Introduction: The Challenge of Constraint

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Abstract This introductory essay defines the background terms and context of constraint-based writing and then situates each essay included in this double issue of *Poetics Today*. Taking the example of the Oulipo (Workshop of Potential Literature) as the foundational reference of contemporary intentional experiments with formal literary creation, we delineate the shifting boundaries of constrained literature, both in terms of its various practitioners (the genres, techniques, intentions they inscribe into their work) and the increasingly wider audiences to which it appeals. Recapping a brief history of constrained contemporary writing, this introduction argues for a conception of constrained writing that emphasizes intelligent freedom, the potentials opened by new forms of media, and the effects of an extended community based on formal approaches to both the composition and the appreciation of literature.

What constitutes the basic tenets of constraint-based literature has, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, gained noteworthy prominence. This not just in the scholarly community, nor simply within a circle of writers intent on charting new territory in the concept of literature, but also, quite tellingly, in the world of the general reader, for whom the principal criterion for books is just the kind of pleasure they impart. The emergent popularity of constrained literature can be attributed, at least in part, to the success of the Oulipo (the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or the Work-

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shop of Potential Literature), the literary group whose works have defined and elaborated the practice of writing under constraint. Founded in 1960 by two friends, François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, it now consists of thirty-six writers and mathematicians.[1] This Paris-based collective has gained international renown, largely on the strength of the books that its members have composed by using self-imposed rules, the presence of which may not always be apparent to the unsuspecting reader.

Take, for example, *La disparition* (1969), the three-hundred-page mystery novel written by Georges Perec. The first reviews of that book (e.g., Albérès 1969) entirely failed to mention a central critical fact, namely, that the disappearance of Anton Vowl, the novel's hero and missing person, is emblazoned into every word of the narrative: Perec wrote the entire novel without using the letter *e* (the most common letter in French and the letter implied in the protagonist's last name, Vowl). Now translated into seven languages, each respecting the same constraint (omitting the most common vowel), this representative manifestation of the lipogram has become paradigmatic of Oulipian writing, largely because the form of the novel, the constraint it puts to work, spectacularly thematizes the story it tells, offering the reader additional dimensions of meaning.[2]

A similar level of self-consciousness may be located in other emblematic novels written by Oulipians. A short list of them might include, for example, Marcel Bénabou's self-effacing *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* (1998 [1986]), Italo Calvino's uncannily captivating *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1981 [1979]), the memorializing prose of Jacques Roubaud's *The Great Fire of London* (1991 [1989]), and—both winners of the prestigious Prix Médicis—Anne F. Garréta's *Pas un jour* (2002) and Georges Perec's masterful "novel of novels" *Life: A User's Manual* (1987 [1978]). In the realm of poetry, where formal rules are arguably more visible and where a heightened level of specularity is conventionally expected, an initial list might also include these three representative works: Raymond Queneau's combinatoric *Cent*

1. The Oulipo currently consists of Noël Arnaud, Valérie Beaudouin, Marcel Bénabou, Jacques Bens, Claude Berge, André Blavier, Paul Braffort, Italo Calvino, François Caradec, Bernard Cerquiglini, Ross Chambers, Stanley Chapman, Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Duchateau, Luc Etienne, Frédéric Forte, Paul Fournel, Anne F. Garréta, Michelle Grangaud, Jacques Jouet, Latis [Emmanuel Peillet], François Le Lionnais, Daniel Levin Becker, Hervé Le Tellier, Jean Lescure, Harry Mathews, Michèle Métail, Ian Monk, Oskar Pastior, Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, Jean Queval, Pierre Rosenstiehl, Jacques Roubaud, Olivier Salon, and Albert-Marie Schmidt. Contrary to other literary groups, Oulipo never excludes any member. For this reason, deceased members continue to be Oulipians.

2. This pivotal book has been extensively studied, mostly from the viewpoint of its lipogrammatic translations. The best introduction to it, including a discussion of its concerns and reception, remains the critical companion by Bernard Magné (1999) and the introduction he wrote to Perec's collected novels (Magné 2002).

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mille milliards de poèmes (1961), Jacques Jouet's ethnographic *Poèmes de métro* (2000), and Roubaud's haltingly meditative poems of mourning in *Some Thing Black* (1990 [1986]). Each of these works, by virtue of their imaginative application of constraints, illustrates not only the diversity of Oulipian writing but also the headway constrained writing has made in becoming a household concept.

The enterprise of writing under constraint, at least as it is defined by the Oulipo, has also been greatly elucidated by the publication of theoretical texts in English. Most prominently among them are the *Oulipo Compendium* (Mathews and Brotchie 2005 [1998]) and *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Motte 2003 [1986]). But let us also mention the numerous critical studies of particular questions and works that have appeared (see the annotated bibliography in part 2 of this special issue), various anthologies of new Oulipian writing (e.g., Poucel 2006), and the spate of academic journals that have sprung up in response to constraint-based writing in France (e.g., *Formules*, *Formes poétiques contemporaines*, *Cahiers Georges Perec*).

Yet, if the idea of constrained writing is enduringly defined by the Oulipo, it is by no means limited to Oulipians. On the contrary, the declared goal of the Oulipo is to experiment with constrained forms in order to offer them to others for use, just as the Oulipo has collectively mined previous movements in French and foreign literatures to find inspiration for their own experiments. To some extent, the Oulipo has exerted a direct influence on younger writers in France—not only in literature but also in comics and other media—and in the United States. There the conceptual poets of UbuWeb have explicitly acknowledged their debt to the Oulipo, and specialized conferences have traced the connection between constraint-based writing and new, emergent poetries (see in particular Poucel 2006; Bök 2007: 157; Viegener and Wertheim 2007). Consequently, when one reads the monovocalic chapters of Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (2001)—there are five chapters, one for each vowel—one might well associate that work with Perec's *Les revenentes* (1972) (the text Perec wrote after *La disparition*, using only words spelled with the letter *e*): a distinctly independent use of constraint that nonetheless shares the same basic principles of constraint.

To make a short recapitulation: strictly speaking, a constraint is a self-chosen rule (i.e., different from the rules that are imposed by the use of a natural language or those of convention); it is also a rule that is used systematically throughout the work (its range therefore differs from that of style, which is less systematic), both as a compositional and as a reading device. Constraints are not ornaments: for the writer, they help generate the text; for the reader, they help make sense of it. Accordingly, rigorously applied constraints are explicitly definable and verifiable in a textual

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analysis. However, this does not mean that they are necessarily visible to the naked eye—and this last feature makes them quite appealing from a pedagogical perspective, though also potentially infuriating from the perspective of the reader.

The definition above closely echoes the Oulipian idea of constraint (it is indeed largely based on Roubaud's (2005 [1998]) introduction to the *Oulipo Compendium*. Yet, as the phenomenon of writing under constraint gains increasing currency, there is a noticeable tendency to stretch the concept by analogy, to stage the dynamics of constraint in a less rigorous context—much as the term *surrealist* has, in some circles, taken on looser meanings. This extension of constraint, the manner in which it is defined in various contexts, is central to our collection of essays for more than one reason. First, like our contributors, we are interested in testing the transportability of constraint-based creativity; also, within the Oulipo itself, the extent to which a constraint rigorously follows the orthodox dictates of constraint is occasionally in question and perhaps all the more so now, as the group matures into its fourth generation of writers.

Take, for example, Jacques Jouet's *Poèmes de métro*, where the constraint is simple enough. While the subway is in motion, the author composes a line in his head; he writes only when the train has come to a stop; he changes stanzas when he changes trains; and the final line is written at the final destination. But this form of constraint, developed by trial and error and subsequently mastered through practice, is not rigorously "verifiable" in the same way that one painstakingly verifies the recurrence of letters in an anagrammatic text or the feet of an iambic pentameter. That is, unless the reader happens to witness the author scribbling in the subway, one must take his word for it that the poem was composed in transit there. This type of drift in the application of constraint is, to our minds, entirely expected, for the imposition of rules quite naturally triggers levels of play within and against the decided frameworks; indeed, ingenuity in the context of constraint is measured by whether one manages to say something surprising while respecting the rules or cunningly shifting the terms of the game.

In line with the Oulipo and most scholars who have studied this type of writing (e.g., Motte 2003 [1986]; Thomas 1979; Consenstein 2002), we defend the hypothesis that constraints are a universal phenomenon. Because constraint is embedded in the very notion of form, all periods, all languages, all types of literature provide more or less self-conscious examples of constrained writing, some more rigorously defined and some more directly motivated than others. Accordingly, the very status of constraint varies dramatically from one literary context or field to another.

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In some cases, a certain literature may be dominated by the notion of constraint: the medieval court poetry of Japan, the medieval troubadour love poem or *canso*, the sonnets of the *grands rhétoriqueurs*,[3] and formula-rich popular fiction, for instance, provide elegant examples of constrained writing. In other cases, there may be a tension between the notion of literature as an artwork and the notion of constraint as a means of trying new things in an experimental spirit whose direct aim is the production of untraditional artworks. In effect, the use of constraint as a compositional tool has never been a guarantee of producing art; some of the exercises one encounters in constrained writing merely serve to fulfill their status as pure experiments, as possible building blocks that may, through carefully motivated and ingenious crafting, eventually integrate into a work of literature. Such is, for example, the case for texts obeying the constraint known as S + 7, where each noun (or substantive) in a chosen text is replaced with the seventh noun following it in a chosen dictionary.[4]

In many ways, this variable quality in the conception and application of constraint is symptomatic of the often astonishing reconfigurations of the aesthetic object witnessed at various moments of history. The Baroque *culteranismo* as illustrated by the work of Luis de Góngora (1561–1627), with its very ornamental, ostentatious vocabulary, its numerous metaphors and extremely complex syntax, is a good example of such a reconfiguration. But this tendency is perhaps more intensively exhibited during the modern and contemporary periods, where the reconfigurations can take very different forms: from the Dada fascination with antiliterature and antilanguage to Oulipian constrained writing to all kinds of experiments with sampling or cut-up writing, such as one finds in the work of William Burroughs. (For a survey of these "unconventional traditions," see Rasula and McCaffery 2001.)

In short, the notion of constraint in art is not new, for it is in the very nature of *form* to impose limits, establish rules, and design structures that more or less play a role in the meaning of a particular work or genre. Yet to single out constraint as a discrete element of form, to define its emergent status in creative and critical poetics, is to foreground the question of how experimental innovation can intentionally affect change in the aesthetic object and the context in which it takes form. Thus, if to a certain extent there is widespread agreement on what constitutes constrained writing,

3. A name given to a group of French poets, including François Villon and Clément Marot, working in northern France from 1460 to 1520: their poetic production was dominated by an extremely rich rhyme scheme, the use of puns, and typographic experiments.

4. On this constraint—in English N (from *noun*) + 7—see Mathews and Brotchie 2005 [1998]: 202–3.

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there continues to be energetic debate about the values that it contributes to our ideas of literature. It is precisely this twofold question that has occasioned this special double issue of *Poetics Today*, where we want to consider how constraint-based literature and how criticism devoted to writing under constraint mark a perceptible shift in what we expect of innovative discourse.

Not only do the essays collected in this issue seek to explain more precisely what constrained writing is and what it is becoming; they also pursue the goal of examining the stakes implicit in different models of constrained literature. Several contributors make rather strong claims for an expanded definition of constraints, either by testing the way the idea of constraint translates from one genre into some other mode of writing or by taking into account elements that are central to a text's signifying economy. Others remain focused on a more classically constrained body of texts or on the new horizons of writing relevant to our current technological context: those essays effectively demonstrate how a rigorous definition of constraint consolidates the poetics of experiment or expands the fields in which constraint may not only be productively pursued but can become a standard organizing principle.

Prior to presenting each of the essays in this special issue, we would like to sketch some of the general theoretical questions that have animated the field of constraint-based writing; they serve as the frameworks that have guided our choices as editors. To begin with, one of the most widely accepted axioms within the field is that the notion of constraint cannot be disassociated from the symmetrical notion of "freedom" (for a historical survey of this problematic link, see James 2009). As such, constrained writing bears a duplicitous relationship to currents of the avant-garde. Experiments in constraints lay a claim to freedom, which they refuse to abandon to those writers who associate freedom with the rejection of all rules. Constrained writers, as we will see, often believe that the repudiation of rule-bound writing is counterproductive, for it produces works that are bound to other, perhaps unacknowledged conventions. The experimenters try to demonstrate that the practice of constraints is a "superior" form of freedom because self-consciously elected and invested in forms or resistance. Constrained writers often also agree that the willful adoption of rules can produce aesthetic surprises that would have been unthinkable without the use of constraints.

Because in this context freedom is related to overcoming the restrictions of specific rules in writing, "freedom"—or, as Warren Motte (2007: 200) calls it, "difficulté vaincue"—manifests itself as a verifiable quantity in the text itself. Each constraint starts both as a prescription ("do this and only

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this": e.g., use only the vowel *e*) and as an interdiction ("never do this or that": e.g., do not use the other vowels of the alphabet). This mix necessarily gives rise to ambivalence. Authors inevitably feel "limited" by constraints, and during the process of writing they have to develop methods that will help them write despite the constraint. (Perec, to reuse the above example of the lipogram, had to learn how to write without *e*, but once he had mastered that technique, he was able to master or invent totally new forms of saying.)

Using constraint and playing with constraint, however difficult, is different from the notion of freedom in the surrealist's practice of automatism, for example, where freedom remains largely an ideal postulated by prescriptive manifestos (Breton 1969; a survey of surrealist games is offered in Brotchie and Gooding 1991). Yet, what is revealed as "freedom" in the surrealist texts themselves is a fairly straightforward mode of rebellion against the social order, a glorification of transgression of social taboos, and more locally in the texts, a catastrophic disregard for formal complexities (for a discussion of the Oulipo critique of this kind of freedom, see Poucel 2006: 149–50). Thus, though much of our current assessment of literature is still pervaded by romantic notions of "genius" and "inspiration," those traditional criteria are partly at odds with the strategies of constrained writing, largely because the commonly received view of traditional (romantic, inspiration-bound) writing is that it is heavily marked by an apparent refusal of self-consciousness.

In his famous book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984 [1974]), for instance, Peter Bürger argues that chance operations, like automatism, are a distinctive feature in the paradigm shift introduced by the historical avant-garde. In his argument, classical forms are cast in the molds of the "law and order" of traditional writing, and to the extent that they seek to establish a "Nouveau Parnasse," they can be portrayed as a conservative attempt to restore the former glory of models that have ceased to be desirable or that have become defunct (such is, e.g., the predominant feeling about the alexandrine at the birth of free verse in France). In a theory of the avant-garde, then, traditional constraints become a problematic manifestation of a (social) rationality that has to be overcome or negated by anticonventional writing performances based on various techniques of chance and subversion of received aesthetic categories.

Opposition between constraint and chance is easily dismantled. On the one hand, writing under constraint has proved its potential in fostering a productivity that transcends the exhaustion of traditional forms or—better yet—a productivity that redeems and extends their usefulness. Queneau (1965 [1937]: 33), who claimed that self-conscious rules compensate for

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the collapse of traditional forms, spectacularly illustrated the regenerative power of constraint by adding rules to, not subtracting them from, his practice of the sonnet. The ten highly constrained sonnets in his *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* produce one thousand billion possible poems and thereby set a new limit for future sonnet collections (see Motte's discussion of this work below).

On the other hand, the most interesting forms of chance operations do not result from the complete refusal of constraint but are instead conceived through the realization of procedural operations, as in the work of John Cage. Consider, for example, the effect produced by the competing texts in the book resulting from Cage's (1990) Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, most commonly referred to as *I–VI* (the full title is *MethodStructureIntention DisciplineNotationIndeterminacyInterpenetrationImitationDevotionCircumstance VariableStructureNonunderstandingContingencyInconsistencyPerformance*). According to Marjorie Perloff (1991: 216), one may indeed find it confusing to shuttle among the "mesostic strings" of each poem-page, the "ticker-tape" lectures that run like footnotes along the bottom of the entire text, and the "source text" at the back of the book, but the whole work's "'unreadability,' far from being the consequence of . . . 'a random collection of atoms bumping into each other,' is of course intentional, a carefully plotted overdetermination designed to overcome our conventional reading habits." If nothing else, then, Bürger's evocation of chance operations as emblematic of the historical avant-garde helps reaffirm a fundamental trend in experimental writing: enduring works at the cutting edge of innovation, when they enter the field of experiment, may appear illegible or confounded by a seemingly pointless randomness. It is via the recognition of intentionality in the work, the author's drive to change our praxis of life (as Bürger insists), that such avatars of experiment progressively take a more central place in the increasingly illustrious canon of radical form.

It is not surprising, then, to note the ambiguous role given to chance in an early modernist work, such as Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard* (1980 [1914]). The question of innovation already presents itself there as fundamentally antichance. If the central argument of that modernist poem—"A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance" (Flores 2000: 171)[5]—bemoans the basic linguistic condition that all verbal enunciations, regardless of how intently one tries to constrain their meaning, risk missing their mark or oversignifying, the poem's conclusion revels in the triumphant statement that, despite this lack of certainty, the poet may, given a highly constrained set of forms, exploit that indeterminacy

5. We follow here the translation by Daisy Aldan as found in Flores 2000.

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(and, if lucky, in the service of language itself). Such is, to our minds, the most convincing reading of the closing phrase of that watershed poem: "All thought emits a throw of the dice" (ibid.: 193). What is extraordinary here, and significant for our reflections on constraint, is that the basic premise of *Un coup de dés* is to transpose into the material fabric of the book a response to the present crisis of verse, which Mallarmé has theorized against. That is, if one carefully considers the numerical structure of the poem, as have numerous critics (see Pearson 1996), what is revealed is an almost symmetrical reaction against what he thought was the exhaustion of traditional verse form. Mallarmé recalibrates the principal elements of traditional verse and redistributes them over a radically differentiated typographical field: he thereby shifts the grounds on which classical entities of versification (line, stanza, poem, book) are conceived. This offers an early example of conceptual writing, "writing in which the idea cannot be separated from the writing itself; in which the instance of writing is inextricably intertwined with material practice" (Dworkin 2008). But in this example, the concept, the very idea of the form is directly related to the problem of innovation. Although that poem has long been known as profoundly obscure and difficult, its structure intentionally refers to and departs from the dominant verse form that had been increasingly tested since the Romantics, and this fact establishes Mallarmé (along with Marcel Duchamp, Cage, the Oulipians, and today's conceptual poets) as a strategist of intentionality.

Much of the theoretical work by Perloff (e.g., 1991) has, via close reading, convincingly refuted the traditional rejection of constraints in the name of "freedom." The very idea that "freedom," in its traditional and stereotyped definition of absence of any internal or external restraint (e.g., shame or political censorship, respectively), is the best way to produce innovative, creative, original, or even personal work should be seriously questioned. Taking as their main target the practitioners of the free verse "tradition," promoters of constrained writing like to highlight the unsatisfying aesthetic results of this kind of writing based on the romantic avoidance of rule-based procedures. Is it not more original and thus powerful to transform intentionally the conditions of play according to determinate principles than it is to stumble upon breakthroughs to a new field of creativity? And does the former not also sometimes lead to the latter? This is what constrained writers ask.

Consequently, the apparent dichotomy of freedom as against constraint must be contextualized and historicized. What matters then is no longer the question whether freedom is better than constraint, since it is generally regarded as irrelevant in circles sympathetic to constrained writing. Indeed, the relevant question is why certain writers or groups of writers come to

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reject the "freedom paradigm," which has not ceased to dominate the literary field since the appearance of the first Romantics. In other words, given the strong preference that the literary system has developed for the belief in freedom as a pathway to originality, how can one explain the fact that some members of that system make a choice that favors constraint?

The simplest answer to this question would undoubtedly be to refer the critique of freedom to the critique of what that freedom is supposed to generate, namely, innovation. Certain authors indeed have been developing an antifreedom stance in the name of what one might call a reactionary view of (literary) history, or to put it in more technical terms, they have been taking sides with (literary and usually also political) *arrière-garde*. The notion of "arrière-garde," which inverts, of course, the better-known one of "avant-garde," was introduced and popularized in literary theory by William Marx (2004), who coined it in a collection he edited on rearguard writing in the twentieth century. This book has become the manifesto of a new form of writing literary history, which does not make a plea for the refusal of innovation but rather tries to problematize the naive teleological ways of thinking about history in terms of old and new. Authors like Antoine Compagnon (2005), who introduced the notion of "antimodern," have taken comparable stances, and—paradoxically speaking—their contribution to the opening of new discussions in literary history cannot be denied. A good example of such an arrière-garde reaction against freedom as innovation and innovation as freedom can be found in the work of Paul Valéry.[6] If constrained literature appealed to him, a contemporary of Dada's and surrealism's rejection of all conventions, this has of course a lot to do with his—and various of his contemporaries'—sympathy for the return to order. Such return, no less than the hype of jazz and other things modern, was characteristic of the Roaring Twenties.

Yet there is also a more difficult answer (a *lectio difficilior*, in the old philological terminology) to the question. In certain cases, the authors reacting against the abuse of the unsophisticated notion of freedom may well be real revolutionaries. This is definitely the case with Jean Ricardou, a member of Tel Quel in its first years and later the foremost theorist of the New Novel. Ricardou, whose theoretical work was dramatically influential in the 1970s, was the main organizer of a number of groundbreaking conferences on the New Novel. These epitomized the high-modernist and ultra-formalist interpretation of the work of authors such as Alain

6. For a discussion of Valéry's lifelong thinking on these questions, see Ricardou 1971: 59–90; for a poet's critique of Valéry's position, see Ponge 2002 [1965]: 219–257.

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Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Claude Simon, all of whom eventually rejected the axiom of the text's absolute closure, self-productivity, and self-reflexivity (Ricardou and Van Rossum-Guyon 1972). At the beginning of his career, in one of the preliminary sections of his first collection of essays, Ricardou opposed the then dominant Sartrean objection to elite or formalist literature, which he accused of being incapable of solving the real problems of the world. As Jean-Paul Sartre stated in discussing the use of literature: "La littérature a besoin d'être universelle. L'écrivain doit donc se ranger aux côtés du plus grand nombre, des deux milliards d'affamés, s'il veut pouvoir s'adresser à tous et être lu par tous. . . . En face d'un enfant qui meurt, *la Nausée* ne fait pas le poids" (Literature must be universal. The writer must side with largest numbers, take the side of the two billion starving human beings if he wants to speak to them and be read by them. . . . In the face of a dying child, *Nausea* cannot make a difference [quoted in Ricardou 1967: 16; our translation]). These stances are strongly criticized by Ricardou, who argues that Sartre's position is incapable of seeing what literature is capable of and the real difference it can make, for only literature can give meaning to death, and this awareness obliges the writer to confront the challenges of literary expression (ibid.: 17–20).

This defense of literature as a specific (i.e., linguistic and cultural) form of commitment also explains Ricardou's hostility to Sartre's ideas on the difference between prose and poetry—and his own attempt to introduce into the novel the same complexities one can find in poetry. A spokesman for the New Novel, Ricardou attacks the view of "prose" as deprived of formal complexities (to Sartre, the difference between prose and poetry correlates formlessness and form). Ricardou also attacks the subsequent defense of this prosaic lack of form as the necessary condition for the writing of good, committed novels: any formal complication of the text might allegedly be perceived by the reader as an obstacle to accessing the author's intended message.

Ricardou's opposition to Sartre's plea for maximal transparency, for clear-cut meanings and messages, gradually brought him to a position that is very close to that of constrained writing. In later books (Ricardou 1971, 1978), he develops a theory of what he calls textual productivity. This theory is based on the belief that the most committed form of writing turns away from any mimetic ambition (or illusion, as Ricardou would put it) in order to explore forms of writing that produce a completely self-referential universe established by the processing of self-chosen elements and rules. Such a world appears, then, as a man-made counteruniverse, which helps the reader understand that reality (in this case, textual reality) can be rein-

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vented according to rules that are not those that govern the world as we know it and that this reinventing of the textual world can be seen as a model for the reinventing of the world out there.

After the existentialist novel à la Sartre vanished, Ricardou continued his crusade against formless writing, now faced with another enemy, namely, the typically 1968 search for individual "liberation" and its almost anarchic and obliging reaction against all authority. In the years in which it had become forbidden to forbid ("interdit d'interdire"), Ricardou published numerous defenses of constrained writing, deploying his favorite slogan: "If everything is allowed, nothing is possible" (Ricardou 1971: 118). This warning, the opening of a famous article on one of the most radical novels written by the future Nobel Prize winner Claude Simon (1969), aptly summarizes the dead end to which a misconceived and chaotic "freedom" leads in Ricardou's eyes.

But what about today? Why has constraint-based creativity grown so much in importance at the turn of the twenty-first century? And as the Oulipo celebrates its fiftieth birthday—an anomaly for avatars of experimentation—why has its visibility persisted, its public and critical success continued to exert a pronounced influence? Once we recognize that the frenetic drive to innovate via revolt has bankrupted so many twentieth-century avant-gardes, it is not surprising that we should now encounter a broad upsurge in constraint-based art. In some respects, in addition to broadening and redefining the playing field, thinking through constraint provides the most efficient means of conceiving strong moves in the game of innovation. The deliberate planning in the practice of constraint is based on awareness of and engagement with the stakes so precious to radical avatars of change, but without foregoing the real influence of tradition; its very mode of being is to encode innovation in the realization of self-fashioned rules (not to follow rules imposed by tradition) and to encode creativity in such a way that selecting and overcoming constraints, mastering them through writing, emancipates the process of imagining liberty. This is why constraint-based innovation has become so appealing: regardless of whether they are appropriated from tradition or newly invented in relation to changing media, the best constraints are simultaneously capable of accommodating an ironic cognizance of a work's historicity and of communicating the indelible charm of a writer's signature. For this reason, the Oulipo is not nihilistic in the way we have come to think of the avant-garde or the postmodern. Rather, as a model collective group Oulipians are both ironically positivistic and naively committed to their specific discursive methods—aesthetically and politically engaged in an ethos of play for the sake of play. That is, there is an explicit reevalua-

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tion of literary value at work in constrained writing, one that recalibrates our critical criteria into a closer correspondence to the shifting categories of contemporary literature. Is constrained writing therefore an answer to the crisis of postmodernism? Is it an antidote to the angst produced by the impossibility of making broader committed and consequential choices once the traditional frameworks of literature (and thus of ideology) are no longer viable as aesthetic antimodels?

Constrained writing as a strategy, seen from the perspective of the writer, is not systematically emphasized in this issue, however. Most of the articles collected here focus heavily on the place of the reader and the professional critic and on the general reader's role in responding to such work. This focus does not merely revisit the question of select interpretive communities, nor does it rehearse the dynamics of reader response criticism (with its own very particular and often radical examples). Instead, it bears witness to a sustained, fundamental rethinking of the relationship among reading, writing, and the performativity of texts.

Broadly speaking, constrained authors first and foremost consider themselves readers: the elaboration of a writing program is most often anchored in readings of previous texts (which may be provisory versions of the text that is being elaborated) that are methodically converted into a new text, and this text is then reread and reworked in order to produce a version that, in a sense, is itself not the final version. In effect, the constrained text seeks not only to be read as any other text, it also demands to be read as a constrained text. This implies stronger participation on the part of the reader, who is invited not only to "re-create" the text in the act of reading (this type of reconstitution is purely metaphorical) but also to assess the extent to which the author has more or less successfully transformed an explicitly stated writing program into an interesting text. This type of evaluative reading may seem less radical than the process of "wreading" (in French, *écri-lecture*, i.e., the blurring of writing and reading) in digital contexts, as promoted by early theorists of electronic literature. It is actually even more radical, however. For the creative and evaluative reading of constrained writing does not replace an author's version of the text by a reader's version but is based on the systematic comparison of what the text actualized and what the reader can tease out of it, within limits of course.[7]

In any case, the conversion of the active reader into a writer is certainly one of the major consequences of constrained writing. And this conver-

7. For a historical survey of such "wreading," see Gillot 1999.

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sion clearly starts with another specific feature of this type of literature: the sense of a "question" or of a series of questions to be resolved by the reader, who is invited to follow the steps of the author. Which constraints are present? How have these constraints been used? What are the aesthetic values of the product? Could other constraints have been used in a more effective and differentiated fashion? And so on. Perhaps this is a possible way of reinterpreting Georges Bataille's (2002 [1935]: 127) statement in his preface to *Blue of Noon* (*Le bleu du ciel*): "How can we linger over the books to which their authors have manifestly not been *driven*?" (Comment nous attarder à des livres auxquels, sensiblement, l'auteur n'a pas été *contraint*?). Moreover, authors and readers of constrained writing have a strong predilection to work in groups. They are often drawn together by their shared refusal of the traditional literary circles that delegate the institutional aspects of literature (those that have to do with the decision to publish or not to publish, with the efforts made to market the text, with the willingness to enter into a dialogue with the critics and the readers, etc.) to a special type of intermediaries, namely, publishers. New forms of literary community are thus coming into being through the field of constrained writing. In this regard, the field influences the literary system much more dramatically than any other new "-ism" (see, e.g., Viegener and Wertheim 2007)—though, it should be remarked, there is no "-ism" in constraint-based writing, no centralized program as such.

This redefinition of the relationship between reader and writer concerns much more than the act of reading: it questions the social, political, and ideological dimension of constrained writing. Not surprisingly, many critics continue to relegate constraint-based writing to the ghetto of formalist and therefore inevitably elitist or ludic literature. Such prejudice may be reinforced by the phallocentric appearance of much constrained writing, where female authors continue to be underrepresented despite their contributions to the Oulipo. (Currently, four out of the twenty living members of the Oulipo are women, and in some cases, their work has strong gender overtones. Thus Garréta's *Sphinx* [1986] is a fascinating experiment with gender-neutral first-person storytelling. This may seem trivial in English, where nouns and adjectives are not gender sensitive, but it becomes an achievement in French, where the difference between masculine and feminine is a basic structure of these word categories: *Sphinx* is a novel with a strong sexual theme whose narrator can be either male or female not because he or she is bisexual but because the text uses no words or particles that enable us to identify the narrator's sex.) Similar prejudice motivates the frequent association of constraint-based and mechanical writing. (But this was already the case with modernist literature; see Hugh Ken-

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ner's book *The Mechanical Muse* [1987].) In addition, there is a complete absence of politically correct writing in constrained literature: Oulipo and other constraint-based writers unapologetically maintain that everything is allowed in fiction. Yet, when seriously considered, the concerns and concrete functioning of constrained literature remain allergic to such reactionary monitoring of meaning.

In addressing the social import of constrained literature we can evoke Jacques Rancière (2007), whose work is crucial for a better understanding of the political underpinnings of formalism. Rancière does not consider the materiality of writing to be a reflection or distortion of a more inclusive social framework, but rather he defines it as the very ground of all world making. Accordingly, the very production of new ways of representing and framing the world is a political act in itself, for it not only presents alternatives to current worldviews but also demonstrates to what extent these worldviews are not natural but constructed. (After all, this was already the bottom line of Roland Barthes's [1992 {1953}] early work on literature as *écriture*.) Yet the questions raised by Rancière, since they bear on the ideological consequences of literary preferences and experiments, exceed the level of textual representations and worldviews.

Constraint-based writing may be considered a paradigmatic example of the type of literary choices Rancière has in mind. Here the most important consequence of the remapping of the world has less to do with new *themes* (e.g., such that would not have been possible before) or with new *styles* (ones that were unknown before and whose very invention modifies our way of thinking: each style is a worldview, as all writers and readers know) than with the way the literary system decides who has the *right* to write, or more exactly to publish, and who does not have that right, even if he or she is also producing texts. One of the most specific features of constrained writing is that the traditional distinction between those who play an "active" role (as writers) and those who only play a "passive" role (as readers) is challenged and, in certain cases of collaborative writing, modified. Traditional ideas and stances on writing and reading foreground the boundary between those who are lucky enough to get published and those who are not. The critique of such ideas makes room for other, more collaborative means of dialogue between the happy few (those who not only write but have access to publication and distribution facilities) and the unhappy crowd (those who can only buy and consume).

Just as one can observe a strong return of community-based work in the visual arts (Stimson and Sholette 2007), so it would appear that constraint-based writing has the potential to modify dramatically the basic structures of literary life itself. With literary writing, the distinction between pub-

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lished and nonpublished writer of course does not disappear, but various elements tend to suggest that it is felt to be less crucial than before.

First, not all constrained authors consider publication the highest good. The Oulipo group is a perfect example of this attitude. For many years the group worked without publishing anything but only circulating internal documents. (The so-called Oulipo Library or Bibliothèque oulipienne, with a print run of 150 copies, can be considered a kind of working papers with a very restricted circulation. The series started in 1965, and some 180 issues have been printed to date.) The ambition of the group's members was not to have their names in print but to think and work together on a common literary project. (It was only the success of the group and the progressive opening to the non-Oulipian public, as well as of course the demand of the broader public to gain access to what had become collectors' items, that encouraged the group to gather and republish the older issues in trade versions; currently seven volumes, covering nearly 100 issues of the library, are available.)

Second, various constrained writers are very keen on collaborating with readers, who, in turn, are invited to take the initiative in the work's conception. Once again, in the case of the Oulipo the working techniques of the group are published and disseminated to their audience members, each of whom can collaborate with others in writing workshops, and each of whom are encouraged to reuse any and all Oulipian constraints. This orientation toward collective and collaborative writing has been slow but progressively developed, and it clearly illustrates part of the fundamental social philosophy of the group. The Oulipo gathered initially as a kind of semisecret society and only later began communicating with the broader literary community, first through conferences and publications, then through public meetings and workshops open to the public. In this regard, it is important to stress the blurring of the boundaries between Oulipian and non-Oulipian authors on the Web site of the group (www.oulipo.net/), for in the Liens (Links) list one finds a double list of related sites, the Oulipo and the Oulipo-related ones.

These various frameworks—the discussion of constraint versus freedom, the emphasis on the role of the reader and the communal aspects of constrained writing, the ideological aspects of formalist literature—all run through the various articles assembled here, albeit in very different proportions.

This two-part special issue contains four groups of essays, although most of the essays, especially due to scope, belong to more than one category. Thus they divide into general reflections on reading and writing under

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the regime of constraint literature; analyses that focus on a specific corpus (though with a constant consideration of general issues); studies of the cultural and political impact of constrained writing on the literary community; and finally, essays that contest the standard definitions of constraint-based writing. Not surprisingly, some of the articles here—those in part 2 by Dirk de Geest and An Goris on manuals of romance writing and by Jan Baetens on novelization—consider objects that often remain outside what is usually deemed as the purview of constrained literature, such as popular culture.

We open with a number of contributions that tackle issues of reading and writing in constrained literature. Roubaud, who is currently the most prominent representative of the Oulipo and an outstanding theorist of the group's notion of constraint, examines "the act of composing, with aesthetic aspirations, what [he] call[s] sequences of words in a language." His article, "Compose, Condense, Constrain," which characteristically takes the form of a mathematical proof and manifesto, serves as an inside introduction to the world of the Oulipo. At the same time, it offers an idiosyncratic version of what is meant by writing under constraint according to a leading poet who practices this type of literature in a conscious and calculated way.

Richard Deming's "Constraints as Opposed to What?" explores the fundamental question of the relationship between constraint and freedom "or, in this case, the willing forbearance of freedom." This essay is situated at the crossroads of literary criticism and philosophy. Drawing on a wide range of Oulipian authors (Roubaud but also Perec and Jouet), Deming introduces the notion of community—via a discussion of the practice of the author's "sharing" with the reader the knowledge of constraint. Unlike the author, the reader does not know if a constraint has been used, which specific constraint has been used, how it has been used, and so forth. The use of constraints indeed forces the author—any author—to determine from the very beginning a strategy of how to communicate with the reader.

If the answer is yes, how will the author prefer to disclose this constraint: by using it in such a way that no serious reading is possible without the reader taking into account the constraint as it has been materialized on the page or by providing the reader with inside information about the genesis of the text in the margins of the work (e.g., in a postface or an interview, the former solution being of course much more direct than the latter)? And why will it be important to inform the reader? Is it supposed to produce a better reading? Is it supposed to enable the reader to do, metaphorically speaking, part of the writing of the text (for if one knows which constraint has been used, one will be capable of assessing what has been done and

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what has not)? If the answer to the question is no, how can this refusal be motivated? Should all constrained writers follow Queneau's lead in making the constraint as invisible as possible in order not to spoil the reading pleasure? Or is such a strategy an implicit means of maintaining the difference between writer and reader? More generally, Deming discusses these specific problems in relation to the philosophical concept of the "unsayable."

In his essay "Paranoid Interpretation and Formal Encoding," Chris Andrews links the recurrent observation that constraint-based writings sometimes stimulate overinterpretations of a work with the critiques of two scholars who have opposed this kind of "paranoid" reading. One is Umberto Eco (mainly on the well-known analyses developed in *The Limits of Interpretation* [1990]) and the other Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (the main reference here is her introduction to the edited collection *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* [1997]). Taking as his major example writings by Queneau, who extensively researched "literary madmen" in the thirties and who subsequently warned against the misguided excesses of obsessively deciphering texts and life itself, Andrews gives an overview of reasons not to overindulge in the labyrinthine traps set by alluring constraints. Andrews makes us aware of the fact that an author like Queneau, who used many constraints and did not always disclose them, plays a complex game with the reader. By using the forms of his novels to encode meanings and by choosing to reveal only some of their formal rules, Queneau induces interpretive paranoia. Nevertheless, since Queneau also develops strategies that help his reader reread as much as read his fictions, he simultaneously offers an antidote to that condition, prompting the reader to resist the fascination of enigmatic details.

A second group of contributions approaches questions of constrained literature by focusing on a specific corpus, sometimes by studying the oeuvre of an author or a group of authors, sometimes by offering close readings of a particular text. Perloff's article, "Constraint, Concrete, Citation: Refiguring History in Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime*," combines these two approaches. Taking as a starting point the productions of the Brazilian and European *concretistas* of the 1950s and interpreting them through the lens of constraint, she notes the relative lack of interest among American readers in either concrete poetry or theoretical thought about constraint. Perloff's article of course does not limit itself to criticizing such lack of interest. Rather, in order to show the benefits of the opposite, constraint-centered way of reading, the author then applies a double perspective of concretism and constraint to Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime* (2005). This reading is all the more interesting since the reception of Bernstein's text—which

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was part of an opera performance—encountered difficulty in "hearing" the text and catching all the complexities of its formal construction. In this sense, Perloff regains here what specialized critique failed to do at the time of the opera's first public performance.

Other articles in this section demonstrate the difficulties of narrowing the corpus of constraint-based writing to the field of Oulipian writing. In extending the scope, we only follow the example given by the Oulipians themselves. Indeed, "Oulipian writing" always needs to be understood in the expanded sense that the Oulipians gave to the term through their systematic use of the notion of "plagiarism by anticipation": constraints that existed before their reuse or rediscovery by the Oulipo were ironically appropriated by the group as unknowingly pre-Oulipian.

Thus Motte's article, "Constraint on the Move," seems at first glance to analyze various types of constraint practiced by Oulipians (his main examples are Queneau and Perec) but soon exceeds this corpus by including works by authors who are not usually labeled as such (Julio Cortázar and Carol Dunlop). His analyses indicate clearly that, at the level of reading and writing, Oulipian and non-Oulipian authors may come very close to one another. Although his argument does not deal with historical issues of the pre-Oulipian use of Oulipian forms, Motte's examples demonstrate that the notion of constraint is extremely broad and generously inclusive. In this regard, it is also important to stress the multiplicity of genres that his article covers under the heading of constraint. Constrained writing extends farther than poetry or the novel, and Motte's smooth, elegant transitions from one genre to another bring forward an important and too rarely acknowledged feature of constrained writing.

In the third group, the contributions by Christian Biet and Karel Vanhaesebrouck, on the one hand, and Joseph Tabbi, on the other hand, center on the transformations—including real revolutions—in the social and political arena that constrained literature can belong to. Constrained writing is often considered a literary practice that brings ludic aspects of the text into focus, and most often it is also exclusively associated with contemporary writing. The article by Biet and Vanhaesebrouck, "Resisting the Constraint," takes a very different stance. It not only provides an excellent example of constrained writing from a much earlier age but also demonstrates the direct relationship between certain forms of constraint (in this case, a certain way of defining the rules of classical tragedy) and a social context (in this case, the organization of social life in the theater and of that related to the theater). Biet and Vanhaesebrouck's initial thesis—that classical French tragedy can be considered an instance of constraint-based

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writing—is then used by the authors to study an aspect of constraint that is much less visible although as wide-ranging, namely, the disciplinarization, in Michel Foucault's sense, of the spectator. His or her socially undesirable behavior was literally tamed in the physical space of the theater when Jean Racine and others reshaped the form of tragedy (at the level of the text, at the level of acting and mise-en-scène, but also at the level of what was at stake in the theater, which became a place to reflect upon contemporary political issues). As a result, many institutional aspects of the theater were changing, and spectators had to adapt their behavior to these new social constraints (e.g., the obligation of remaining silent during the representation). Moreover, these new constraints of the text as performed on stage (i.e., specific rules of acting) and of the theatrical text itself (i.e., of specific formal conventions) also had to be interiorized, and this process of interiorization plays a role whose importance cannot be overestimated.

Joseph Tabbi's analysis of constraint-based and specifically electronic writing as a new form of "world literature" brings further evidence of the direct political power of constrained writing. Arguing that the shift from printed text to electronic writing dramatically modifies our notion of what literature is (less a "thing" than a way of collaborating) and seeing the Oulipo less as a canon than as a "workshop" (which it always has been), Tabbi advocates a new model of world literature. In such a model, the emphasis shifts away from the work (the individual masterpiece) toward enhanced possibilities of communicators working together in increasingly dynamic and technically pliable forums (such as open-source structures). Tabbi's essay thus also throws light on issues already outlined above: the community aspects of writing and the new relationships that arise between author and reader, between published writer and unpublished writer, between group and individuals.

In the last group of essays, constraint-based writing assumes a somewhat different and less common meaning. The difference is deliberate. Most, if not all, of these essays are interested in genres or forms of reading and writing that are frequently overlooked by specialists in constrained writing. Experts tend to privilege poetry (after all, constraint-based writing has strong roots in various local poetic traditions of "fixed form") and high-art literature (constraints in less privileged corpora are often dismissed as formulas, although it is not absurd to consider formulaic literature a form of constraint-based writing for the poor). These last essays go against such established privilege, extending the key term's conceptual and textual scope.

Baetens's essay, "Expanding the Field of Constraint: Novelization as an Example of Multiply Constrained Writing," deals with the question of the multiple constraints that determine the production of "industrial

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literature." Extrapolating from R. A. Peterson's seminal article, "Five Constraints on the Production of Culture: Law, Technology, Market, Organizational Structure, and Occupational Careers" (1982), and taking the genre of novelization as his main example, Baetens studies the relationship between external (social, institutional) and internal (aesthetic, generic) constraints. This study suggests that the notion of constraint extends far beyond issues of content and style or, more precisely, that a certain number of external obligations that determine the way one has to work within the field of cultural production can usefully be defined and analyzed as constraints. As a result, the article bridges the gap between two approaches which are often seen as dramatically opposed: the formalist readings of constrained writing and the social analysis promoted by cultural studies.

The essay by Dirk de Geest and An Goris, "Constrained Writing, Creative Writing: The Case of Handbooks for Writing Romances," complements that by Baetens. It offers a thorough analysis of the rules of romance writing as proposed—or rather imposed—by the many handbooks of this despised but socially (and politically) important genre. Such manuals formulate not just the generic constraints but also the best ways to play with them. Here again, formal analysis—in this case, narratology, although applied to a corpus normally ignored by narratologists—and cultural studies are intimately intertwined. One of the most salient features of this contribution is also the humor—not so much that of the essay itself as of the specific type of writing they analyze: it is much more subtle and ironic than may appear at first sight, an aspect which is also frequently overlooked in scholarship on constrained writing.

Finally, Paul Grimstad's essay, "Maelzel's Chess-Player and Poe's Reverse Constraints," can be read as a drawing together of the various threads that run through this section if not this entire issue. Grimstad analyzes a famous example of "how to write," namely, the essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), in which Edgar Allan Poe puts forth a theory of composition as rule following: he describes how he composed his lyric poem "The Raven" in a series of predetermined steps. However, these steps are inferred from the composed text rather than the other way around. Poe thus significantly alters what has become the dominant understanding of constraints as axioms. Instead, we need to distinguish between a priori deduction and a posteriori induction (or experiment).

A selective annotated bibliography of work done on constrained writing concludes the special double issue.

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