to our predecessors.

(Le Lionnais 2007: 27)

The group continues to refine and build new structures in their work, a strategy geared toward exhaustion by playing through each possibility in a perpetual game of generation. Adherence to the rules is crucial, but the rules will inevitably grow and the game will evolve. The tools of analysis and synthesis are further represented in the group's monthly meeting agenda items of Creation, Rumination and Erudition (Schott, 2009). Placing equal emphasis on the consideration of realised and unrealised procedures, the Oulipo is always searching for new constraints on which to ruminate and create in practice. It is from the activity of rumination that the group derives the term potentielle, which forms crucial part of the group's name. The analysis or Anoulipism (Le Lionnais 2007: 28), is just as important to the group as the creation or synthesis of material, or Synthoulipism (28). The cataloguing of constraints is an essential part of the group's activity, the refining of their own structures and rules, followed by contemplation. Potential, in this respect, becomes a backbone of the group's activity and accounts, to a degree, for the cross-disciplinary makeup of the members. The varied systems of mathematics and computation, for example,

provide vast possibilities for literary generation, such as Le Lionnais's application of Boolean logic to the haiku poetry form (Motte 2006: 196). The potential for constraint grows in correlation with the breadth of the members' expertise. Every time a member discovers a new constraint it becomes part of the group's repertoire, producing families of related constraints that may be played with in any combination. Indeed, the plethora and diversity of the group's outputs is a testament to its ever-growing list of possibilities. Constraints may be singular or multiple, invisible or highly visible in any given work and some constraints are less obvious than others. La Disparition, mentioned earlier, was famously reviewed by critic René-Marill Albérès who failed to notice the lipogram at all (Levin Becker 2012: 82).

The group's essential focus on exhaustion and the emphasis on the structural potential of constraint rather than on tangible results, problematises their game playing as end-goal oriented. The oulipian final goal, if there is one, connects to their pataphysical lineage through a desire to have completed every possibility, privileging a process that playfully depends on the idea of summation, while acknowledging its impossibility. The only concession to their unwavering devotion to constraint is the clinamen, defined by the group as 'a deviation from the strict consequences of a restriction' (Mathews and Brotchie, 2005: 126). Etymologically, the clinamen derives from Lucretius's description of Epicurian atomic theory and is used to describe spontaneous, unpredicted swerving (126). Georges Perec's masterpiece of rigorous constraint La Vie mode d'emploi, translated as Life a User's Manual (1978), provides a clear example of the clinamen, which according to the mathematical structure of the book should consist of 100 chapters, but instead has only ninety-nine.

More fundamentally, this chapter must disappear in order to break the symmetry, to introduce an error into the system. [...] It must not be rigid; there must be some play in it; it must, as they say, "creak" a bit.

(Perec in Motte 2005: 19-20)

I consider the live performer as a kind of clinamen, an unpredictable, fallible entity, by nature liable to swerve, deviate and to be inconsistent or biased. Contemporary theatre company Third Angel's production of The Machine provides an opportunity for the clinamen-performer to be considered.

In 1968 Oulipian Georges Perec wrote a radio play, with the working title La Machine, which provides valuable insights into playing within oulipian constraint in a live performance context. The only complete version of the play for some time was Eugen Helmlé's German translation, Die Maschine. This version was translated into English 31 years later by Ulrich Schönherr for a special Georges Perec issue of The Review of Contemporary Fiction (2009). Third Angel then decided to stage the play and I was a co-director and performer with the company working with Schönherr's translation. This led to the premiere performance of The Machine in English at the Crucible Studio, Sheffield, in 2011. While the use of rule-based structures is quite common within contemporary theatre, the specifically analytical and granular level of constraining devices within The Machine represent a rare example of the oulipian effect on the live performer.

The text of The Machine reads as a 'how to' of oulipian constraint, consisting of a thorough observation, segmentation, dissection, rewriting and rereading of Goethe's poem Wandrer's Nachtlid II (Rambler's Lullaby II, 1780). The text uses, among others, the well-known S+n constraint, where each noun/substantive(S) in the existing text is replaced with the noun that appears 'n' places later in Cassell's Latin Dictionary. In the case below n=5 or n=10 respectively, the resulting changes alter the middle section of the poem from:

in all treetops
you feel

hardly a breath

to:

in all trespassers

you feel

hardly a brevity

in all tribunals

you feel

hardly a bride

(Schönherr 2009, 63-64)

Another example of a constraint in The Machine involves the verbal reporting of subjective associations related to the original poem's author, in alphabetical order. This results in a systematic, semi-biographical/historical recounting of Goethe connotations:

Goethe and 'a'

Goethe and architecture

Goethe and Aristotle

Goethe and art

(78)

The Machine was presented in-the-round with four performers equally spread around the perimeter of the playing space, facing inwards, reading the play from scripts. The movement from literary to theatrical unfettered the singular activity of fixed literary reading and revealed the multiple individuals that constitute a live audience. This shifted the focus from the author's game-playing as a writer, and instead engaged the more complicated construction of a live performance moment.

Although the performance of oulipian texts is unusual, there are examples of such work having taken place. For example, the Oulipo have recently begun to include particular kinds of public performances in their repertoire. The group's monthly Jeudi (Thursday) meetings include the public readings of both established and new variants of oulipian works and techniques to an audience of listeners. These texts are nicknamed by members of the group as 'Oulipo light' works, rather than the weightier tomes of some Oulipians' output, which are conversely, and equally wryly, labeled 'Oulipo 'ard' (Levin Becker 2012: 62-63). There have been some negative views expressed within the group about texts that are accessible enough to be performed to a live audience. Some members believe that the depth of constraint agreeable to the ephemeral moment of live performance is probably somewhat inferior to the more complex code-breaking and difficult game of deciphering/appreciating the Oulipo at its hardest, its most writerly, literary or dense. The best example of Oulipo 'ard is Perec's Life A User's Manual, mentioned above, which is constructed around a number of very complex constraints. These include those borrowed from alternate disciplines and pursuits, including mathematics and board games. An elaborate Græco-Latin bi-square equation, for example, determines the contents of each room in the apartment block in which the novel is set. The order that these rooms are revealed in the chapters of the book is determined by the Knight's Tour formula on a chess board, which is the journey a Knight chess piece must take around the board in order to occupy every square only once. The Oulipo's Jeudis are small public sharings of accessible constraint examples. Our presentation of The Machine was a live demonstration that revealed the detail involved in the labour of exhausting constraint, it was 'ard, but crucially its success depended on the performers playing their role in the game of constraint dissemination.

Just as with any other script, The Machine is permanently a literary text and so most of the time only potentially exists as a live performance. In this way, the script or play text is an interesting addition to the oulipian notion of potential.

Conceptually, a play text shares some common ground with Queneau's 1961 volume, Cent mille milliards de poemes (A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems). The book consists of ten sonnets, each in fourteen lines, printed on card pages with each line on a separate strip. The strips potentially make 100,000,000,000,000 possible combinations of lines, meaning the book would take 200,000,000 years to read in all permutations, making it a very clear example of potential literature. The book is unreadable, rendering it in terms of the usual capital of a book, inutilious in all but its potential -- a ceaseless game of adjustments and versions, to be played endlessly. The script of The Machine is very difficult to understand when reading it through alone. It is designed for four performers, often required to speak simultaneously, with their lines occupying separate vertical columns on the page. Therefore the text needs to be spoken and requires multiple voices to reach a comprehensible form. Its realisation depends on the three interrelated dimensions of performance: time-body-space.

When I first read The Machine with the company, the multiple voices gave immediate materiality and clarity to the play's structure and character. The four voices in the text, three Processors and one System Control, systematically restructure Goethe's words (and Goethe) through a range of protocols, which comprise oulipian constraints and various linguistic apparatuses. Perec's decision to use the Processors and System Control figures is a direct acknowledgment of the increasing role of computational systems in the 1960s and their potential importance for the group. The potential for machines to exhaustively work through the various permutations of a given constraint provided the possibility that eventually the writer might become unnecessary. Perec's representation of a machine in the play is an ironic step in that direction, demonstrating the shortcomings of real people while celebrating their necessity in providing texture and/or pleasure to the mechanical. It is here that we might recognise the clinamen-performer.

The general structure of The Machine was that System Control introduced a

constraint and each Processor responded to it in turn. The order of these responses directed each processor toward a particular identity. The Processors, although essentially only there to give voice to the various permutations of Goethe's text, developed particular performance qualities, due both to the order in which they spoke and Perec's playful coaxing and exaggeration of the structures in the text. Perec had designed the permutations offered by Processor 3 to be more extreme/amusing/provocative than those of Processor 1. Consequently Processor 1 became a kind of pedant, Processor 2 an aggressor, Processor 3 a dawdler, and System Control the ever-frustrated interlocutor. As a point of comparison, the development of personality from constraint can be seen in experimental poet Christian Bök's Eunoia (2008). The novel is comprised entirely of univocalisms, meaning that each of the five chapters consists only of words that contain one kind of vowel. Chapter one consists only of words containing the vowel 'a', chapter two only those containing the vowel 'e', and so on. Bök encountered an otherworldliness during his writing of the book, describing the feeling that each chapter took on a particular value, as if each vowel had something to say:

I began to feel that language played host to a conspiracy, almost as if these words were destined to be arranged in this manner, lending themselves to no other task, but this one, each vowel revealing an individual personality.

(Bök 2007: 7)

However, in The Machine, additional to the personality traits of the Processors that resulted directly from the constraints of the text, were the four live personalities in the space. Their fallible humanness in combination with their performance skills, wants and desires, necessarily bled into their delivery. Four people faced off and played in the round; these were the conditions for oratory competition, or at least a performance of such a competition. What at first, on the page, looked like a prescribed, inflexible text for performance, unleashed a

particular kind of liberation, without the mess of narrative and goal-orientation, the performers played, not to win, but for the joy of the game. To read the constraints and own them, the clinamen-performer made sense of the words in relation to the other performers, the audience and the space. As the various constraints were applied to Goethe's poem, the first Processor to speak set the tone for the others. The other Processors made conscious or unconscious decisions to accept these micro-proposals or reject them, thus altering the interpretative pitch of that moment. As a clinamen-performer, I operated within a game structure at its most liberatingly constrained. I read out constraint protocols from a script, adhering to the invisible, formal expectations of theatre, while still flexibly playing the nuances of delivery and pitch, of dialogism and irony, of competition without prize. As all good game-players do, I dived in and out of the rules, and operated at the edges of what was acceptable, adhering to and resisting the label of The Machine in each utterance. Whereas the clinamen represents for the Oulipo an acceptable, usually aesthetically inclined rule-break, as a live performer it represents the recognition of being the conduit between the text and the audience -- the ineffable vessel of meaning-making. To operate within a progressive, performance game structure, one that is unfixed, inconclusive and not goal-oriented, the bending of the rules is an essential constituent of the game. In performance, because of the many subtleties of delivery, the clinamen-performer is not an excuse for a lack of adherence to a game structure, instead they are an integral addition to the constraining devices at play. The clinamen-performer is in fact a constraint, one that must be understood in order to be harnessed -- a step toward the conquering of chance.

To fathom such rules supposedly emancipates us from them, since we gain mastery over their unseen potential, whereas to ignore such rules quarantines us in them, since we fall servile to their covert intention.

(Bök 2006: 182)

It is through the expectation of unpredictability that one can be emancipated from the problem of one's inability to be machine-like when performing. The oulipian imposition of constraints onto the writing process is an attempt to limit the available options, in the hope that the understanding of these limits will allow a command of the craft, a reminder of the proverbial notion that 'knowledge is power'. The clinamen-performer, less tangible than the written word, multifaceted and liable to bias, cannot be controlled at a granular level of constraint. Instead, the clinamen-performer exists within a context of recognisably heavy constraint, as one constraining factor among many. Arguably, all game players are clinamen-performers, constrained of their own volition. As Bernard Suits defines playing a game as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (1990: 41), the Oulipo define themselves as 'rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape' (Motte 2007: 22). To recognise the clinamen-performer is to accept and embrace their capriciousness, allowing the potential of their erratic energy to be understood and channelled, in however unruly a way.

My effort below helps provide explanation:

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Acrostic word determination = 1+3,5+2,8+1,6+5

Notes

1 Daniel Levin Becker in his book Many subtle Channels, in keeping with French standards of demonymy, uses a capitalised Oulipian throughout the volume only when referring to a person. He uses the example that 'Georges Perec was an Oulipian, but his output was (for the most part) oulipian' (2012: ix). I have used the same formatting rule in this writing.

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