

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Raymond Queneau

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 8th, 2018

A poet needs to have some sort of constraint – many constrain their voice aiming for consistency; others constrain their themes, grouping collections together to be about loss, the body, shopping; others yet constrain their form, working in sestinas, limerick, terza rima. But why can't one think first of the constraint of constraints, and hence the freedom inherent in them, from concept to structure to metaphor and every other aspect of a poem's construction? What is the constraint of poetry in the world?

In pushing constraint, I want to say it will set you free when you write poetry. I like to think that I was less conscious of constraint when I was younger, but maybe one does not need an obvious framework in which to produce good work. I was, in my own way, concerned with time, which might indeed be one of the two big constraints, the other being space. They are the boundaries of life itself, as ontology, epistemology, reality and existence.

Constraint in poetry came to me through a professor and his 101 exercises in how to generate poems. From him I learnt about Kenneth Goldsmith's uncreativity, Jackson MacLow's chance operations and even Edgar Allen Poe's mechanical. But to me, I liked the play of Oulipo the best. If one was going to be constrained then one should have fun along the way. From Oulipo, I loved Georges Perec and Italo Calvino. I read and re-read *Life, A User's Manual*, swapped copies of *A Void*, taught *W*. With friends in co-ops I put on a play of *The Baron of the Trees*, adapting it with papier-mache masks, and shortening it considerably. We served veggies from our own garden and beer we had brewed in the weeks before. It was fun, it was meant to be fun and we were not trying hard to make that happen, but simply living life without the tensions and difficulties others had projected onto being an adult as defined by 'culture'.

In my professor's class, a friend and I wrote a poem to the city of Philadelphia based on the grid of its streets, playing an elaborate and constrained back and forth we titled *En Passant*. We knew how much chess had meant to people like Lewis Carroll, Vladimir Nabokov and Marcel Duchamp, and wrote our own history and experience into that by speaking back to them with our own gameboard. But to me Queneau and his *99 Exercises in Style* was some sort of origin point, a point for thinking through all the possibilities in a word play that was built for readers who wanted more than prose poems or short rhymes of repute. It legitimated what it was to be in research and development, what it was to *experiment*, and as I learnt more about Borges or Adunis, people I respected, I knew there was something worthwhile to being in this kind of ferment and element. Even if one did not want to instrumentalise this kind of writing, one knew that it had worth. They knew how to make the alphabet sing beyond the fact that it is a tool. They found a new path for the bus to take, and as

Queneau wrote:

A chap of about 26, felt hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone's been having a tug-of-war with it. People getting off. The chap in question gets annoyed with one of the men standing next to him. He accuses him of jostling him every time anyone goes past. A snivelling tone which is meant to be aggressive. When he sees a vacant seat he throws himself on to it.

The bus might be traveling along the same route in 99 different ways, but maybe it is the experimentalists who are the ones that are really in control while the conservatives with nothing better to do than jostle, snivel, and throw themselves about. That is the dialectic of tradition and the avant garde.

This professor was a great defender of this kind of counter-revolution of the word, which would also have us value play, contingency, difficulty, abstraction, surface. In his universe, this is established as being the opposite of 'official verse culture'. And though he has grown in importance over the years and is respected, if not quite canonised, it must be said that these debates are useful for organising the sociology of poetry as it now stands. But, there are people that are liminal to those traditions, or rather, those whose work transcends the binaries that are common. Here, I think of Queneau but it is there in many forgotten women writers who had a crossover appeal. What might be one lesson is that constraint can teach us what particularity does as well – namely that particularity is the path towards the universal, which is figured here not as a trans-historical phenomenon but as an appeal to our common ground and our common good. That is what can lead Alain Badiou to rightly suggest that:

Poets are those who try to make a language say what it seems incapable of saying. Poets are those who seek to create in language new names to name that which, before the poem, has no name. And it is essential for poetry that these inventions, these creations, which are internal to language, have the same destiny as the mother tongue itself: for them to be given to all without exception. The poem is a gift of the poet to language. But this gift, like language itself, is destined to the common – that is, to this anonymous point where what matters is not one person in particular but all, in the singular. Thus, the great poets of the twentieth century recognized in the grandiose revolutionary project of communism something that was familiar to them – namely that, as the poem gives its inventions to language and as language is given to all, the material world and the world of thought must be given integrally to all, becoming no longer the property of a few but the common good of humanity as a whole.

Our common good is found to be common in the way that constraint is also. In other words, we learn what is what when we collaborate on new rules for the games that do not seem fun at all. And in that way, what Queneau and Oulipo present to us is an excitement of being liberated when our boundaries and circumstances would tell us that there is nothing left to do but rebel.

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