

Creativity in the Constraints of Oulipo

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In my proposal, I am specifically looking at how different types of constraint applied to poetry can oftentimes activate unexpected creativity in the field of writing. Applying different methods of limitations to one's writing may lead to quicker and more effective results. One way to promote this creativity within writing is by applying specific constraints through the field of Oulipo, a movement combining algorithmic methods and literature. I will be researching and then writing my own Oulipo to see if it is an effective mode for writing, specifically for amateur poets. I will then consider Oulipo in the context of free verse poetry. By creating my own portfolio of poems that directly compare Oulipo poetry to free verse poetry, I will uncover the effectiveness of relying on constraint in writing, rather than just inspiration. I hope this creative endeavor adds to the field of Oulipo and reveals an amateur poet's experience of writing under poetic constraint, and shows, through comparison, the different outcome of poetry with constraint versus poetry without constraint.

Introduction:

Constraint in one's writing can oftentimes be an effective technique for activating creativity. Innovative ideas that might otherwise never be accessed can rise to counteract a situation that is full of limitations. In poetry specifically, there are poems written within certain restrictions, and other poems entirely free of constraint. Considering poems in both forms can help lead to a better understanding of how restrictive methods lead to inspiration. The main restrictive form I will be looking at is *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or *Workshop for Potential Literature*, which offers a source of poetry that uses mathematical and algorithmic limitation (Fournel, 2017). The shortened term for this movement is known as Oulipo. Another form I will be considering is free verse poetry, which has no set rules in its structuring or wording. Since many successful literary pieces have arisen from the pressures of finite rules, I want to further consider the effectiveness of this method by comparing it to free verse poetry. Many users of Oulipo claim that the more constraints one has within writing a piece of work, say a poem, the easier it is to unleash creativity (Frank, 2017). Since Oulipo is a fairly recent movement, that has a strict set of rules, I want to research this topic more in depth. I want to evaluate both the process and outcome of Oulipo. I will be specifically looking at Oulipo as an effective mode of writing, specifically for amateur poets when it is pitted against free verse poetry.

Background:

In 1960, a group of enthused French literary specialists and mathematicians came together to create *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*. The founders of this literary movement were Frenchmen Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais (Olivier Julien, 2015). They were interested in using constraint to instigate creativity. For example, Oulipo refers to a

poem that is written entirely without the letter “a”, or a poem where every noun is replaced with the word that is seven slots down from it in the dictionary. Basically, they wanted to simplify the creative process by removing inspiration and replacing it with limitation. In a span of fifty-seven years, Oulipo has been the catalyst for the creation of many literary books, poems, and artworks that are popular today. Among these renowned works include the popular novel “If on a winter’s night a traveler” by Italo Calvino and “Exercises in Style” by Raymond Queneau (Scott Esposito, 2011). One of the main contributors to the field of Oulipo is from the French writer, Raymond Queneau. Since he essentially co-founded Oulipo, his work represents key elements of this movement. His book, *Exercises in Style* writes the same exact story over and over again in multiple different ways. For example, he writes different versions of a story about a man on a bus both philosophically, telegraphically, and mathematically (Fournel 147). He also writes the same story as a sonnet and as a letter. He uses a range of literary styles to tell the same story in ninety-nine different ways, showing that even if one uses different methods of communication, the same story can still get across to the audience. Queneau’s contributions enabled many other authors such as Italo Calvino and contemporary poets to create a wide array of literature that is all considered to be Oulipian writings. Poets today still experiment with Oulipo, as seen in the numerous blog posts revolving around aspiring poets trying out Oulipo (Eric McDowell, 2013). Even though Oulipian works have been created, as demonstrated in the works of founders and poets interested in this field, I want to take this a step further by using my own writing to see how effective and different Oulipo is compared to free verse poetry. There is little discussion about the differences between the two poetic forms so I will be researching, analyzing, learning, and incorporating Oulipian rules into my own writing.

Method:

Since I will be specifically focusing on creating my own poetry for my research project, I would like to first expand my knowledge on Oulipian thought through research and travel. I intend to locate a range of poems all written in Oulipian style and possibly meet the authors of these poems in person. Although many of Oulipo's most influential contributors have passed away, many knowledgeable scholars still exist today that can offer experiences and solid knowledge on their writing habits and experience with Oulipo. Since France is the birthplace of Oulipo, I would travel there to be in the presence of the culture that started this movement. I want to experience "Oulipo Thursdays" which occur nine times yearly. They occur in the Jussieu Amphitheatre in Paris. I can then listen to reading at the "Très Grande Bibliothèque François Mitterrand." I can also speak to people who have attended these events by reaching out by email as well as in person conversation or interviews. Through travel, I can embrace the French roots of Oulipo and contribute to the field as an American exploring poetry, especially for a field that started out only in French. After the bulk of my research has been completed, I will then move on to the writing aspect of my project. I will practice on Shakespearean poems and alter them by turning them into a poem that uses Oulipo constraint (Berkman, 2017). They will change from their original format, which will make them interesting to compare with their new format. Then I will be writing five poems, all enacting different types of constraints. The five constraints I have decided upon are the "S+7" where I will replace every noun, and another "S+7" constraint where I will replace every verb (Pereira, 2005). I will also make a Lipogram where I do not use the letter "e", another Lipogram where I do not use the letter "a", and a Snowball poem (Hass 376). Alongside each poem, I will also write a free verse poem that contains no constraints, as a basis for comparison.

Final Product:

By the end of my research project, I hope to have created a poetry portfolio that is a physical documentation of both poetry free of constraint and poetry trapped inside constraint. Although the work will be written by me, it will have traces of techniques used by the famous Raymond Queneau or even inspired by professors on Loyola Marymount University's campus in the English department who have written Oulipo. My own work can intuitively reflect all that I learned by studying their poems. Upon further research, I may even be able to submit my portfolio to upcoming Oulipo competitions and conferences. The product of my work will answer my question of the difficulties of producing work under such strict constraints, especially for someone who generally prefers free verse poetry that lacks all rules.

Conclusion:

In my research proposal, I am specifically interested in how different types of constraint applied to poetry may activate creativity while writing. Oulipo is a field of writing full of opportunities that is ironically defined by its limitations in writing. I want to demonstrate how Oulipo expands creativity by creating my own set of poems directly inspired by studying Oulipian methods as well as analyzing numerous poems published as Oulipo's works. I will use current published Oulipian works as examples for my own writing. I also intend to take famous poems, specifically Shakespeare's most well-known sonnets, apply Oulipian rules to them, and see how constraints alter a well-established poem. By combining both instruction and physical examples, I will create a portfolio contributing to this field of literature. In my portfolio, I will include a free verse poem, as well as that poem with an Oulipian lens. For example, I will use the same topic and message, roughly the same words, and see how drastically the poems alter in meaning. By creating this portfolio, I hope to analyze how two poems written about the

same thing can be different through word choice alone, resulting in an exploration of creativity occurring from being limited versus creativity occurring from being unrestricted.

Budget:

Transportation:

- Roundtrip flight from LAX to XZI then XZI to LAX Approximately \$1,376
- Bus Fare Approximately \$300

Housing:

- Hotel Diana (73 rue Saint Jacques | 5 Arr, 75005) Approximately \$500

Meals:

- Spending \$50 a day Approximately \$250

Portfolio Supplies:

- Portfolio Cover and Paper Approximately \$25

Grand Total:

Approximately \$2,051

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