

AN EXERCISE:
THE ROUSSELIAN PUN-PUZZLE

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Raymond Roussel stands as a strange and formidable character in the “anti-history” of Western Literature. Neighbor and contemporary of Marcel Proust, Roussel crafted bizarre works that have inspired generations of the French avant-garde, from Surrealism to Oulipo. M. Roussel has done us the great favor of leaving behind a description of his creative process. “How I Wrote Certain of My Books,” quoted here from the 1975 translation of Trevor Winkfield, gives us Roussel’s device in a nutshell:

I chose two almost identical words...For example *billard* [billiard table] and *pillard* [plunderer]. To these I added similar words capable of two different meanings, thus obtaining two almost identical phrases...

1. *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard*...[The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table...]

2. *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard*...[The white man’s letters on the hordes of the old plunderer...]

...The two phrases found, it was a case of writing a story which could begin with the first and end with the latter...

In the story in question, there was a white explorer who, under the title “Among the Blacks,” had published a book in the form of missives in which he discussed the hordes of a plunderer (black king).

At the beginning we see someone chalking letters on the cushions of an old billiard table. These letters, in the form of a cryptogram, composed the final sentence: “The white man’s letters on the hordes of the old plunderer,” and the story as a whole turned on the tale of a rebus based on the explorer’s epistolary narratives. (Roussel)

Simple as that. The Rousselian Pun-Puzzle is constructed first by assembling a series of words with two meanings, cobbling them together into phrases or whole sentences of doubled meaning, and then constructing a tale that will join the two phrases together.

The value of an exercise like this might not be readily apparent to some readers, who will see the Pun-Puzzle as, at best, a language game, closer kin with the Sunday word-jumble than with any work of literature. Such readers might think of the exercise as a pleasant diversion, but would never recommend it to the serious writer. Against such criticism, the results of Roussel’s technique are its best defense. Roussel’s work is at once deliberate and wildly improvisational; its effects are simultaneously calculated and erratic. The Pun-Puzzle and its products have been lauded by nearly a century of the literary avant-garde. André Breton and company considered Roussel a forerunner of Surrealism. Raymon Queneau and friends awarded Roussel the title of “Plagiarist by Anticipation.”

For those who know even a little bit about Surrealism and the Oulipo, it will seem strange that both movements look to the same figure as their forefather. What can the Surrealists, who valued the untempered report of the unconscious above all else, have in common with the Oulipo, who renounced inspiration in favor of formal constraint? Or, more to the point, what is there about Roussel and his work that bridges the immense divide between these two movements, their views on literature and the creative act? For answers (as well as a better appreciation for the Pun-Puzzle and similar exercises), we will need to look more carefully at the creative process as it is represented by Surrealism and the Oulipo. We will then be in a better position to revisit the esoteric technique of Raymond Roussel to see how it manages to pull together so diverse a group of literary radicals.

At a lecture in Brussels on June 1st, 1934, Breton told the story of how he discovered Automatic Writing, the principle compositional technique of the Surrealist movement: “One evening in particular, as I was about to fall asleep, I became aware of a sentence articulated clearly to a point excluding all possibility of alteration and...which came to me bearing...not a trace of any relation whatever to any incidents I may at that time have been involved in; an insistent sentence, it seemed to me, a sentence I might say, that knocked at the window” (Breton).

That sentence was this: “A man is cut in half by the window,” and Breton was so taken by its dreamlike qualities that he decided to use the sentence as “material for poetic construction. I had no sooner invested it with that quality, than it had given place to a succession of all but intermittent sentences which left me no less astonished, but in a state, I would say, of extreme detachment” (Breton).

That night was so productive for Breton that he invited over a friend of his, Philippe Soupault, and shared the technique with him. The two “began to cover sheets of paper with writing, feeling a praiseworthy contempt for whatever the literary result might be. Ease of achievement brought about the rest. By the end of the first day of the experiment we were able to read to one another about fifty pages obtained in this manner and to compare the results we had achieved” (Breton).

Automatic Writing is a process in which conscious thought and self-criticism are suspended completely, so that the unconscious mind might be allowed to surface directly onto the page. The influence of this technique is pervasive in modern creative writing education. For example, one would be hard pressed to find a modern book of the writing instruction that does not expound upon the importance of silencing the internal critic developing the capacity to tune in to one's inner muse.

To some extent, the influence of Surrealist technique has resulted in a general assumption (among creative writing instructors, no less!) that the art of writing is essentially unteachable. Wallace Stegner, founder of Stanford's trailblazing creative writing program, has this to say: "Every book that anyone sets out on is a voyage of discovery that may discover nothing...Nobody can teach the geography of the undiscovered. All he can do is encourage the will to explore, plus impress upon the inexperienced a few of the dos and don'ts of voyaging" (9-10).

Rather pessimistic for a man who made his living teaching others how to write. Then again, if writing is *only* a voyage of discovery, the unearthing of unconscious material, what can one really teach?

In the fall of 1960, Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais formed a group they called *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature), or Oulipo. In its theory and techniques, the Oulipo was diametrically opposed to Surrealism. Particularly, the Oulipian views on the creative writing process set them apart from Breton and his successors.

Rather than unearthing unconscious material, Queneau and the Oulipians were interested in a completely conscious and controlled writing process. Their primary technique was that of *constraint*, or the imposition of formal restrictions. Oulipian use of constraint was/is inventive and radical. Georges Perec, for example, wrote a novel entirely without the use of the letter *e*. Raymond Queneau's most famous poem is composed of ten sonnets, the lines of which are all interchangeable, producing one hundred trillion sonnets. The Oulipo as a whole has invented a host of such experimental constraints, which it makes available for general use¹.

In his committed use of constraint, Raymond Queneau developed a view of the creative process defined by conscious application of these restrictions and the labor to fulfill them. Queneau had this to say about inspiration: "The poet is never inspired, because he is the master of that which appears to others as inspiration...He is never inspired...because the powers of poetry are always at his disposition, subjected to his will, submissive to his own activity" (Motte 43).

The idea is that those who subject themselves to the whims of inspiration, the unpredictable movements of the unconscious mind, are subject to laws of which they have no knowledge. Therefore they exercise little control over their work and cannot guarantee its value. The author who creates and imposes his or her own constraints, on the other hand, has the advantage of inventing laws uniquely suited to the purposes of literary invention.

An early self-definition by the members of Oulipo sums up the process nicely. *Oulipians: rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape*. For the Oulipo, the art of literature lies in the invention of the labyrinth as much as in the means of escape.

Oulipian technique has not yet had as profound an impact as Surrealism on creative writing education in the United States. However, the Oulipian emphasis on constraint highlights an aspect of the writing process that is present in all literary effort. That is, all writing involves some form of constraint. So many lines of iambic pentameter in an agreeable rhyme scheme will give you a sonnet. A

three-line poem, whose lines have five, then seven, and then five syllables is always a Haiku. A detective novel is 60,000 words or so and involves a crime, a detective, and a series of clues, red-herrings, and so forth.

From an author's perspective, the value of a good constraint is in the way it focuses the mind on creative problem solving. Rather than face the intimidating emptiness of a blank page unarmed, authors who adopt constraints are able to begin work immediately by puzzling out the means necessary to meet the demands of the form.

Georges Perec has said that he would not write any other way: "The intense difficulty posed by this sort of production...palls in comparison to the terror I would feel in writing 'poetry' freely" (Motte 13).

The Oulipian constraint is also perfectly teachable. Where inspiration is a nebulous, ill-defined process that only another century of neuroscience can hope to clarify, constraint is readily understood, even easy to communicate, and immediately useful to the aspiring writer. Not only does a good constraint often motivate good writing, it also trains novice writers to think about things like form and structure in a constructive, creative way.

In terms of creative writing pedagogy, of course, it is valuable to represent both inspiration and constraint in the curriculum. There are various exercises, like Automatic Writing, that will encourage (but not necessarily *teach*) inspiration, and a healthy exposure to these exercises in concert with a wide sampling of the variety of available constraints can only serve to benefit the creative writing student.

There are also a few exercises that blend together inspiration and constraint in a novel way, which brings us back to the subject at hand: the Rousselian Pun-Puzzle, inspirational constraint par excellence. Looking back on the instructions Roussel left behind, we see first the correspondence to Oulipian constraint. Roussel's phrases composed only of words with double meanings, and his technique of beginning and ending his work with the same phrase have clear Oulipian overtones. In effect, the Pun-Puzzle operates as a constraint, dictating what the author must do in order to successfully produce such a work.

However, Roussel's constraint is not as comprehensive as most Oulipian techniques. It does not dictate the content of the whole narrative, nor does it dictate anything that must happen on the level of every sentence, or each word. Perec's abandonment of the letter "e" makes choices for him about what kinds of words he can use, and therefore what sorts of sentences he might construct, and therefore the types of things that can happen in such a novel. The N+7 constraint, in which each noun is replaced with the one seven entries following it in a dictionary, dictates the content of an entire work. The Pun-Puzzle, on the other hand, only regulates two phrases, leaving the rest to the imagination, or rather the *inspiration*, of the author.

Roussel's constraint forces authors to consider the creation of narrative along unusual lines. Rather than thinking about characters and what might happen to them, authors writing a Pun-Puzzle have to ponder what might form a link between, in Roussel's example above, white letters on a billiard table and the hordes of an old plunderer. In asking, "What might connect these images?" authors are drawn into a type of literary speculation that would not be available to them by any other means. In this exercise, we permit all manner of odd pairings and incongruities, suspending the normal constraints of realism (as well as our "inner critic") and, with "praiseworthy contempt for whatever the literary result might be", simply write whatever it takes to connect those two phrases along a narrative

line. Anything surfacing from our unconscious mind can be included and even justified by the final twist in meaning of the key phrase.

Again, the value of an exercise like Roussel's is in the way it combines disparate aspects of the creative process, namely inspiration and constraint. It is not unlike any other "prompt", in that its requirements excite the imagination in a particular direction. It is not unlike any other form or genre, in that it has its own rules and norms and still leaves room for variation and innovation. But the Pun-Puzzle is unlike any prompt or genre in that it manages a union between the disparate aspects of creativity at their extremes. Roussel's technique is at an Oulipian extreme in its use of constraint, imposing novel and radical limits on the creative process; it is also at a Surrealist extreme in its invocation of the unconscious mind, inciting a free-associative process and elevating this process to the status of art.

I've tried my own hand at this, and have found that the perfect Rousselian phrase pairing, in which each phrase differs from the other by only a single letter, is most difficult to attain. I'm not sure if this is a difference between the French and English languages, or between my humble intellect and that of the genius Roussel, or both. In any case, I've dumbed down the project a bit by allowing less than perfect phrase pairings. Specifically, I often had to allow myself the use of homophones, plays on words, and in some cases, even slant rhyme.

In the example I've included below, I made use of a series of four pairings:

1. The pallbearer hung Terry's clothes on the line.
The ballbearer Hung tarried close, on the line.
2. As he fainted, his paper folded, officially in the black.
As he painted, his paper folded off fishily in the black.
3. He stayed, beheld him, out and under the weather.
He said, "Behead him! Out and under the weather!"
4. His shadowy and inedible figure was in the ball park.
His shadowy and incredible figure was in the ball park.

I then rearranged the phrases into a sort of chiasmus, so that the first pairing would open and close the story, the second pairing would sit in second and second-to-last place, and so forth:

The pallbearer hung Terry's clothes on the line.
As he fainted, his paper folded, officially in the black.
He stayed, beheld him, out and under the weather.
His shadowy and inedible figure was in the ball park.
His shadowy and incredible figure was in the ball park.
He said, "Behead him! Out and under the weather!"
As he painted, his paper folded off fishily in the black.
The ballbearer Hung tarried close, on the line.

Generating the story to connect the phrases was then quite easy. The demands of drawing out each of the two meanings of the key words gave rise to various points of exposition and twists in the plot. Little more was needed for the story to feel complete. Of course, for a much better demonstration of what this technique can do, please refer to Roussel's own works.

The Pallbearer

The pallbearer hung Terry's clothes on the line. It had been a difficult funeral, and this elderly man had voluntarily followed Terry home to make himself useful. Though the man was unknown to him, Terry was grateful for the assistance and assumed the pallbearer had been a friend to his father. He needed the help now more than ever. Having grown up under the wing of such a powerful and successful man, Terry would now have to take his place at the helm of *The Free Globe*, the most widely read paper on the planet.

Terry closed his blinds and sighed. In the next room, the entire board of the paper was waiting to confer upon him this unwieldy duty. When he entered, the mood was somber. Twelve men around a table in black, mourning. Terry joked to himself that it felt like a second funeral. In fact, it was. The paper had died, they informed him. Terry protested, pointing to the amazing profits that the paper had made every year for the last thirty years while his father had slaved over the *Globe*. But the board showed him proof. His father had kept a secret book, and all the paper's profits had gone into an unknown fund marked only with the name of ballbearer Animal Hung. While publicly turning a huge profit, the *Globe* was privately penniless. The board members expressed their apologies and looked at their watches. In ten seconds, Terry's paper would crumble. Terry swooned. Tomorrow's paper would label him the wayward son who managed to bankrupt a Fortune 500 company in the space of an hour. As he fainted, his paper folded, officially in the black.

The pallbearer had stayed on to look after Terry, who woke up with a miserable cold that kept him in bed for days. The poor boy had so much that weighed on his heart that it was making him ill. Not only had he lost his father and his father's legacy, but he had only come out as a homosexual to his family three weeks prior and was met with their unmitigated, but civilly delivered, disgust. This must still be eating at him underneath all else, reasoned the pallbearer. His father died disgusted with him. The pallbearer made soup three times a day and brought it to Terry's bedside, each time exchanging a hot, fresh bowl of soup for a cold untouched one and then leaving Terry in peace. Each time he paused in the hallway as he closed the door: He stayed, beheld him, "out" and under the weather.

When Terry was up and about again, the pallbearer took his leave with a strange promise. "I will send you a cake once a week, in the hopes that your life will grow sweet." Terry dismissed the offer with a shrug and thought nothing more of the matter until his first cake arrive in the mail. It was pink, hard as a rock, completely unpalatable, and in the shape of the number seven. The card attached to the cake box had only a single letter, the letter 'b.' Odd, thought Terry. Why bother baking a cake that no one could possibly eat. The old man had promised him a sweetening, but the cake was bitter and tasted not faintly of cod liver oil. It could only be a cruel joke—but from such an otherwise gentle man? And why the letter 'b' and number seven? The cake sat on the island in Terry's kitchen for a full

week, and Terry pondered over it each day at breakfast. If nothing else, it took his mind off his failure and his grief.

The next week, another awful cake, this one smelled of scorched rubber and shaped as a nine, with a card that read: ‘a.’ Each week a new horrid cake and a new number and letter until Terry’s kitchen island was covered with a line of cakes and a series of cards that spelled b-a-l-l-s-t-a-d-i-u-m. Ball stadium. Of course Terry’s mind immediately thought of the ballbearer Animal Hung and the fortune that had been tucked away under the man’s name. Interestingly enough, the pallbearer’s cakes laid in a line came very close to the amount of money that Terry’s father had embezzled. The pallbearer may have been an awful cook, but he knew something about his father’s funds. His shadowy and inedible figure was in the ball park.

Unsure of what else to do, Terry headed down to the stadium. Ballgame was a sport invented by a television network that specialized in the invention of games. Ballgame, though poorly named, was its most popular invention, and had become almost as accepted in the States as baseball. Like all good sports, the rules were simple. The playing field consisted of two parallel white lines and four posts, one at either end of each line. One player on each team was designated ballbearer and assigned his own line. The ballbearer had the duty of walking his line with his team’s ball and touching the other team’s post. All the rest of the players had the task of obstructing the opposing team’s ballbearer and defending their own. If a ballbearer made post, his team scored a point. If ever a ballbearer left his line or dropped his ball, his team lost a point. And of course, in an era of sensationalism and violence, the players wore no pads, nor were there very strict rules regarding the severity of physical contact.

Now Animal Hung was the most widely loved ballbearer of all time—the Babe Ruth of Ballgame. His stature was immense and his face was still pretty, an unusual condition for ballbearers who are the target of so much professionally honed animosity. Animal Hung had incapacitated more defending players than any other ballbearer in the history of the game, though his posting rate was somewhat less than average. He was a brutal man, and Terry feared to approach him. Furthermore, it was raining out in the worst way, and Terry hated getting wet. Ordinarily he would have put off a visit to the stadium for a sunnier day. However, having been submerged in despair with nothing else to buoy him but the awful encrypted cakes that arrived once a week, Terry felt compelled to investigate the stadium at once when the coded message had been delivered in full.

At the stadium, the lights were off, and Terry crept about until he made his way to the field. In the dark and silence, Terry tried to comfort himself by humming a bit of show tune and assuring himself that there was no one else there. Then, in the corner of his eye, Terry caught sight of something moving. He held his breath and felt the blood rush into his ears, making an awful ringing. He began to grow dizzy and had to force himself to breath. Yes, there in the bleachers was the awful shape of the man to whom his father had given a fortune. Animal Hung. His shadowy and incredible figure was in the ball park.

Hung stood and swaggered. Drunk. He turned all the stadium lights on with a remote that he held in his hand. “I don’t care if it’s impolite!” screamed the ballbearer. “We will have this execution rain or shine!” Terry began to panic. The man was gigantic, insanely drunk, and bent on someone’s death. If it was Terry that was to be executed, he felt there was little hope of survival. In a moment of desperation, Terry decided to join ranks with the madman. “Yes!” cried Terry, “Let’s have him hung!”

The pause that ensued left Terry feeling quite anxious. Realizing that “hung” was perhaps the wrong style of execution to choose and that very possibly the ballbearer had taken offense at the strange pun, Terry was sure that he would have been better off if he had said nothing at all. But, in for a penny, in for a pound, and Terry decided that he had better break the silence. “Or maybe possibly drown the man?” His effort was weak, but it seemed to do the trick. Animal Hung snapped out of his pause and became enraged. “No! We will not drown him! I will have his head on a platter!” Hung was now in a seizure of wild fury. He said, “Behead him! Out and under the weather!”

Terry broke into applause and Hung bowed and relaxed his posture before stumbling his way down the bleachers and onto the field. “You are so kind, you are a lady and a gentleman,” said Hung. Terry decided to take it as a compliment and kept quiet. “I have something for you, it is from your father.” Hung reached down the front of his pants and Terry nearly lost his mind with fear, but Hung’s hands returned with a sheet of paper and a small, tin watercolor set. “You are to paint my portrait,” said Hung, who handed Terry the items and then laid out on the grassy field in an exaggerated pose of leisure.

Terry wasn’t sure how to take all this. Painting the portrait of the man to whom his father had unlawfully given Terry’s inheritance was not his idea of fun. In fact, Terry felt that this was somehow an extension of his father’s disgust for him. Tear down the homosexual son’s fortune and good name, and then rub his nose in it by having him paint the portrait of this horrible man. But the horrible man was gigantic and in an unstable state, so Terry complied even though it caused him to feel just rotten.

The paper was of a heavy stock and was bordered with a thick, black layer that served as a kind of ready-made frame. The watercolor set was the very same kind that Terry’s father had given him for this fifth birthday when they had spent the day at the Tate. “You’ll be a great artist someday,” his father had said, “and I admire your creativity.” That day was Terry’s sweetest memory of his father. It was the only time they had ever spent an entire day together, and it was the only time Terry’s father had been so open in his praise. As there was no water, Terry rubbed a bit of spittle over the ovals of color and began to work, cleaning his brush on the grass. He had never become much of an artist, but he new his way around watercolors well enough. The ballbearer seemed to be relaxed now and would not pose a threat, at least not as long as Terry was painting. So Terry painted. Before long, Terry noticed something odd about the black border that framed his emerging portrait. As he painted, his paper folded off fishily in the black.

A bit of investigation proved that the black border was actually a seal, and that the heavy stock was actually acting as an envelope, which enclosed a letter to Terry from his father on his father’s private stationary. “Dear Terry, I know that I have been distant as a father and often unkind. I know I cannot make up for the time we have lost together, but I can save you a bit of trouble. The newspaper business is no place for a man to squander his life away. I’ve bankrupted the company and buried the loot on this field. Animal Hung is a close friend of mine, and I regret that you two were never introduced. He will likely be drunk, as he’s promised to mourn me in the classical style, but when he dries up you will find him to be amiable enough to befriend, perhaps even to love. He is of your, well ... persuasion. At any rate, you will find a box of valuables buried at the spot indicated on the map enclosed. Tell no one of your discovery. Escape the country. Live a life of freedom and adventure. You are a sweet and creative soul and I love you my son.” The letter was signed and dated one week prior to Terry’s father’s death.

When he was done weeping, Terry rose and began to get his bearings on his father's map. The location was easy enough to spot, as it was directly under the home team's starting post. Terry looked to the ballbearer, who smiled and got on his feet. Terry made his way toward his treasure and his new life. The ballbearer Hung tarried close, on the line.

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Notes

1. See: *Oulipo Compendium*, Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, editors. Atlas Press, 1998.

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