

"Freedom in Constraint"

Natalia Cecire, University of Sussex

The Oulipo, or *Ouvroir de la littérature potentielle*, is, as we have repeatedly been told, founded on a "paradox": aesthetic freedom, the Oulipians argue, lies in aesthetic constraint. Thus, therefore, the famous Oulipian constraints: the lipogram, which systematically avoids one or more letters of the alphabet; the $n + 7$ operation, which relies on the use of a dictionary to substitute lexical words with their neighbors seven words down; the metro poem, whose composition must take place during a subway ride. We are often told that this is a paradox: for example, the Oulipo scholar Warren Motte calls it "startling" and "strongly counterintuitive," a "seeming paradox," and the Oulipian Marcel Bénabou likewise calls it a "paradoxical effect."¹ But is it really such a paradox? Does it *blow our minds*? Maybe not.

For the Oulipo, "constraint" indicates a formal rule of any kind, whether the conventions that define the villanelle or the constraint that one's novel may not contain the letter "e." Bénabou argues that the rules that define generic conventions and the more arbitrary-seeming constraints imposed in Oulipian literature differ only in degree, not in kind, writing [quote]:

[P]eople accept the rule, they tolerate technique, but they refuse constraint. ... It is as if there were a hermetic boundary between two domains: the one wherein the observance of rules is a natural fact, and the one wherein the excess of rules is perceived as shameful artifice.

It is precisely this boundary, wholly arbitrary, that must be challenged.²

Bénabou insists, then, on a continuity between different kinds of constraining structures.³ Thus the "metro poem," which takes its structure from the number and placement of stops on your subway ride, translates city infrastructure into literary form.⁴ So when the Oulipians speak of "constraint" as generative or as a source of aesthetic freedom, they are indicating a wide range of forms, poetic, generic, institutional, and infrastructural, raising,

¹ Warren F. Motte, ed., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 13, 18; Marcel Bénabou, "Rule and Constraint," in *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, ed. Warren F. Motte (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 42. See also Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito, *The End of Oulipo?: An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2013), 1.

² Bénabou, "Rule and Constraint," 41.

³ One of Bénabou's favorite words in this essay is "passage." Insofar as constraint offers "a commodious way of passing from language to writing," as Bénabou puts it, it takes the form of what Sianne Ngai calls the "gimmick": it seems to be at once a labor-saving device and far too much work for what is produced by it. Bénabou, "Rule and Constraint," 41; Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (December 12, 2016): 472, doi:10.1086/689672.

⁴ Elkin and Esposito, *The End of Oulipo?*, 3. There is a difference between arbitrariness and randomness, and the Oulipian notion of constraint works to widen the difference, gathering arbitrariness away from aleatorics (against which the Oulipo has firmly set itself), and bring it to the side of structure, convention, genre, and even institution. See Motte, *Oulipo*, 17.

though rarely settling, questions about the relationship between literary forms and the social, institutional, and infrastructural contexts in which they have significance. To insist that the lipogram is as "valid" a literary form as the sestina is an anti-institutional gesture, asserting the equivalence less of the forms than of the histories and social uses that give the forms their meaning. That this is understood distinctly as a transgression is evidenced by Oulipians' constant invocation of unnamed dismissive critics. Understanding Oulipian constraint in this way helps to explain the group's transgressive power, or to put it another way, its violence. In contrast with the historical emergence and use of poetic forms, or even those forms' "invention," as Ezra Pound pseudoscientifically conceived of them, the *Ouvroir* has posited itself as a counterinstitution that can turn out equally "valid" forms as if on a lathe. The assertion, then, that Oulipian forms are just as good as any others, or more pointedly, that a failure to embrace Oulipian forms amounts to either a snobbery or a sentimentalism, and certainly a suspect traditionalism in either case, is a claim about social forms, and in particular, a claim about the conditions of literary production. Neither £500 a year nor a room of one's own is necessary or even desirable if you have an *ouvroir*.⁵

And so, to return to our supposed paradox of "freedom in constraint," I would suggest that we are looking at an argument as much about institutional form as about literary form; or, rather, it is an argument that implicitly relies on a translatability across the two. It is, moreover, an argument that I wish to suggest is intimately connected with the frequent charge—invoked, above all, by the Oulipians themselves—that Oulipian forms are "mere" games, and are therefore "juvenile." It is obvious that these terms are often meant pejoratively, and Oulipians certainly take them pejoratively, answering them with a mixture of defiance and pride. Bénabou's invocation of such charges is fairly typical:

Even the most kindly disposed critics pretend to see in the use of constraint nothing more than a game, rarely innocent but fundamentally vain. The only merit that they might accord to it is that it provides, for a few linguistic acrobats, for a few verbal jugglers, the circus in which they may display their virtuosity.⁶

Importantly, Oulipians have refused to repudiate the charges, instead preferring to revalue juvenility and games. Thus Raymond Queneau writes, [quote] "Surely, certain of our labors may appear to be mere pleasantries, or simple witticisms, analogous to certain parlor games. [But]let us remember that topology and the theory of numbers sprang in part from that which used to be called 'mathematical entertainments,' 'recreational mathematics.'"⁷

⁵ Elkin points out the gendered resonances of the "ouvroir." Elkin and Esposito, *The End of Oulipo?*, 77.

⁶ Bénabou, "Rule and Constraint," 40.

⁷ Motte, *Oulipo*, 22.

This is all to the good, of course, but in focusing on the goodness or badness of being juvenile, the Oulipians fail to address the substance of the characterization.⁸

So let's consider juvenility and games again. Games formally codify the notion of freedom in constraint, providing the stable grounds upon which play and diversion may take place. As Mark Seltzer has recently argued, the provisional zones of games, reenactment, and play figure not only of freedom but also autonomy, autopoietically determining their own grounds.⁹ Moreover, they are far from marginal or secondary arenas; on the contrary, Seltzer argues, such zones, whether explicitly given over to play, as in the amusement park, or notionally concerned with reality, as in the office, constitute what he calls "the official world," the world that is always being audited and that therefore has more sanctioned reality than any lived experience. Seltzer's key insight is that the space of play is not external to the institution; rather, it supplies the form of institutionality itself. In Seltzer's account of the official world, freedom in constraint is not a paradox; instead, constraint constitutes the condition of autopoiesis, and this situation is not rare or transgressive but rather the norm.

As Seltzer suggests, reenactment zones can notionally be inhabited by anyone, and indeed are typically inhabited by adults in the examples he gives. But there is nonetheless something powerfully juvenile about the game, not so much because of the ethnographic fact that children in our society often play games—whether of their own accord or because adults expect them to—but rather because the ideologies surrounding minor status supply an ideal figure of freedom in constraint. To put it another way, minorhood, however defined, always entails a complex relationship to institutions. Dependent, disenfranchised, and lacking legal standing, the child is officially outside of institutions and unable to shape them by normal channels. At the same time, as Anna Mae Duane points out, the child is "the quintessential subject of discipline"; because of this, institutions are enormously interested in the child, often speaking or acting in the child's name or for the child's alleged good.¹⁰ Lee Edelman has somewhat famously pointed out the breadth of institutional violence that is done "for the children."¹¹ As Robin Bernstein has argued, childhood is better understood in terms of performance—performance, above all, of scripts

⁸ That pejorative valence is important, I think, but it is more important still not to *reduce* the charge of juvenility to its dimension of least semantic richness.

⁹ Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Bénabou's circus metaphor anticipates one of Seltzer's most evocative figures of the official world, a "human pyramid" of balancing male acrobats described in a Patricia Highsmith novel.

¹⁰ Anna Mae Duane, "Introduction. The Children's Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities," in *The Children's Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities*, ed. Anna Mae Duane (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013). On childhood and institutionality, see Caroline Field Levander, *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W. E. B. Du Bois* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights*, America and the Long 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Annette Ruth Appell, "The Prepolitical Child of Child-Centered Jurisprudence," in *The Children's Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities*, ed. Anna Mae Duane (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

¹¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

dictated by adults—than as a site where unmediated agency, resistance, or compliance can be registered.¹² The sense of freedom in constraint attributed to childhood has much to do with this status: like the actors in Seltzer's reenactment zones, the child's supposed special access to liberty is conferred by the child's disenfranchisement and dependency, the merely trial basis on which the child is thought to act. This dynamic suggests why we might see Oulipian constraint as properly juvenile—not because being juvenile is good or bad, but because it names a complex stance toward institutions.

In the larger project on which this talk is based, I call that stance "puerility," from the Latin word for "boy." For we ought to admit that the concept of being "juvenile" is gendered. In her critique of the work of the Oulipian novelist Hervé Le Tellier, Lauren Elkin goes so far as to read Oulipian juvenility as a proxy for masculinism, though without particularly addressing the dynamics of age.¹³ Elkin is, I think, putting her finger on a fact about the construction of childhood rather than a fact about the Oulipo. Regardless of what real children actually do, the prototypical child is a boy, and the juvenile freedoms imputed to the child are really the freedoms of a boy.¹⁴ Thus in "Foulipo," their brilliant performance critique of the twin institutionizations of mostly male Oulipian and conceptualist poetics on one hand and mostly female body art on the other, Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young point out how the older Oulipian strand is continually treated as fresh and avant-gardist, even as feminist body art is regarded as embarrassingly dated.¹⁵ Familiar as these discrepant temporalizations are, I would suggest that, in this case, they are enabled at least in part by male access to the position of puerility, and thus to a double relation to institutionality that shores up institutional power on the basis, precisely, of disavowing it. It doesn't get more institutional, after all, than weekly readings at the Bibliothèque Nationale Française and a metro station named after a co-founder.¹⁶ The Oulipian gesture of travesty, then, might best be described by way of what Michael Taussig calls "defacement," the joy in deflation that Taussig attributes to both children and men in particular.¹⁷ And not despite but because of its anti-institutional stance, this joy—puerility—is a distinctly, I would say, an institutional pleasure—not a paradox, then, but a logic.

¹² Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*.

¹³ Elkin and Esposito, *The End of Oulipo?*, 78.

¹⁴ This has, I think, a great deal to do with the indistinctness of the categories "girl" and "woman"; as Bill Brown suggests in *The Material Unconscious*, playing, in girls, is only imagined as the too-good mimicry of adults. Think, too, of the gendered, boring, bad playing of the sister in *Toy Story*: the toys are made to play at being grown up by sitting down to a tea party; more specifically, they are forced to act like women, which is to say that they are made to do something that is trivial but not fun.

¹⁵ Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, "Foulipo," *Drunken Boat* 8 (2006), <http://www.drunkenboat.com/db8/>.

¹⁶ On the history and more recent fate of the Oulipo, see Daniel Levin Becker, *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hk2x>.

¹⁷ Michael T. Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 269, 96.