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James Kurt

The beginning of Oulipo? An attempt to rediscover a movement

This article addresses recent criticism of the French literary movement Oulipo, demonstrating that such criticism is partly grounded in the tendency for scholars and even Oulipo members themselves to interpret early poetic forms of the group, for example, Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, through the theory of textual generation through strict constraint developed significantly later in the group's history. The article posits that, when duly analysed, these early forms run counter to the later notion of textual generation, align in a certain way with contemporary 'Uncreative Writing', and open new possibilities for rethinking the contemporary significance of the Oulipo and questioning the postmodern poetic project generally.

Keywords

Oulipo; uncreative writing; constraint; postmodernism

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The French literary movement Oulipo, famous for their procedural, in particular constraint-based, approach to the composition of various forms of literature, has recently been subjected to a certain brand of negative critical attention in the two essays collected as the book *The End of Oulipo? An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement*,[1] published January 2013. As the title of the collection might suggest, the authors here are questioning the literary relevance of the current output of the Oulipo and the likelihood that any future output will not retain any significance at all. To offer just a taste of the overall tone such questioning takes, the authors of the two essays contained in the book, Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito, in the joint 'Preface' state that, while 'there is no doubt that the Oulipo remains a productive and much-admired literary force on both sides of the Atlantic',

> today, as the group enters its sixth decade of existence, its relevance and its future are in question. None of the Oulipian works that have made their way into English in the past decade [. . .] can rival the best work published during the group's staggeringly successful run through the 1960s and 1970s.[2]

Later, they explain that this decline in quality is due to the fact that 'the most significant latter-day Oulipians to be published in English in recent years [. . .] have not been able to match the seriousness of purpose characteristic of earlier Oulipian works' (p. 8). And, the lack of 'seriousness of purpose' for these critics is diagnosed as failings of the group in two registers: aesthetic and political. Members of the group that are currently active are unable, for Esposito in particular, to produce works matching the achievements, both political and aesthetic, to be found in Oulipian works of past decades.

Both of these failings, as critiqued by Scott Esposito in the first essay of the book, 'Eight Glances Past Georges Perec', are diagnosed through an examination of the literary production of Oulipo member Jacques Jouet, but are largely aimed at any and all of the group's current production. On the aesthetic level, Esposito claims that while, or perhaps because, Jouet has apparently published an enormous sum of fifty books in several genres, particular works 'appear of little literary value',[3] are 'downright awful' (p. 34) or 'far from interesting', (p. 38) or, at best, could serve the reader as a 'fun little book' (p. 35). On this basis, Esposito feels justified in levelling his claim that the group's current production lacks any serious political content against Jouet, specifically insofar as this member readily asserts himself to be the 'most "political" Oulipian currently writing' (p. 35). Esposito claims that, far from being innovative, profound, or insightful, such political writing is but 'a fun knock at the ruling order, but hardly revelatory, or memorable' (p. 35). In this claim and, later,

when he quotes him directly, Esposito is echoing poet-critic Christian Bök who has argued that the 'Oulipo can, at best, offer only a few whimsical critiques of tyranny'.[4]

The objective here, however, is not to save Jouet from Esposito, or even to question the latter's assessment of the current or future significance of the Oulipo specifically on aesthetic or political levels. Rather, while, as Esposito does adeptly demonstrate, aesthetically and politically, this 50-odd-year-old literary movement may have very much passed its prime years, the purpose of this intervention is to argue that one possible significance that the group may still enjoy today and beyond lies buried – in a very specific way – in its past. And, the key to uncovering this moment in Oulipo's history is to recognise that a critical manoeuvre that Esposito employs to drive his assessment is just the latest example of a scholarly misstep ubiquitous in literature treating both the group's history and its most fundamental poetic theories.

In critiquing Jouet, Esposito calls for the group to return to its 'original revolutionary roots [. . .] if it hopes to be significant'.[5] In making this point, Esposito is gesturing towards something specific in Oulipo history. The 'roots' to which Esposito hopes the Oulipo will return, as suggested by the title of his essay, 'Eight Glances Past Georges Perec', are the literary accomplishments of a particular Oulipo member, Georges Perec, who is perhaps the most famous Oulipian. Indeed, throughout the essay, Esposito's criticism of Jouet's work is developed against his praises of Perec, whose greatness for Esposito lies in his ability to 'depict truths that had heretofore never been depicted in a novel' (p. 23) all the while following, very successfully, 'the, perhaps prime, modernist commandment to create revolutionary art by making his world new' (p. 22).

What Esposito is doing here, however, is confusing the Oulipo with the literary accomplishments of one of its members. This confusion of the 'roots' of the Oulipo with Georges Perec's work is both widespread in Oulipian scholarship and widely recognised, and thus somewhat harmless. Indeed, as member Jacques Roubaud points out, it 'has been known to happen' that readers 'fancy that it was Perec who created the Oulipo'.[6] But, grounded on this relatively harmless misstep is an even more widespread and almost completely unrecognised phenomenon occurring in Oulipo scholarship. Here, Esposito and others[7] confuse Oulipo poetic theory with one particular Oulipian method, namely with writing under constraint and the accompanying theory of textual generation. As Esposito and Elkin explain in the 'Preface', the Oulipo is 'founded on a paradoxical principle: that through the use of a formal constraint the writer's creative energy is liberated'.[8] That such a statement is being questioned at all must strike most as odd, for the name Oulipo has been synonymous with one thing: writing under strict constraint. However, this strict

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association acts to exclude a few particular Oulipo works and poetic forms, and this is where the presumed identity of the group and Perec becomes most important. For, as will become clear in re-examining the history of the group, the belief in textual generation through constraint is in fact *not* the principle upon which the Oulipo was founded. Indeed, there is evidence in Oulipo documents and a few pieces of scholarship that suggest that the idea of 'constraint', specifically when linked to the notion of textual generation, while present more or less from the beginning, overtook the group's theoretical consciousness only with Perec's membership, which commenced some seven years after the group's founding. For, it seems, it was Perec himself who popularised the notion within the group's ranks.

The 'overtaking' of the group's theoretical consciousness by Perec's constraints is nearly absolute.[9] And, the near completion of the identification of the Oulipo with constraint is important insofar as it covers over a significant moment in the history of postmodern poetics. There is, in the oft-ignored period of Oulipo existence prior to the use of the constraint for textual generation, a poetry happening whose meaning and significance have not been fully explored. This poetry, of which the Oulipo's 'founding' text, Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*,[10] serves as an example, I will refer to as 'potential poetry'.[11] This potential poetry operates in manner that is markedly counter to works such as Perec's that utilise strict constraint when the two are considered in their respective relationships to poetic production. If poetry written through the use of strict constraint, as will be discussed in greater depth later, seeks to highlight something like a free generation of text insofar as limitations on poetic production are removed and creative energy is freed to explore limitless possibilities, potential poetry operates in a manner that dramatically precludes limitless possibility and instead produces poems that are fields of massive, yet limited potentiality.

While assessing the possible future significance of the Oulipo through critiquing the current literary production of its members results in, as Esposito has shown us, a rather dismal prognostication, removing the thick sediment of constraint lying over the Oulipo and covering over this potential poetry, and then seeking to understand its meaning within the context of both postmodern thought and poetry and contemporary poetic projects, might draw, for those committed to innovative poetic practice, a new inspiration from this otherwise 'exhausted' movement.

Oulipo history revised

In his 2006 article 'OuLiPotemkin: Down with the Tyranny of Constraints!', Jean-Jacques Thomas complicates the oversimplified identity of

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the Oulipo and constraint, uncovering something of a 'dirty little secret' regarding the formation of the group. Namely, Thomas points out that Oulipo was not necessarily established with view towards that poetic technique for which they are best known: the constraint. The constraint was not, as it were, the birthright of this group. Indeed, Thomas calls attention to the fact that, while Raymond Queneau's 1961 *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* has always been the officially sanctioned 'founding text' of the Oulipo, the text does not truly belong within the Oulipian cannon for two reasons: First, the text precedes the official founding of the group by several months. As Thomas states,

> [n]o matter what the 'official history' of the Oulipian movement says, unless we consider [*A Hundred Thousand*] an Oulipian book 'by anticipation', the text cannot be 'Oulipian' because, when it was published, the Oulipo, as a movement, did not yet exist. The text, as a gimmick, was conceived in 1960 and published (released) in early 61 when Oulipo had not yet been 'named'.[12]

While this questioning of the authenticity of *A Hundred Thousand* as an Oulipian text because it appeared a few months earlier than the official founding of the group might seem trivial at best, Thomas' second reason for such questioning is quite substantial and rather interesting. Namely, he points out that the form of Queneau's text differs significantly from those prototypical – that is, constraint based – Oulipian texts that will appear after the group's *First Manifesto*[13] is released in August 1961. Specifically, *A Hundred Thousand* is not a text written under strict constraint (p. 119). As such, it shares neither a method of production nor a theoretical framework with those texts for which the Oulipo will become best known.

A Hundred Thousand[14] comprises ten sonnets, where all sonnets share a common rhyme scheme, as well as the same actual rhyming sounds for all end-words of lines corresponding in order. This is to say that the end-words for line one of all of the poems rhyme, as do the end words for lines two, three, and so on. The result of this rhyme-structure is that any line from any sonnet may be interchanged with the corresponding line from any of the other sonnets, for example, line one from sonnet one may be substituted for line one from sonnet eight, or line ten from sonnet ten for line ten from sonnet two. The text is thus not meant to be read as ten sonnets static and complete in themselves, but as the titular one hundred thousand billion unique sonnets that may be formed through recombining the lines in all possible permutations. Obviously, the text was never meant to be exhaustively read in this sense. Rather, it was to be 'read' as one hundred thousand billion 'potential' poems.

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As a text to be read in this fashion, *A Hundred Thousand* is an example of what Oulipo founder François Le Lionnais, borrowing the title of a field of study in mathematics, has called 'combinatorial literature'. Combinatorics proper, that is, as a branch of mathematics, is, simply put, the study of possible configurations of discrete objects. Solutions for combinatorial problems are often achieved through the use of permutation. For example, if one were to make the formal premise of *A Hundred Thousand* into a combinatorial problem, the question might read: How many possible sonnets can be formed through the recombination of corresponding lines from ten different, pre-given sonnets? The answer, one would discover through permuting all possible combinations, is, of course, one hundred thousand billion, or 100,000,000,000,000.

Thomas highlights the qualitative difference between such a text and the later constraint-based work for which the Oulipo is most known claiming '[n]o one would (or should) have used that term [constraint] to describe the "first" Oulipian text' (p. 119). He explains instead that if

> one accurately reads Le Lionnais' postface it is easy to see that the text deals with something that will not be at the core of the Oulipo experimentation [. . .] the so called 'combinatorics'. [. . .] A giant intellectual step in the group will take place between February 1961 when [*A Hundred Thousand*] is published and August 1961 when the first *Manifesto* appears

when 'the call for "combinatorics" will be replaced by the doctrine of "strict constraint"' (p. 120). If Thomas is correct in this diagnosis, that is, if there is indeed a 'giant intellectual step' happening here, then this shift certainly calls for greater historical clarification and raises several important theoretical questions.

Examining the history of this 'giant intellectual leap' from combinatorics to constraint, Thomas asserts that the Oulipian predilection for strict constraint is outlined in the group's *First Manifesto*, written by founding member Le Lionnais for publication on 28 August 1961, only seven months after the official establishment of Oulipo. Such a timeline, if accurate, would not be terribly problematic. Seven months seems to be a reasonable period of time for a literary group to solidify its methods and theories. However, if one examines the text of this *First Manifesto* carefully, it is apparent that the notion of poetic constraint, while clearly present in this early document, is troubled at best. In four of the five instances that the term appears in the approximately two page essay it is linked with traditional notions of poetic form, namely, form as a set of constraints, for example, those associated with the sonnet, into which authorial inspiration and meaning are fitted. All five uses of the term refer to formal 'constraints'

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of a historical nature, such as the formal determinacy of the novel, the classical tragedy, or, again, the sonnet. Of such constraints, Le Lionnais asks, '[m]ust one adhere to the old tricks of the trade and obstinately refuse to imagine new possibilities? [. . .] Should humanity lie back and be satisfied to watch new thoughts make ancient verses?'[15] His answer, of course, is no.

What is important here is that the term 'constraint' is most readily associated with the non-reflective approach to poetic formalism that Oulipo is working against: the adherence to the rules and conventions of genre. At best, the study of these non-reflective, historical constraints is understood to be 'Analytic Oulipism', or the study of historical forms for the purpose of finding new possibilities lying latent therein. It is clear, however, that a much greater value is placed on 'Synthetic Oulipism', which is touted to be 'more ambitious', as 'it constitutes the essential vocation of the Oulipo. It is a question of developing new possibilities unknown to our predecessors. This is the case, for example, of the [*A Hundred Thousand*] or the Boolean haikus' (p. 27). Indeed, when the focus shifts from the readily criticised *constraints* of the traditional novel or the classical tragedy as form, the term constraint itself is replaced with 'possibilities', as in the 'new possibilities' developed through Synthetic Oulipism. And, when these 'possibilities' are discussed, the poetic processes in question shift from constrictive forms to mathematic procedures: '[m]athematics – particularly the abstract structures of contemporary mathematics – proposes thousands of possibilities of exploration [. . .] it would take a long article to enumerate the possibilities now foreseen' (p. 27). It is clear, then, that even up to and including the first Oulipian *Manifesto*, the group was primarily a research seminar devoted to uncovering the possibilities of language that a reliance on mathematics, and combinatorics in particular, promises.

It is not until the *Second Manifesto*,[16] authored again by President/founder Le Lionnais, appears over a decade later in Oulipo's coming out (to the public) text *La Litterature potentielle* in 1973, that the term 'constraint' receives an unambiguously positive treatment. Explaining the work of the Oulipo to the public at large for the first time, Le Lionnais only offers examples of Oulipian texts that are produced through the imposition and subsequent working through of strict constraints: 'the acrostic, spoonerisms, the lipogram, the palindrome, [and] the holorhyme'.[17] The closest we come here to a valuation of mathematics, again, primarily combinatorics, in the production of literature is the offhand mention of 'numerical constraints' (p. 29). Indeed, whereas in the *First Manifesto* the term constraint, almost without fail, held a negative significance in referring to the traditional and limiting genre structures that the Oulipo has always taken issue with, in this *Manifesto,* the term is universally valued. Although, when it is mentioned in terms of structures that are

'less', or 'hardly', constricting it certainly does not carry the buzz of excitement surrounding its use to describe those 'strict' constraints developed through what Le Lionnais earlier named 'Synthetic Oulipism'. Indeed, here, the 'efficacy of a structure – that is, the extent to which it helps a writer – depends primarily on the degree of difficulty imposed by the rules that are more or less constraining' (p. 30). While a seven-month theoretical gestation period for the Oulipian practice of strict constraint that Thomas proposed seemed quite reasonable, a twelve-year, otherwise unexplained and unexamined incubation seems to only complicate the historical evolution of the constraint further.

Thomas quickly leaves behind the transition from combinatorial literature to constraint. Indeed, in his essay, he is following instead what he describes as an ongoing, liberal 'rebellion' against the strictness of the constraint within the ranks of the group. The focus of this study, however, lies in continuing the investigating into the 'giant intellectual step' occurring between combinatorics and constraint.

While Thomas' attention moves elsewhere in the history of Oulipo, he does leave a clue: Jacques Roubaud. Oulipo member Roubaud, according to Thomas, has long been working to construct a 'revisionist history' of the Oulipo. And, indeed, this revised history holds the key to this constraint conundrum.

Roubaud opens his article 'Perecquian OULIPO' stating that he will 'divide the history of the Oulipo into three periods: A-the pre-Perecquian Oulipo // B-the Perecquian Oulipo // C-the post-Perecquian Oulipo'.[18] Through referring to the work of fellow Oulipian Georges Perec as a defining moment within the theoretical development of the Oulipo, what such a historical account accomplishes for our purposes is a division of the Oulipo into essentially two periods: The first is the pre-Perecquian manifestation, which was marked most readily by the combinatoric stylings of Le Lionnais and Queneau; the second is the Perecquian and post-Perecquian periods, which have both been dominated by the writing under strict constraint that Le Lionnais refers to in his *Second Manifesto*. As the period names suggest, for Roubaud, the movement from combinatorics to constraint must be centred on the writings of Georges Perec.

Indeed, in Roubaud's new history, in the late 1960s, Perec comes to the rescue of an Oulipo cast into severe doldrums by a waning of interest in the original combinatorial work of the group. Roubaud explains this phenomenon, stating that after 'the effervescent invention of the Oulipo as an idea, after the enthusiasm born of recognising the project's originality, the originality of the [*A Hundred Thousand*]', there was, amongst most Oulipian denizens, a noticeable waning of interest in the theories and practices of the group, and that it 'would be rather tempting to see the *Perecquian Oulipo* – or, more exactly, the concomitant decision to

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enlarge the *Ouvroir* – as the solution to that crisis' (p. 108). This description seems to suggest that the 'Perecquian Oulipo' was nothing more than a reinvigoration of the founding principles set forth by the group several years prior in the *First Manifesto*. The *modus operandi* of Oulipo has shifted, yes, but the theoretical underpinnings of the movement remain the same. To those familiar with the Oulipo, such commentary seems to gybe well with well-worn Oulipian folklore. Oulipo members have always been quick to boast of the extraordinary longevity and purported stability of their association, as opposed to the turbulent and short-lived tenure of other 'avant-garde' literary groups.[19]

However, Roubaud's commentary on the 'Crisis of 66', his title for this mid-1960s' lapse in interest in combinatorial literature that led to and was cured by Georges Perec's restrictive literary stylings, quickly gives way to a more radical interpretation of the place of constraint in the group's history. He claims that, while this crisis and Perec's arrival do coincide quite nicely in the timeline of the group's development, and while the Oulipo did certainly re-emerge from these doldrums with a new method of composition and a corresponding virility much greater than Queneau's combinatorics ever allowed, his hypothesis establishing a causal link between the crisis, Perec's joining the Oulipo, and the meteoric rise of the group occurring soon thereafter, 'does not account for the most original aspect of the "*Ouvroir's* second life", most of which must be almost exclusively attributed to Perec himself' (p. 108). This 'most original aspect' is a new theoretical framework accompanying the method of literary composition known as 'strict constraint'. While the Oulipo had considered constraint to some degree prior to Perec's membership, the theoretical notion of a free generation of text, free, that is, from prior determination by things such as genre, tradition, or the rationality of the subject, through use of this method, could only be attributed to Perec himself. Roubaud thus intends that the shift from combinatorics to constraint was not the logical continuation of Oulipian theory, but the emergence of a genuinely new mode of poetic thought. As such, it is explainable only as the product of a single mind thinking in an altogether different manner from those previously collected in the halls of the Oulipo. This mind was Perec's – and its most groundbreaking product was the novel *La disparition.*

The generative device

La disparition[20] is, as Oulipians refer to it, a lipogrammatic novel in E. As such, the text is written without the use of one letter, here, the letter 'e'. This is to say that throughout the novel, no word containing the letter 'e' is used. It was this text that forced Oulipian theory to change

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dramatically – to truly reinvent itself – between the work's publication in 1969 and the appearance of the previously discussed *Second Manifesto* some four years later. Roubaud explains Perec's groundbreaking and era-defining text stating that the

> Oulipian character of the work rests on an *Oulipian principle*, one that only came to light in the wake of precisely this example: the lipogram in E disappears E from the written language, and that disappearance generates the story. In this sense, the composition is radically different from previous uses of constraint. (p. 102)

The key term here is 'generates'. The constraint, with Perec's lipogram, becomes a 'generative device'.

In utilising a generative device, a writer eschews the typical schema of artistic production in which the artist begins with some 'content', that is, a meaning, plot, and so on, to be portrayed in the work. In this model, the composition is then a fitting of this preconceived content into a chosen artistic form, for example, the sonnet or novel, in hopes of effectively conveying this content to an audience. The content, here, is first and last. It exists before the work and is what is to be ultimately taken from it. The use of constraint as a generative device functions opposite to this. The artist begins not with content, but with a formal choice, that is, the constraint. But, the constraint, as opposed to traditional forms such as the sonnet, is difficult to the extent that the artist's primary concern can only be the production of a work that satisfies the limitation. Content or plot, that is, meaning, and even language fall where they may. These are not chosen by the artist. Rather, they are generated by the constraint, or, better, blindly by the artist's attempts to work within it. There is, ideally, no conscious choice on the part of the artist on matters of meaning or language.[21]

It is in the impossibility of conscious choice of language and meaning that constraint as a generative device has for its practitioners and theorists alike profound poetic purpose and philosophical implications. Explained in rather simple, yet effective terms by American Oulipo member Harry Mathews, there 'is no value inherent in the product of a constrictive form, except one: being unable to say what you normally would, you must say what you normally wouldn't'.[22] The poet is unable to say what he 'normally would' insofar as the difficulty of the constraint disallows him the normal means through which meaning and language are laid out, things such as memory and the self, tradition, and rationality. But, this disallowal not only is not a burden, it is rather a boon. Accordingly, scholar of postmodern poetry Joseph Conte explains in his text *Unending Design* that this 'rule-dominated composition relieves the poet of the

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burden of the self, since the "personality" of the artist is no longer called on to direct the creative process'[23] and Mathews elsewhere states that the generative device, '[i]mposing fixed patterns as it does, [. . .] keeps us *out* of control. Control usually means submitting reasonably to the truly tyrannical patterns that language imposes on us whether we like them or not'.[24] Suddenly unfettered by these things, what the poet *is* able to say is drawn from a realm of indeterminacy, a place where the possibilities of language are as yet free of actualised meanings, structures, orders, or rules established by the rationality of subjectivity or the conventions of tradition. Here, the possibilities for orderings and re-orderings of language are unlimited and, accordingly, the possibility of absolute poetic newness is actualised, at least according to the more optimistic practitioners and theorists. Remember that Esposito lauded Perec for developing complex themes all the while following 'the, perhaps prime, modernist commandment to create revolutionary art by making his world new'.[25]

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Potentiality vs. Possibility

Perec, his lipogrammatic novel and the constraint at large, and this theory of textual generation developed by Oulipians and scholars to accompany and explain these have become so widely known as to overshadow the early history of Oulipo, that is, as Roubaud calls it, the pre-Perecquian Oulipo during which Queneau developed the combinatorial method of *A Hundred Thousand* and Le Lionnais theorised the method in the group's *First Manifesto*. Because of this, a rather large, and perhaps even a bit startling, difference separating the early forms of Oulipian poetry, namely Queneau and Le Lionnais' combinatorics and another I have yet to discuss, Jean Lescure's S + 7, and Perec and co's generative device has never, as far as I can tell, been drawn out by commentators, critics, or Oulipians themselves. Here, I hope just to begin to shed light on this difference, beginning by returning to Esposito briefly.

Esposito and Elkin, very near the beginning of their 'Introduction', make the mistake of explaining *A Hundred Thousand* through Oulipo poetic theory developed only after the appearance of the generative device. Though this move is common in Oulipo scholarship,[26] they do this in a way that is of particular significance here, claiming that *A Hundred Thousand* 'perfectly captures the Oulipo's aspirations: a great Oulipian work is both a statement of what it knows and a gesture towards something infinitely larger than itself'.[27] Anyone who has spent time pondering Queneau's work must immediately take issue with the last bit of this assertion insofar as the text, being combinatorial in nature, has no relation whatsoever to any type of infinity. The titular

hundred thousand billion poems lay before the reader as poems that can be assembled and read, even though such a feat is not expected, or possible, for that matter. But, despite this impossibility of reading all of the hundred thousand billion poems, their potentiality is entirely finite.

When describing *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* above, I emphasised the fact that this work is commonly understood to be composed of a hundred thousand billion 'potential' poems. The term is necessary in order to draw out what should be a very clear distinction between Queneau's combinatorical work and the generative stylings of later Oulipians. Queneau's work is a closed system: any possible meanings, that is, any possible poems, are already determined. But this is to say that they are not really 'possible' at all. Rather, they are 'potential' insofar as they are all already defined, yet not always existing in a stable, material form. The term 'possibility' I reserved instead for the discussion of the generative device. To reiterate, poetry utilising the constraint as a generative device seeks to break down the ways in which language and meaning are, in a sense, always predetermined to a large degree by the rationality of subjectivity, and so on. The goal is to reach into the stores of language that are undetermined and to find therein a pure and open possibility for determinations and orderings that are radically new. Poetry of the generative device seeks, in this way, possibility for language that is infinite, unbridled. Whether it accomplishes it or not, such poetry is after pure possibility. So, if generative poetry can be called possible poetry insofar as it accesses and generates undetermined possibilities for language, then Queneau's combinatoric poetry will be a type of potential poetry,[28] or works that explicitly demonstrate a striking relationship between wide-ranging potential formulations and finite, already existent determination.

If Queneau allows us an example of potential poetry that is sufficient to formulate the distinction between this poetic practice and the generative practice of later Oulipian's, Jean Lescure's S + 7 poetry, another early Oulipian form that was first put forth publicly in 1961 in Dossier 17 of the Collège de 'Pataphysique, serves to draw this distinction into much greater relief insofar as it is all the more profoundly oriented towards the specific understanding of 'potential' at issue here. The S + 7 poem begins with two items: first, any sort of source text, be it a short story by Kafka, an excerpt from a technical instruction manual, or a poem by John Dowland, a text Oulipo member Mathews has used for S + 7 poetry,[29] and second, a dictionary of the poet's choosing. Next, the poet replaces every substantive in the poem with the seventh substantive following that word in the dictionary to be used. Looking at the OED, for instance, the first substantive of the Iliad, 'goddess', would become 'godspell'.

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Mathews, commenting on the form some twenty years after Lescure first conceived of S + 7, is quick to group this method under the theoretical implications and concerns of the notion of the constraint as generative device. The procedure, according to Mathews, demolishes the semantic sense of the source text while retaining its syntactical arrangement. The point here is to demonstrate that the 'meaning-making function' of language bleeds through a forced irrationality of content or subject matter. Accordingly, he explains that 'in practice even "[S] plus 7" turns out to be more fertile than we might expect' insofar as the audience is able to witness the 'fertility' of a generation of determinacy from out of a lack thereof.[30] For Mathews, generation absolutely occurs here just as it does in Perec's *La disparition*. However, his understanding of what is at work in S + 7 becomes untenable when taking a closer look at the temporality of works produced thereby.

Turning to the production of the S + 7 poem, the term so fundamental to the standard theoretical treatments of the Oulipo, that is, 'generation', comes into question. One could claim that the poem is 'generated' as it is written, that is, as the poet painstakingly replaces every substantive, writing the new 'product' down in its completed form. There exists, of course, prior to the material instantiation of the poem the poem as possible in a certain sense, and the completed poem is 'generated' from out of this possibility. However, this can be thought in a different, more proper manner. One could make the claim that at the very moment a poet, for instance Mathews, chooses to create an S + 7 poem using a particular dictionary and particular source text, the 'result' poem exists potentially, waiting to be read from out of the dictionary, but determined in full nonetheless. There is no indeterminate moment from out of which this poem 'becomes'. There is, of course, the argument that the poem is determined from out of the poet's decision to make this particular S + 7 poem. But, again, this poem exists in potentiality before the poet makes his choice. The pre-text exists, as does the dictionary. Every 'possible' S + 7 poem exists always in a fully determined, yet still potential actuality. There is no possible, yet undetermined S + 7 poem. If such a poem is, indeed, possible, that is, if a source text and a dictionary exist (and if they do not, then we are no longer talking about S + 7), then this poem is potential insofar as it is already determined. In fact, every 'possible' S + 7 poem is potential and determined prior to the 'invention' of the method itself. There is here no relation to anything like unconditioned possibility or indeterminacy, and, for this reason, S + 7 stands far afield of the notion of the constraint as a generative device.

The argument could most likely be made that I have unduly parsed if not the history of the group then certainly its theoretical development. *A Hundred Thousand* and the S + 7 method might have been, in other

words, forerunners of the poetic theory of textual generation through constrained writing, and thus just one step in the crystallization of thinking that holds that 'through the use of a formal constraint the writer's creative energy is liberated'.[31] But, if these early Oulipian forms were genuine attempts at free generation of meaning and language, free, that is, from the determinative forces of tradition or the rational operations of subjectivity to which all poetic creation has seemed impossibly bound, then they were failed attempts insofar as they accomplished, rather, something nearing the opposite of this. And, ultimately, this examination is less about developing a proper interpretation of an irregularity in the history of the Oulipo that would be accurate within the context of this same history, and more about uncovering an anomaly in the postmodern poetic project and understanding what significance it might have with regard to both it and contemporary poetic projects.

To this end, a survey of what is commonly understood to be the more innovative forms of poetry happening today would seem to indicate that the poetic objective highlighted by Harry Mathews and Joseph Conte above, that is, of freeing the generation of language from rational determinative forces, no longer carries the weight it once did. One need only look at the practice that poet Kenneth Goldsmith has termed 'uncreative writing' to see this. Goldsmith explains this writing, in an essay titled 'Sentences on Conceptual Writing', stating that with

> uncreative writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an author uses an uncreative form of writing, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the text.[32]

The phrase 'a machine that makes the text' might seem to align Goldsmith's description with the constraint as the generative device. Accordingly, it is important to note that the 'ideas' behind acts of uncreative writing are mostly decisions to reproduce particular texts, for example, in the famous case of Goldsmith's *Day*,[33] the 1 September 2000 issue of *The New York Times*, word for word. In this way, the idea as machine does not generate the text. The idea, essentially, is the text. Once the idea is conceived, the text potentially exists. The 'machining', accordingly, is 'perfunctory'. And, of course, the text existed in at least some sense before the idea. Uncreative writing thus operates within the same temporal-productive realm as the S + 7 method that immediately 'potentialises' any possible S + 7 poem and even points to its potential existence outside of the occurrence of the idea itself. When thought specifically through questions of generation, production, creation, and so on, forms

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of potential poetry and uncreative writing thus differ similarly from poetic practices attempting to eschew determination and seek an indeterminate generation of language and meaning.

This temporal-productive variance from other postmodern poetry shared by uncreative writing and potential poetry of the Oulipo has yet, as far as I can tell, to be thoroughly questioned. Indeed, critics, for instance Marjorie Perloff in her 2010 book *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*,[34] following the lead of uncreative practitioners themselves, posit a lineage between the Oulipo of the strict constraint and uncreative writing,[35] thereby missing the manner in which uncreative writing, like potential poetry, in fact *differs* from poetic methods concerned with bringing indeterminacy to the surface through generative devices. But, I would posit that this is due largely to the fact that, as we have seen, practitioners and theorist of potential poetry are themselves focused on the poetic goals that these forms elide, that is, goals opposite of what their poetry accomplished, while practitioners and theorists of uncreative writing tend to have poetic goals outside of such questions of indeterminacy and free generation altogether.[36]

One glance to the past of Georges Perec

Returning to Esposito, we remember that he titles his essay in *The End of Oulipo? An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement* 'Eight Glances Past Georges Perec'. But, in reality, what he is doing in this essay is taking eight glances directly at Perec. The glances themselves are features, strategies, or themes present in Perec's writing, for example, 'truthism', 'negation', and 'remainder', that Esposito admires. They are 'past' him only in the sense that Esposito looks at what is 'past', or after, Perec, that is, his successors, and finds these qualities lacking. Esposito would, of course, like to see such features re-emerge in the writing of current and future Oulipo members. It is interesting, though, that, throughout his essay, Esposito focuses not on that for which the Oulipo and Perec are most well-known: the use of the strict constraint as a generative device in order to break the determining force of tradition and rational subjectivity in the creation of meaning and language. Esposito is lamenting instead what was considered by the group, as opposed to individual members at work on their own writing projects, as secondary to the theoretical profundity of writing with constraints: features, strategies, or themes present in writings produced thereby. Ultimately, perhaps it is only with the waning of interest in such theories, evidenced, again, by the emergence of uncreative writing, that one discovers the fact that Oulipian activity has, for the most part, always centred on theoretical notions rather than

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themes, and so on. When the novelty of such notions wears off, one might look for 'seriousness of purpose' and find it only in the writings of a handful of Oulipians who felt a personal draw to write in such a manner, Oulipians, according to Esposito, who are long since gone.

Perhaps, though, if we can reorient the 'past' of Esposito's 'Past Perec' to mean a glance not past him into the present of the Oulipo, but rather into the forgotten past of the Oulipo itself, we can discover that, while perhaps poetry constructed through strict constraint as a form of free generation has exhausted all of its possibilities for the provocation of thought and the creation of interesting literature, there still lies a great potentiality, namely, potential poetry, within the already determined history of the Oulipo.

But, beyond simply being 'new' in the face of the perhaps tired postmodern project of eschewing determinacy, such poetry could, perhaps, serve as a call for a thorough rethinking of this postmodern goal itself. Thinking through the way the relationship between poetic production and determinacy has been posited might lead to a deeper question about the philosophical implications of this postmodern idea: Does the attempt to free the creation of language and meaning from the influence of rational subjectivity dismantle this determinative force, or rather recreate its power on another, more fundamental level? Following this line of questioning, critic of postmodernism Frank B. Farrell has claimed that postmodernism takes issue with the determinative force of the subject insofar as in 'the modern period the finite human thinker' hubristically 'takes over some of God's function as subject' and, accordingly, the 'qualities that things once were taken to have on their own migrate across the subject/object divide and are seen to be determinations imposed by the self'.[37] But, while such thinking still subordinates the determinative force of the individual subject to the controlling and limiting force of rationality, the 'postmodern self', in eschewing such rationality, attempts to eliminate any checks upon its ability break down pre-given determinacy and continually re-determine reality as it sees fit, thus all the more hubristically earning 'its freedom in the modern way, by the emptying out of that which opposes it' (p. 251).

While those contemporary poets of 'uncreativity', whose practices I have claimed resemble what I have called potential poetry, do not seem to be interested in these sorts of philosophical questionings of the subject, determinacy, and generation, their interest in non-generative poetry at all perhaps signals potential for such questioning to emerge in today's poetic landscape. Should such question gain traction, the idea of 'potential poetry' that I have presented here could serve as an instantiation of a rethinking of determinacy outside of the belief that it must arise somewhere between the poles of the determining force of the rational subject

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and the postmodern idea of a free becoming of determinacy. This poetry, in other words, would seek greater potential for thought in turning from a conception of reality as a realm of determinacy that has been *generated* at all and towards new territory: an understanding of the occurrence of art and the world as phenomena existing, like Queneau's sonnets, as small nodes in a field of massive, yet finite and determined, potentiality. The Oulipo and others – other poets, theorists, and philosophers – could perhaps find new inspiration, and much more to infinitely attempt to exhaust, in such finite potential.

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Notes

1 Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito, *The End of Oulipo? An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement* (Winchester and Washington: Zero, 2013).
2 Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito, 'Preface', in Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito, *The End of Oulipo? An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement* (Winchester and Washington: Zero, 2013), p. 6.
3 Scott Esposito, 'Eight Glances Past Georges Perec', in Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito, *The End of Oulipo? An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement* (Winchester and Washington, Zero, 2013), p. 34.
4 Christian Bök, 'Oulipo and Its Unacknowledged Legislation', in Christine Wertheim and Matias Viegener (eds.), *The Noulipian Analects* (Los Angeles: Les Figues, 2007), p. 158. See *The Noulipian Analects* also for more contemporary, specifically feminist and political, critiques of the Oulipo.
5 Esposito, 'Eight Glances Past Georges Perec', p. 61.
6 Jacques Roubaud, 'Perecquian OULIPO', trans. Jean-Jacques Poucel, *Yale French Studies*, 105 (2004), p. 99.
7 See, for example, Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), pp. 214–66 and Warren F. Motte, Jr., 'Raymond Queneau and the Aesthetic of Formal Constraint', *Romantic Review*, 82.2 (1991).
8 Elkin and Esposito, 'Preface', p. 1.
9 For a rare, but not unheard of, example of recognition by an Oulipo member that some Oulipo forms are not 'constraints', see Caude Berg, 'For a Potential Analysis of Combinatory Literature', in Warren F. Motte, Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal: Dalkey, 1998), p. 116.

10 See Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille millards de poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961). For and English translation, see Raymond Queneau, 'A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems', trans. Stanley Chapman, in Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (eds.), *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas, 2006 and North Hollywood: Make Now, 2005), pp. 15–33.
11 In coining this term, there is risk that it will be confused with the notion of 'potential literature' that is inscribed in the very name 'Ou*LiPo*'. To characterise this idea only briefly, 'potential literature' simply refers to the fact that the Oulipo invents structures that can be used by writers to create works of literature, works of literature that are, thus, yet potential with the invention on these forms. For more on this notion of potentiality, see Raymond Queneau, 'Potential Literature', in Warren F. Motte, Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal: Dalkey, 1998), pp. 51–64. The term 'potential poetry' used here, as will become clear later, seeks to mark a difference in the temporality of production between Oulipian forms utilising constraint as text-generating device and several Oulipian forms that operate in a fundamentally different matter.
12 Jean-Jacques Thomas, 'OuLiPotemkin: Down with the Tyranny of Constraints!', *French Forum*, 31.1 (2006), pp. 119–120.
13 See François Le Lionnais, 'Lipo: First Manifesto', in Warren F. Motte, Jr (ed. and trans.), *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal: Dalkey, 1998), pp. 26–8.
14 For a discussion of this Oulipian poetic form or, indeed, nearly any Oulipian form, as well as information on members, history, and so on, see editors Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas, 2006 and North Hollywood: Make Now, 2005).
15 François Le Lionnais, 'Lipo: First Manifesto', p. 27.
16 See François Le Lionnais, 'Second Manifesto', in Warren F. Motte, Jr (ed. and trans.), *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal: Dalkey, 1998), pp. 29–31.
17 François Le Lionnais, 'Second Manifesto', p. 30.
18 Roubaud, 'Perecquian OULIPO', p. 99.
19 For a brief discussion of this, see Warren Motte, 'Raymond Queneau and the Early Oulipo', *French Forum*, 31.1 (2006), p. 41.
20 See Georges Perec, *La disparition* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1969). For an English translation of the work, see Georges Perec, *A Void*, trans. Gilbert Adair, (Jaffrey: David R. Godine, 2005).
21 The notion of textual generation through constraint is treated in depth in Conte, *Unending Design*, pp. 214–66.
22 Harry Mathews, 'Vanishing Point', in Harry Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* (Normal: Dalkey, 2003), p. 282.
23 Conte, *Unending Design*, p. 40.
24 Harry Mathews, 'Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese', in Harry Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* (Normal: Dalkey, 2003), p. 81.
25 Esposito, 'Eight Glances Past Georges Perec', p. 22.

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26 See, for example, Warren F. Motte, Jr., 'Introduction', in Warren F. Motte, Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, (Normal: Dalkey, 1998), pp. 2–4.
27 Elkin and Esposito, 'Preface', pp. 1–2.
28 See note 9 above.
29 See Harry Mathews *Trial Impressions* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1977), p. xii.
30 Mathews, 'Vanishing Point', p. 281.
31 Elkin and Esposito, 'Preface', p. 1.
32 Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Sentences on Uncreative Writing' *ubuweb.com* (http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_goldsmith.html), para. 1.
33 See Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington: The Figures, 2003).
34 Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).
35 Ibid., pp. 14–16.
36 For a thorough articulations of these goals, see, for example, Goldsmith's book *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) or Perloff's aforementioned *Unoriginal Genius*
37 Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism, and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.

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