THE GAMES WE PLAY: LOOKING AT OULIPIAN AND ALEATORY APPROACHES TO WRITING

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Creative Writing

University of Washington
2015

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree: English Department

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Abstract

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This paper seeks to explore and critique aleatoric approaches in the creative process, specifically chance operations, Oulipo techniques, Surrealist exercises and Bernstein's 66 experiments. The paper examines whether language experiments are really just a matter of chance and posits that contemporary poets approach language experiments differently than the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E, Oulipo, and Surrealist poets. The research illustrates the ways in which language experiments (erasure, homolinguistic translation, exquisite corpse, abecedarian, acrostic) and traditional forms (sonnet, sestina, villanelle) are dissimilar. I argue that the very essence of what makes a poem a poem is choice, highlighting the ways our meaning-making as writers and readers seems to hinge on this concept.

This new poetry wears its sincerity on its sleeve…yet no one means a word of it. Come to think of it, no one's really written a word of it. It's been grabbed, cut, pasted, processed, machined, honed, flattened, repurposed, regurgitated, and reframed from the great mass of free-floating language out there just begging to be turned into poetry.

--Kenneth Goldsmith

Poetry is the enemy of chance, in spite of also being the daughter of chance and knowing that, in the last resort, chance will win the battle.
--Italo Calvino

Purposelessness is not meaninglessness.

--Dean Young

Last November, on the first Thursday of the month, a group of thirty-six writers and mathematicians met in Paris at the Forum des Images, Bibliothèque Nationale de France with an immutable agenda: creation and rumination (Henry Matthews, MIT reading). Since its inception in 1960, the OuLiPo group has participated in over 640 such monthly meetings, which its members have affectionately termed "OuLiPo Thursdays". Founded by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, the OuLiPo stands for **OU**vroir de **LI**ttérature **PO**tentielle, or Workshop of Potential Literature. It consists of writers and mathematicians who invent, reinvent and experiment with different types of formal constraints. Often, these formal constraints are based in mathematical equations, but they needn't necessarily be, as in the case of George Perec's *La Disparition*, a detective novel written entirely without the letter "e" (Poucel). With a regularity that remains unparalleled in other groups, participants of the OuLiPo are highly organized; and yet, they do not take themselves too seriously. They do not, for instance, meet together with the aim to create literature, poetic or otherwise. They do, however, collectively create poetic constraints with which to later utilize in the hope of producing

literary work. It is in this way that the stakes of these OuLiPian meetings are intentionally low. They are simply a means of discussing and collaborating on *approaches to one's creative work* without judgment and with a certain air of playfulness. It is this playfulness, in particular, that has attracted its membership and has allowed its participants to ruminate on philosophical questions about the creative choices that writers bring to their work.

Since its foundation, the OuLiPo have been met with a mixed reception. The inherent playfulness towards its ambition, its seeming repudiation of poetic choice, and its focus on the creative process rather than its product are just some of the reasons that critics have found the OuLiPo suspect (Poucel). Poet and critic Marjorie Perloff, in her book *Unoriginal Genius*, tackles this opposition by examining the ways in which deterministic experiments, such as those formulated in OuLiPo, along with other aleatory processes, such as those found in surrealist and LANGUAGE experiments, produce work that is surprisingly more personal than hermetic. At the crux of her argument, Perloff explains that these practices provide "a defeat of reader expectation—a kind of cognitive dissonance—[that]is central to these poems." (Perloff 9). The aim of this paper is to understand the ways in which unconventional writing practices including, but not limited to, formal constraints, chance operations, and textual collage are built on a rich tradition of language experimentation that broaden possibilities for poetic sincerity instead of disavowing them.

Choice, Framing, Reconfiguration

Words such as “technique”, “construction”, and “craft” are often used to describe the poet’s task. The question at hand, then, is what happens when the act of “crafting” a poem, based on a presupposed idea or mood, is subsumed in favor of a poetic experiment? OuLiPo, Dada, Surrealist, and LANGUAGE poets have variant responses to this question, based on the nature of their individual experiments; however, each group places choice, framing, and reconfiguration *as a secondary stage* in the creative writing process. While critics may dismiss such practices as unpractical and unproductive, this misunderstanding is based on the assumption that experimental writing abandons authorial choice altogether. In fact, these concerns are extremely important to experimental poets, but choice, framing and reconfiguration are addressed in the editing process, rather than the generative process.

Although not associated with any experimental movement, Dean Young eloquently states the problem of choice in his book *The Art of Recklessness*, “Clarity results from the intensity of choice. Meaninglessness results from not too little but too much meaning. A string of randomly selected words is a site of nearly unlimited interpretations generating only vagaries because no decision has been made.” (Young 91) In order to fully understand the dichotomy that Young is creating between clarity and meaning, it is necessary to interpret Young’s understanding of these terms. Here, it seems that Young is identifying clarity as closely related with conscious strategy on the part of the author since he states that “clarity results from the intensity of choice.” While he doesn’t explicitly state as such, Young’s interpretation of clarity is akin to the “clarity

of self-consciousness”, as defined by D.H. Tracy in his essay “Six Types of Clarity”. In this type of clarity, the author constructs “tends to militate against puzzle-like elements, purely stylistic displays, and inertia of argument.” It seems then, that Young is referencing an author’s conscious choice to mitigate “puzzle-like elements” while also trying to thwart an “inertia of argument” that would otherwise produce predictability within the poem. When an author makes such choices, clarity *does* result from the intensity of choice. It is this self-conscious choice on the author’s part that allows for meaning. It seems that “meaning” for Young is singular. While a poem’s meaning can be difficult to ascertain, it should not be too ambiguous to allow for multifarious interpretations or utter confusion within a poem. As Young aptly points out, a balance between choice and chance must be struck for a poem to resonate with its reader. This challenge is an old one that is not particular to experimental poets. While Romantic, Confessional, or narrative poets would begin writing a poem with an idea of what the subject of the poem will be (nature, personal experience, or a situational event, for example), experimental poets *do not consciously have an idea of the poem’s subject before writing the poem*. Instead, they allow the constraint or experiment under which they are writing to dictate the language of the poem and save the authorial choices that would shape a subject for the editing stage. Although it is true that some suspension of one’s inner critic is necessary for any writer—experimental or otherwise—when writing early drafts of a poem, experimental poets tend to privilege choices in the formation of the constraint (which I will discuss at length later in this essay) or the editing process more than the drafting process. The larger question then becomes, Why privilege one stage more than another at this point in literary history? This is a question that I believe

can be explored by examining certain poetry experiments individually in order to fully comprehend the ways that meaning-making is shaped, rather than constructed, in this type of writing.

Procedural writing with the OuLiPo

It is important to clarify some misconceptions about OuLiPo before launching into an examination of its procedures. Constrained writing is not synonymous with formalism or rule-based writing. While poets utilize formal techniques such as rhyme, meter, stanzas often enough, these approaches are not constraints for they are a part of the usual techniques that shape our ideas of poetry. A “constraint” for OuLiPian poets is a supplementary rule and is always more than a convention. (Baetens 115) Formal techniques found in poetry structures such as the sonnet or pantoum are often utilized and understood by most poets. For instance, when one writes an end-rhymed couplet, one is handling a formal technique commonly found in poetry. It is a technique employed in order to heighten the musicality of a poem, reinforce a point within a poem, or provide closure within a stanza. However, it is not a constraint in the OuLiPian sense because one is not *writing against the conventions of poetry* by using it. Furthermore, an end-rhymed couplet is not a technique that is generative in-and-of itself. While it may help shape the preconceived ideas within a poem, it does not generate the language of the poem in its execution. Second, OuLiPo constraints, while often confused with chance operations, are very much its opposite. As OuLiPo member Claude Berge argues, “the OuLiPo is anti-chance”. (Poucel) This logic makes sense, considering the fact that a constraint is in

principle *self-chosen*, and therefore is not subject to chance on the onset of its generation. For OuLiPians, there is nothing random about writing under constraint. While the choice of OuLiPian constraint is arbitrary, its execution is never accidental, as the constraints are very calculated. Most OuLiPian constraints have long histories peopled by illustrious precursors, dubbed "plagiarists by anticipation" in OuLiPian theory. (Poucel) Finally, while OuLiPo constraints sometimes yield promising results, the OuLiPo aim is not to produce a poem. (Matthews, Pennsound) Instead, the impetus behind constrained writing is to produce unexpected language that later can be used in other creative work. Though OuLiPian texts, such as Perec's *La Disparition* or Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (which will be discussed in depth later) systematically adhere to their constraints throughout, most OuLiPian constraints are considered a stepping-stone in the creative process. In this way, the "creation" process mentioned earlier is actually a collaboration of ideas and possible constraints, not to be confused with the creation of literary work, hence its suitable title, "Workshop of Potential Literature".

Potentiality is essential for the OuLiPian project, but the importance of the resulting text should not be ignored either. In its early years, the OuLiPo group consisted mainly of a group of friends whose shared distaste for mainstream literature (primarily Confessionalist poets), and their shared love of experiment for experiment's sake. (Baetens 117) When George Perec arrived in 1967, and publically declared membership, his presence became the catalyst for other authors to publish OuLiPian texts, including notable members such as Jacques Roubaud, Italo Calvino, Harry Matthews, and Oskar Pastior. It was Perec's emergence onto the OuLiPo scene that spurred the movement from theoretical (the composition of constraints) to potential (the trial and execution of such

constraints in practice). Responding to a sense of overwrought sentimentality in Confessionalists, and the "undisciplined" writing practices of The Surrealists, OuLiPians wanted to provide innovative ways of writing that were unexpected, carefully crafted, and not impeded by a poetic subject. Ironically, "it is the constraint, OuLiPians have argued from the first, that forces the artist to give up an illusionary artistic 'freedom' in favor of what Roubaud calls 'the freedom of the difficulty mastered'". (Perloff 81)

Under these circumstances, critics of the OuLiPo feared that without a sense of coherence beyond their formal constraint, OuLiPian texts risked becoming nonsense poems. While there are numerous examples of OuLiPian texts that prove contrary to this fear, I will focus on two contemporary examples that I believe adeptly adhere to OuLiPian constraint and retain a sense of sincerity in their subject matters.

Christian Bök could be considered an unofficial member of the OuLiPo, for all the praise his book *Eunoia* has received from OuLiPians and critics alike. These are his opening paragraphs of his final comments on *Eunoia*:

> "Eunoia" is the shortest word in English to contain all five vowels, and the word quite literally means "beautiful thinking". *Eunoia* is a univocal lipogram, in which each chapter restricts itself to the use of a single vowel. *Eunoia* is directly inspired by the exploits of OuLiPo (*l'Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle*) –the avante-guarde coterie renowned for its literary experimentation with extreme formalistic constraints. The text makes a Sisyphean spectacle of labour, willfully crippling its language in order to show that, even under such improbable conditions of duress, language can still express an uncanny, if not sublime, thought.
>
> *Eunoia* abides by many subsidiary rules. All chapters must allude to the art of writing. All chapters must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage. All sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism. The text must exhaust the lexicon for each vowel, citing at least 98% of the available repertoire (although a few words do go unused, despite efforts to include them: parallax, belvedere, gingivitis, monochord, and tumulus). The text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary (so that, ideally, no word appears more than once). The letter Y is suppressed.

It is notable that here, Bök acknowledges that he is putting extreme stress on language, and that this stress is the very reason that he is able to achieve "uncanny, if not sublime, thought". Additionally, Bök utilizes more than one formal constraint in his writing in order to shape the coherence of its content. While it would be a feat in and of itself to write a lipogram, he had the foresight to predict that in order to achieve cohesion, he must create additional restraints about the content, which is why each chapter must describe certain scenes, and each sentence must accent internal rhyme. The rule that "the text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary" is essential to the OuLiPo spirit, as it forces the writer to constantly search for new vocabulary, instead of resting on old, redundant verbiage. In this way, Bök is able to arrive to language and thought in ways he wouldn't have imagined had he not utilized OuLiPian constraints. Here is the opening poem of the book:

> Awkward grammar appalls a craftsman. A Dada bard
> as daft as Tzara damns stagnant art and scrawls an
> alpha (a slapdash arc and a backward zag) that mars
> all stanzas and jams all ballads (what a scandal). A
> madcap vandal crafts a small black ankh—a hand-
> stamp that can stamp a wax pad at last plant a mark
> that sparks an *ars magna* (an abstract art that charts a
> phrasal anagram). A pagan skald charts a dark saga
> (a Mahabharata), as a papal cabal blackballs all annals
> and tracts, all dramas and psalms: Kant and Kafka,
> Marx and Marat. A law as harsh as a *fatwa* bans all
> paragraphs that lack an A as standard hallmark.

Essentially, the above poem is an ars poetica in two respects. First, Bök has chosen to describe the act of writing. The opening line, "Awkward grammar appalls a craftsman" gestures at the inherent problem when writing within constraints: a poet is always at risk of confusing the readers when adhering to the established rules. Secondly, poems written

under OuLiPian constraints are inherently ars poetica poems, because of the OuLiPian axiom “a text written according to a constraint, describes the constraint.”(Roubaud qtd. by Perloff 97) We understand the above poem as an event in language *because* it is operating under rules that highlight its constraint. This informs our understanding of the poem and also our pleasure of the poem, because the univocal lipogram lends itself to assonance.

Furthermore, the poem’s constraint allows Bök to utilize language that he probably otherwise wouldn’t under normal circumstances. Here, Bök clearly does not see the constraint as entirely an *obstacle* (although, admittedly it must be at least some of the time), but as a *springboard* for the subsequent idea. In this way, the unexpected word becomes the trigger for the next line. Notice the way that “an abstract art that charts a phrasal anagram” triggers the following line “a pagan skald charts a dark saga”. This is a direct result of the repetition of the word “chart” and because “abstract art” sounds so similar to the “ancient art” of paganism. In this manner, far from becoming nonsensical, when OuLiPian constraint is used carefully, the resulting text has the ability to amuse and amaze its readers.

Another poet who should be considered an honorary member of the OuLiPo is Harryette Mullen for her book, *Sleeping With The Dictionary*, which was nominated for a National Book Award. Although the book is not entirely composed of poems that follow OuLiPo constraints, the entire book keeps with the OuLiPian tradition of “plagiarism by anticipation” (Poucel). Hoke S. Glover II in *Black Issues Book Review* said of her book, “This is her art: to reconstruct, redefine and create out of splicing and stitching back together the pieces of meaning in language." (Glover 63). The book is filled with styles

ranging from rewrites of classics (notably two re-workings of a Shakespearian sonnet) and abecedarian structures. However, she utilizes the N+7 constraint in many of her poems, a signature OuLiPian constraint wherein all of the original nouns in a choice of text are replaced with the seventh noun following the original in the dictionary.

When considering the problem of choice within a constraint, it is interesting to specifically consider the N+7 rule, as there are some choices to be made about the constraint before it can be executed. First, one must decide whether to follow the N+7 rule strictly, or perform a variation of that rule (N-7, for example) in which the author finds the seventh word *preceding* the original noun. While this choice may be arbitrary for most poets, variations of this kind can sometimes yield more fruitful results, based on the original noun. Mullen employs both the N+7 and the N-7 constraints in her book of poems, and even shifts between N+7 and N-7 within a singular poem. Another important OuLiPian choice is the choice of a dictionary. Of course the resulting text will be dramatically altered based on the choice in dictionary, but the choice of dictionary may also speak to an author's political agenda—if there is one—within the poem. The classification of dictionaries is varied taking into account the density of entries, the number of languages involved, the nature of entries (lexical only or also encyclopedic), the arrangement of entries (alphabetical, semantic, or casual), and intended audience. If one chooses a larger dictionary, such as the OED, the chances of the seventh word being a variation of the original word is very high, given the amount of dictionary entries. Similarly, a Merriam Webster dictionary may produce a word entirely unlike its original, because it contains fewer entries. In the generation process, it isn't necessarily bad for a poet to experiment with various dictionaries, to see which one produces the better poem.

As OuLiPian constraint is a generative technique, it is up to the writer to determine how strictly to follow the rules. Sometimes, strictly following the N+7 rule will yield truly remarkable results. However, most of the time, authors will choose to alter the original text around the replaced word in the editing process to form a cohesive text. The purpose of this procedure, like all OuLiPo constraints, is to play with language in a way to provide a cognitive dissonance that calls attention to its constraint. For Mullen, the breakage in the constraint is just as important as the constraint itself:

> "I was reading Warren Motte's book, *OuLiPo: A Primer of Potential Literature*. I was interested in the idea of potential literature because I was trying out different ways to write prose poems, and I valued their investigation of different ways to generate or alter a literary text. I'm also interested in the ludic aspects of language and literature, the idea of playing a game with rules that can be broken. For me it was important to break the rules in a selective or systematic way. By breaking those rules selectively and systematically we create alternate meanings in poetry. I'm paraphrasing Michael Riffaterre in *Semiotics of Poetry*. When we read the poem the first time we are reading for referential meaning; but as we read, we notice what he calls "ungrammaticality." The poem deviates from standard usage. The poet deliberately and persistently breaks linguistic rules, so that if we look at how the rules are broken they point in a certain direction. We are distracted from literal, denotative, or referential meaning and pointed towards the metaphorical, connotative, or poetic signification. We comprehend poetry by paying attention to those places where the rules are broken. Those are signals to shift from literal to non-literal interpretation." (Mullen, interview in *Not Enough Night)*

Unlike Bök, who chooses to adhere to the lipogram throughout the text, Mullen's approach is less strict, although nonetheless calculated. She rightly points out that in order to truly adhere to the spirit of OuLiPian innovation, one must not mechanically follow all the rules. The disruption of readerly expectation arises when we attend to the "ungrammaticality" of a poem. For Mullen, the OuLiPo constraint is more of an aid in the creative process, and not a measuring stick by which a poem can be evaluated. Take, for instance, the following part of "Any Lit":

You are a ukulele beyond my microphone
You are a Yukon beyond my Micronesia
You are a union beyond my meiosis
You are a unicycle beyond my migration
You are a universe beyond my mitochondria
You are a Eucharist beyond my Miles Davis
You are a euphony beyond my myocardiogram
You are a unicorn beyond my Minotaur
You are a eureka beyond my maitai
You are a Yuletide beyond my minesweeper
You are a euphemism beyond my myna bird
You are a unit beyond my mileage
You are a Yugoslavia beyond my mind's eye
You are a yoo-hoo beyond my minor key
You are a Euripides beyond my mime troupe

When writing within an N(+/-)7 constraint, some creative choices must be made before the procedural writing can begin. For this poem, Mullen carefully chose *The American Heritage Dictionary* for political as well as utilitarian reasons. In an interview with Barbara Henning, Mullen explains that her choice in a dictionary was a chance to comment on the ways that "African Americans have been associated with illiteracy and a lack of intellectual development. I'm often making an effort to recognize and resist the bias that is built into language through a history of accumulated associations." (Henning) By choosing the *AHD* as a source text, she specifically locates the racial tension inherent in American language and American values. While this choice is not made transparent in the book, it nevertheless subtly contributes to our understanding of Mullen's work.

Additionally, Mullen uses the N(+/-)7 constraint for most of the words in the second part of her line (words that begin with "m"). She knows that this may produce some unconventional results, and therefore she has chosen to ground the poem in anaphora. This choice not only strengthens the poem sonically, but also creates a cohesive thread throughout. The first metaphors of each line (ukulele, for instance) all

begin with the sound of “you”, while the second metaphors (microphone) begin with the sound of “my”. These sonic choices seemed to have been intentionally established as additional constraints even before the poem is created. In this way, they reinforce the boundaries Mullen establishes between the characters of “other” and “self” in the poem.

Although some choices about how to handle the N+7 constraint were decided before Mullen even began writing the poem, most of her decisions occurred after she had followed the constraint. Beginning with the first line, which was self-generated, each sequential line was formed based on the word “microphone”. Following the syntax of the initial line, Mullen created a parallel syntax with the phrase “You are a ______ beyond my ______”. Then, she found the seventh word preceding “microphone” in the *AHD*, which is “Micronesia”, and wrote the second line based around this word. In this fashion, Mullen shaped her poem based on the word that the N(+/-)7 constraint produced. Consequently, her poem vexes and pleases readers with its surprising logic.

As evidenced by Bök and Mullen, constraint-based writing does not abandon authorial choice for the sake of its rules. It simply puts stress on choices of form so that the author is granted the freedom to make paratactic leaps in language. OuLiPians, and others who practice their constraints, find that this type of procedural writing is a superior form of freedom because it guarantees innovations that are unthinkable without the use of constraints. (Baetans) While this may seem counterintuitive in a culture that defines freedom as the absence of all constraints and rules, it continues to be a radical approach towards writing that is practiced by many contemporary poets, regardless of any official affiliation with the OuLiPo group.

CHANCE OPERATIONS WITH THE DADAISTS & SURREALISTS

For the purpose of this paper, it is helpful to look at the similarities between Dadaist and Surrealist exercises and their affinity of chance as an operational tool. This comparison is by no means a conflation of the two movements, and I am not trying to suggest that Dadaists are synonymous with Surrealist writers. However, as with most consecutive movements, Dadaists and Surrealists have some homogeneity in their approach towards aleatoric writing.

As mentioned earlier, OuLiPo constraints are often confused with chance operational procedures. While antithetical to each other in many respects, OuLiPian constraints and chance operations are alike in the fact that they both try to resist traditional methods of writing through experimental approaches. Much like poetic constraint, the purpose of chance operations is to play against the poet's intentions and ego (which will be discussed at length later in this essay), while creating unusual syntax and images. Both value the play of the imagination over the poem that is written with an agenda at hand. Both take a playful approach to their practices. Both value the imaginative turn over a formed logic. But it is here that all likeness ends, for chance operations is a form of aleatory writing, while OuLiPo is essentially anti-aleatory.

As Perloff so accurately points out, "art defines itself by its struggle with its immediate past" (Perloff 163) Thus, the OuLiPo was partially a response to the writing practices of the Surrealists and Dadaists, who courted the mystique of the accidental. For these groups, randomness was not only fundamental but also inevitable in any creative writing. It was inevitable, because for Dadaists and Surrealists, writing is never really under authorial control, and will always be subjected to the random associations that a

reader imposes on it. In this way, language is considered fake, inauthentic, and counterfeit. Surrealists and Dadaists approached language through "negative use", namely the attempt to reject all known rules and usages, in order to highlight language's artificiality and urge readers to make associative connections between their juxtapositions. To practice Surrealist and Dadaist language experiments, one must be "against writing", and consider the refusal of words as the most ideal form of real writing. (Baetens 121) Hence, the abdication of authorial control and the espousal of chance operations.

Chance operations take many forms, but probably the most utilized experiment is the "cut-up" technique, as explained in manifesto by Tristen Tzara, entitled "To Make a Dadaist Poem":

- Take a newspaper.
- Take a pair of scissors.
- Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
- Shake it gently.
- Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
- Copy conscientiously.
- The poem will be like you.

And here are you a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

So much of our understanding of the cut-up technique can be gleaned from Tzara's thoughtful word choice in this manifesto. For instance, consider the word "conscientiously" and its implications. On the one hand, Tzara could be instructing the writer to copy the words meticulously or painstakingly. However, this understanding of "conscientious" does not really make sense when considering the nature of the instruction, as copying a word that has been plucked from a bag does not take much

effort. It is perhaps the case that Tzara is instructing the writer to copy the words according to an inner sense of what seems right or principled, which is a secondary definition of "conscientious". So although the previous instruction tells the writer to "take out the scraps in the order in which they left the bag", the "copying" process is more like the "editing" process during which a writer can shape the poem to make logical sense. In the case of cut-ups, poems are "written" once the words are pulled from the bag, leaving the juxtaposition of language up to chance, and then edited conscientiously. One can also see the playful nature of Tzara's manifesto in the phrase "shake gently". Of course, the resulting text will have the same level of randomness, regardless of whether the writer shakes the bag gently or vigorously. By including the adjective "gently" into this manifesto, Tzara seems to be making a larger statement about the fragility of language. The final few lines are arguably the most poetic out of the poem and embody the statement that Tzara is trying to make about nature of an author and an author's writing. According to Tzara, "the poem will be like you" because human thought and experience is associative. For example, if one was to ask "how was your day" and we told that person the things that we did (did the laundry, went to work, cooked a meal), we are always leaving out our various moods, stream of consciousness, and memories that shaped that day. Our words can never accurately explain our experiences. In this way, language fails us, and for Tzara, the only way to achieve some semblance of accuracy is to mimic in language (associative randomness or extreme parataxis) that we experience in our daily human experiences. The last word of the manifesto is also the most loaded word. One can best interpret the word "vulgar" by its definition of "lack of good breeding or taste". In this sense, Tzara is arguing that those who do not see the merit in his

approach have bad taste in poetry because of their ignorance. Italo Calvino reinforces Tzara's sentiment in *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, "Poetry is the enemy of chance, in spite of also being the daughter of chance and knowing that, in the last resort, chance will win the battle." (qtd in Hirsch,15) Calvino's statement makes sense in the context of Tzara's manifesto because the cut-up technique is a way of consciously creating a poem, but its language is ultimately determined by chance. Based on the language of Tzara's manifesto, one can easily see that Tzara is making an argument about the nature of poetic language—that letters and words are essentially arbitrary signifiers that together can produce surprising, silly, and often remarkable results. By positing poetry as a playful game of randomness, Tzara highlights the materiality of language and our stymied associations with it in its more formal practices.

Surrealists, like Dadaists, cherished poetry games because they believed that games or exercises could free the subconscious of the writer without authorial censorship. One such game that was extremely popular for Surrealists was the Exquisite Corpse. While there are many variations of the Exquisite Corpse, the writing practice is always a collaborative one. Exquisite Corpse is played by two or more people, each of whom writes a word on a sheet of paper, folds the paper to conceal it, and passes it on to the next player for his or her contribution. André Breton writes that the game developed at the residence of friends in an old house at 54 rue du Chateau, and the name "Exquisite Corpse" comes from the first time André Breton, Benjamin Perét, and Marcel Duchamp played the game: "The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine." (Brotchie 143) The only hard and fast rule of Exquisite Corpse is that each participant is unaware of what the others have written, thus producing a surprising—sometimes absurd—yet often dynamic

poem. In order to retain some semblance of coherence, players may choose to situate the poem around a sentence structure of "adjective, noun, verb, adjective, noun." Guilluame Apollinaire coined the term "surréaliste" in 1917 to suggest a dramatic attempt to break through the limits of an agreed-upon "reality". The leading idea behind the movement was that poetic playfulness, whether practiced through automatic writing, writing collages, or Exquisite Corpse, could free the mind from the shackles of rational logic and allow the writer to explore the associative logic of the subconscious mind. (Hirsch, *surrealism*, 621) It makes sense that the Surrealists would privilege the subconscious mind over their rational mind in response to Leninist thinkers who were dominated by control, order, and discipline. Although not overtly political in their agenda, Surrealism was in part a reaction against what its members saw as the destruction wrought by the "rationalism" that had guided European culture and politics in the past and had culminated in the horrors of World War I. (Sakolsky 105) Also, this literary movement also was burgeoning on the heels of Romanticism. Although Romanticism did not value rationalism, it did ground its aesthetic in poetic interiority and feeling, two concepts that were unimportant to Surrealist writers who were interested in a collective imagination. Collaboration, especially in the practice of Exquisite Corpse writing, was venerated among surrealists because it called authorship into question, it allowed for free association between ideas, and it allowed its form (adj., noun, verb) dictate its content, rather than a preconceived subject. Like Dadists, Surrealists also believed in the possibilities of chance, as exemplified when the French poet Comte de Lautréamont calls something "Beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table". (Lautréamont qtd. by Hirsch 621)

SINCERITY VERSUS SENTIMENTALITY

Having examined a few of the writing practices espoused by OuLiPians, Dadaists, and Surrealists, one is left with the fundamental question: Why would a writer find it imperative to undermine both the personal ego and poetic intentions within a poem in the first place? This is an interesting query to consider both in its historical context, and also in relation to its contemporary configurations. At the crux of this discussion, the issue of sincerity arises. When I refer to "sincerity" in this paper, I am exactly evoking Lionel Trilling's definition, which is "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling". I am also recalling the Keatsian understanding of "the true voice of feeling". (Trilling and Keats qtd. by Hirsch 585) Sincerity, at least for my purposes, is closely synonymous with an author's feeling or personal experience. I say "author" specifically, because I am not talking about poems that induce affect within the reader (although experimental poems *can*) or poems that have earnestness in the fictive speaker's voice. If I were, then I would have to include persona poems, modernist poems, dramatic monologues, and a whole host of other poems that are not relevant to this discussion. I am interested in the relationship between poetry that espouses aleatoric or OuLiPian practices in order to undercut the sincerity of the authorial voice. As mentioned earlier, the OuLiPo group formed because its members were bored with poetry that they deemed to be predictable and overwrought with sentimentality. OuLiPo poets formed their group in 1960, at a time when Confessionalism was in vogue in American poetry. Similarly, the Surrealist poets formed in part as a direct response to their Romantic predecessors. Romantic poets and Confessionalist poets, although dissimilar in countless ways, both valued sincerity very

highly within their respective aesthetics. Instead of allowing authorial feeling dictate the language around a poetic subject, OuLiPian constraints such as N+7 or aleatoric cut-up practices were alternative exercises meant to guide an author through the writing of a poem. These poetic exercises not only challenged writerly expectations of how one should approach a poem, but also how a reader should consume a poem. After all, if one OuLiPo member invents a constraint, and another writer follows it, should we then consider the resulting text a form of collaborative work? In any event, it was no longer assumed that the poet intended to create a certain kind of tone or mood. With experimental techniques, both the writer and reader could bask in the surprise of language and its uncanny resonances; less weight could be placed on discerning the exactitude of poetic intent. I do not mean to suggest that OuLiPian or aleatoric writing produces writing that is devoid of emotion, but rather, that the feeling within the poem is organic to its language and cannot necessarily be attributed to craft on the part of the author.

In contemporary writing practices, and specifically in my own creative writing, a balance must be struck between sincerity and experimentation, and aleatory practices are an excellent way to accomplish this harmony. In part, the practices of OuLiPians, Surrealist, and Dadaists is my object of fascination because I too, am looking for new language avenues for describing personal experiences that reach beyond my logical rationalizations. Often, I utilize writing constraints, collaborations, collage, and cut-ups as generative exercises to "write through" a subject that I have been contemplating. As with most writers who are interested in the history from which they are writing, I take what I like and leave the rest. Therefore, for me these exercises *are* subject to my authorial judgment in the end; a lot of my creating work is done in the editing process.

While my process isn't unique to those who heavily edit their work, it may be different from many writers who set out with a subject to write about. I usually start with a form, game, or constraint in mind first, and then fit the language of my poetry around it. By no means is all of my poetry written in way, but some of my strongest pieces in my manuscript have been crafted in this fashion. For instance, in the case of DSM-V, I began with the "hermit crab" exercise, a technique that I learned from Rick Barot. This is an exercise in which a writer co-opts the "shell" of another textual genre, typically one that is not poetic—the restaurant menu or instruction manual—and uses it as an organizing principle within the poetic work. This exercise piqued my interest for two reasons. First, it seemed like a playful approach to poetic form. While my manuscript focuses on serious matters of mental illness or dissolution of the family and empire, my approach to my writing practice is very playful. This disparity between approach and resulting text is an important one, because it allows me the freedom to be very messy in the drafting process. Sometimes, when we try to write about significant subjects, we are faced with the added burden (or the inner critic) that insists that our work must be equally serious. The hermit crab exercise provided a fresh way of examining the serious subject of depression without bringing to it laden, predictable, or histrionic imagery typically associated with mental illness. I do not think it was a coincidence, for instance, that this poem references many children's games (*olly-olly-oxen-free, Peter and the Wolf, Mother May I*), as I was already in a playful state of mind when writing it. In the context of the poem's subject, however, these game referents take on an ominous tone that seems fitting. Secondly, I enjoyed the fact that the hermit crab prompt had a built-in organizing principle. By organizing my thoughts around the form of an entry in the DSM-V manual, I was given

the freedom to be as fragmentary or as paratactic as I liked, given that each phrase would be read in relation to its organizing principle. Without the DSM-V's clinical subheadings, the poem risked being too vague about its subject matter. Additionally, I didn't feel the need to provide a narrative around the speaker's state of mind, because the organizing form didn't necessitate one. Finally, because the form was so clinical and dispassionate about depression, I was granted the luxury to be as sincere and passionate as I wished without fear of becoming overly sentimental or melodramatic.

Collaboration is also a quality that I find enlightening, both in my research and in my practice. In my manuscript, "You Kept Loving Something", "Promise to a Rapscallion", and "That Gentleman's Romantic Shadow" all are results of collaborative work. The first two poems are variations on the Exquisite Corpse. Each poem was written with one other author, and we didn't follow the structure of "adjective, noun, verb, adjective, noun". In fact, the organizing principle behind the poems was the couplet: I would write a couplet and only leave the second line visible to the other author. The secondary author would then form another couplet based on my visible line, and in turn, leave me with one of their lines. We proceeded this way until it was mutually decided that the last visible line seemed like an ending. The rules were that we could not look at previously written lines (even if they were at one time visible), and that each person had to return a piece of the poem within two days so that the energy and imagery of the poem remained fresh in our minds. "That Gentleman's Romantic Shadow" was generated word-by-word with another author. Using a voice recorder, each of us took turns coming up with the following word of the poem. This poem was formed through a rapid-fire collaboration in which neither of us knew what word would come next until its utterance.

Quickly, we would be forced to continue its logic, and we would often say the first word that came to mind. At any time, one of us could finish a poetic thought by saying aloud its punctuation (*period.*) When one of us felt that the poem was finished, we would end the poem by saying *"poem"*. I then transcribed the poem from the recording and edited it to my liking. All three poems were subsequently edited by me, although I did give permission to the other authors to edit the poems as they saw fit with the understanding that any editing done on their parts would result in separate poems. In this way, these writing exercises were *generative* and the resulting poems were actually written by me in the editing process.

I have tried my hand at the N+7 constraint, lippograms, flarf, collage, erasure, homolinguistic translation and a whole host of other exercises, some of which have been fruitful. Only some of the resulting poems are in my manuscript, and others have only yielded partial poetic phrases or nothing at all. All of these experiments have put pressure on my conventional notions of what language can and should do. It is perhaps beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the myriad of ways that collage, visual poetry, mistranslations, and erasure come from a rich tradition of experimentation that can be traced back to OuLiPian, Surrealist, Dadaist roots. However, anyone who reads my manuscript will see variations of these experiments present. My work, I hope does represent the "new poetry" that Goldsmith references because it is an amalgam of language that has been "grabbed, cut, pasted, processed, machined, honed, flattened, repurposed, regurgitated, and reframed from the great mass of free-floating language out there just begging to be turned into poetry." (Goldsmith qtd. by Perloff 162)

Poetic experiments, aleatory processes, and constraints essentially provide my poems with a counterbalance to sincerity. While I have noticed that a lot of contemporary poetry takes an ironic tone in order to tackle serious subject matter, my poetry “wears its sincerity on its sleeve”, as Kenneth Goldman would say. Irony can be a powerful tool to undercut sentimentality, but if utilized too much, it can come off as apathetic towards the subject at hand. I do not want my readership to misunderstand my work (*who does?*) as evasive, quirky, or merely clever because of irony. Therefore, I am sincere in my declarations about love, empire, and family knowing that my work is grounded in its form and in its meaningful literary history.

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