
Introduction: *Poetry on the Edge*

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Languages die for one of two reasons: lack of speakers, or lack of experimentation. The word *experiment* comes from the Latin verb *experiri*, meaning “to try out.” People experiment when they try out a new word, a new phrase, put a little English or spin on a familiar phrase. Most people do this off the cuff. Writers do it deliberately. Language invites play. In all probability, language is itself the product of play. Yet there is always a segment of the population unnerved and antagonized by linguistic invention. There was great hostility toward the American language in the mid-eighteenth century emanating from Britain, particularly its stodgier writers such as Samuel Johnson, because of the many changes in its vocabulary and syntax. English, in an effort to describe new terrain, new flora and fauna, had become experimental. New life was injected into the language.

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Now that we’ve entered another new terrain—the volatile flora of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and the invisible fauna of the subatomic realm, the day to day anxieties of covert terrorist activity and malfeasant corporate monsters running amok—the language of poetry and fiction has been revitalized in an attempt to adapt to a fractured, disjunctive world of mercurial change and uncertain identity. Some welcome and contribute to this course; others disparage it and cling to the predictable monotony of formulaic sitcoms, trendy clichés, and “little lyrical I” bonbons masquerading as social petards. The more heavily entrenched and comfortably tenured tend to dismiss a lot of new writing in an indulgent, patronizing manner by imputing a kind of childish irrespon-

sibility to it; the easy assumption that experimental writing means thumbing your nose at technique and tradition and doing anything you want.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Much of the new writing is the result of rigorously imposed constraints. The writers reviewed in this *ABR* focus section all adhere to a process whose application creates a sense of the work making text by itself. Such self-imposed strategies free the writer as well as the reader. It is a paradox: by writing under constraint, the writer is freed from habit and cliché, and the reader is freed from her/his secondary role by the necessity of creative participation; more to the point, by the possibility of becoming a writer themselves. Oulipo, the collective of experimental authors created by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960, is the most salient example of this process, but it is not the only one. Rabinowitz’s use of the acrostic exemplifies this process, as does Mullen’s use of the alphabet to structure her book, McGookey’s modulations of prose poetry, or McCaffery’s homage to Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, in itself a pre-Oulipian book based on cubist strategies of multiple perspective. Topp’s self-effacing aperçus have an Oulipian flavor, whereas Bök’s use of the lipogram is unadulterated Oulipian product. Whether purely Oulipian or Canada Dry (in the words of Paul Fournel, a Canada Dry text “has the taste and color of a restriction but does not follow a restriction”), each of the works reviewed in this *ABR* focus proposes a disciplined strategy for producing text as liberating and useful for the writer as it is for the reader.

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