

Book Review

***Exercises in Criticism: The Theory and Practice of Literary Constraint.*
Louis Bury. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015. 290 pages.**

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Let's imagine an assignment in which the instructor asks the students to do a homosyntactic translation of, say, a monologue from a Shakespeare play. What is a "homosyntactic translation"? It entails replacing all of the words assigned to a "major" part of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) with other words, leaving sentence structure intact. Which other words? Let's say that the vocabulary the students are to use must come from another text. It doesn't matter what kind of text—it could be a book of Plato's *Republic*; it could be a chapter from a biology textbook. Does the translation have to make sense? the students ask (i.e., Do we need another rule?). The selection of words shouldn't simply be random (although for the daring instructor, there are some uses that can be made of that). So, the instructor might say, yes, it should stay as close to the meaning of the original text as possible (creating a kind of Shakespearese). Then, once they have completed their homosyntactic translations, they should identify all the differences in meaning between the original text and the "translation"—differences that presumably would have been produced solely by the translation itself.

So, what's the point—what do students learn from such an exercise? For starters, they will have to identify all the parts of speech in the Shakespeare monologue, which means they will probably have to follow, and to some extent parse, some pretty complicated sentences. They will also have to identify the parts of speech of the words they use from the source text. (Questions will arise: can students change the form of the words they take from the source text, changing nouns into verbs and so on? The implications of modifying the rules to account for such contingencies can be discussed in class.) They may learn how to use a grammar handbook or website in order to ensure they perform the translation properly. Beyond that, they will transform their understanding of what it means to "read" and "understand" a text, by seeing that such activities do not involve reducing an unfamiliar text, with its potential for new knowledge, to more familiar terms. To read is to use a text to break up one frame of intelligibility and construct a new one. Their understanding of the original text will be defamiliarized, now that they see it in its difference from the translation, not as an implicitly "textless" summary of what they already know. And, finally, the instructor might find that class discussions can be considerably more focused once questions change from "What does it mean?" to "What difference would using this other word here make?"

Louis Bury's *Exercises in Criticism: The Theory and Practice of Literary Constraint* does not directly address such pedagogical concerns, but I would recommend it as a powerful resource for those who might like to pursue the

constraint-based assignment-making process I am proposing. Bury analyzes the work of well over a dozen Oulipian and post-Oulipian writers and thereby makes available enough constraints to last a lifetime of teaching. (“Oulipo” is an acronym for the title of the literary group *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, translated as “Workshop for Potential Literature,” that focuses on developing and practicing aesthetic constraints.) Even more, Bury uses the constraints he explores, creating a new approach to scholarship—one that, rather than keeping a prim and neutered distance from its object, immerses itself in that object, problematizing severely the distinction between “theory” and “practice,” observer and object. (An analogous approach—and possible constraint for a sociology class—might be to write a sociology textbook by listing a series of practices aimed at subverting, reinforcing and evading social institutions.)

Bury’s approach serves as a useful reminder of how much of learning is simply imitation, and how complicated imitation can be. A student needs models to follow and constructs them out of the teacher and students perceived to be stronger learners. But we confront a paradox here: if the student doesn’t already know what the model is doing and why (which must be the case if she needs the model), how does she construct a workable model for herself? The student inevitably extracts a set of rules, explicit and tacit, regarding what counts as the production of knowledge in the classroom space. The student inevitably gets it “wrong,” though, piecing together a partial and “distorted” set of rules. The instructor can keep telling the student where she is getting it “wrong,” but without any insight into the rules the student is actually following, all the instructor can do is tell the student what she already knows—that what she takes to be the knowledge-making process modeled by the instructor is incompatible with what the instructor takes that process to be. We end up with a “deficit” model, focused on what the student isn’t doing rather than what she is doing. Foregrounding constraints, precisely because of their arbitrariness (it is the very arbitrariness of the student’s model construction that guarantees she will be “wrong”), levels the playing field insofar as all participants are dealing with the same rules, and the widely varying effects of those rules can be examined publicly. In this way, the necessarily idiosyncratic rules of inquiry constructed by the student can be addressed. A constraint-based approach to critical thinking would then define critical thinking as the examination of the consequences of following one or another set of rules in solving problems.

Here is Bury “revising” repeatedly an essential Oulipian principle in imitation of Raymond Queneau’s foundational Oulipian text, *Exercices in Style*:

Notation: The notion of the exercise is fundamental to Oulipian writing praxis.

Synonyms: The concept of the workout is foundational to constraint-based compositional practice.

Antonyms: The sensation of idleness is inessential to Surrealistic-speaking caprice.

W+7: The novice of the exordium is furtive to Oulipian xenophobia precipice.

Double entry: the notion and concept of the exercise and of training is fundamental and central to Oulipian and constraint-based writing and inscription praxis and practice.

Compound-words: The heavy-duty writing-notion of the exercise-text tune-up is well-nigh the centerpiece of a constraint-based work-out praxis-ethic.

Homeoptotes: The notion of the exertion motion action in reproduction is constitutional to the coercion composition addiction. (59)

(Homeoptotes is the “composition of sentences by morphologically similar words.” [I had to look that one up.]

Bury continues for another 12 pages, working through various genres, imitations of authors, grammar-based constraints, and more. Each exercise requires rigor, research and ingenuity, and each can be performed in various ways, providing a rich resource for classroom discussion and ongoing revision. Nor are the benefits restricted to literature classes, or even the humanities more generally. Suitable exercises can be defined to help students learn how to work with difficult scientific and technological terms, by placing such terms in a field of synonyms, antonyms, morphological and syntactical possibilities.

The playful nature of constraint-based writing is evident, and an important point in its favor. Teachers are currently being urged to draw upon the pedagogical potentialities of video games, and we certainly should exploit the cognitive dimensions of such activities—but there may be more to gain by engaging students in the pedagogical potentialities in the very first game space: human language, with its vast array of sound shapes, shades of meaning, and forms of articulation. One could start anywhere in Bury’s book and access such a game space, within which a range of scholarly moves, personal and familial structures, and cultural problematics can be worked out in original and productive ways. ⌘