

aware or done consciously, with knowledge and responsibility, with knowledge and by design, knowingly and designedly a contented cuckold is aware of, but indifferent to, his wife's infidelity or faithless humorous quick repartee, displaying wit near johannesburg where gold placers were first worked and furnished with wives or married women in heraldry a winged dragon with barbed and knotted tail often spelled plural.

•Stephanie Young

stephanie is a set of portable steps, is with, usually a hinge or is a hinged frame or framed at the back, framed at the back which may be and may be is or which may be extended as a support, is a support, stephanie is a support.

rather young, rather, a young person, animal or plant, rather an inexperienced person, rather: young.

In The nOulipian Analects Ed. Matias Viegner & Christine Wertheim Les Figues Press, Los Angeles, 2007

I can remember that, years after finding Calvino at Half-Price Books, when I first heard of Oulipo and Oulipians, I thought of them in relation to the Eulipians of Rahsaan Roland Kirk's jazz classic, "Theme for the Eulipians," the ones he calls "the artists, the actors, and the journeymen" who come from a planet in another galaxy, Eulipia. I'm not an Oulipian; but I can call myself an Eulipian.

to follow
Mullen, go to

•Theme for
Oulipians:
A Personal
Reflection

Harryette Mullen [1 of 2]

Experimental Writing: Negation or Potentiality?

Perhaps the greatest appeal of the Oulipo lies in its absolute devotion to new forms, and its conceptual vocabulary of constraint, combinatorics, potentiality and voluntarism, which offers a clear demarcation between what is and is not Oulipian. If only such clarity were available to us regarding what is and is not experimental! While commentators are often happy telling us what the experimental *is not*, few give a clear outline as to what *it is*.

A brief survey of contemporary literary criticism reveals the following ideas: 1) the experimental exists in small presses, never in big publishing; 2) it concerns itself more with self-examination than communication; 3) it breaks more rules than it follows; and 4) it pays more attention

to its tools (form, process, language) than to verisimilitude. All these notions, except perhaps the pragmatic one on publishing, are shaky. As modernity comes to seem more catastrophic and the nature of reality becomes harder to define, verisimilitude in particular is ever harder to pin down. Narrative realism has incorporated so many shifts in point of view, so many fragmentations and chronological displacements, that experimental writing can no longer be defined as a critique of, or response to, this form. Neither can mainstream realism any longer be defined as a rejection of the experimental, though that is a large part of what has characterized the debate in months of published polemics over the year 2005. Ben Marcus resists the reduction of the argument to an either/or situation in his recent article in *Harper's*, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It." Nevertheless, he fails to define the nature of the experimental, even though he is clear on the subject of narrative realism.

As the dominant form of fiction for more than a century, as well as the basis for almost all Hollywood feature films, the characteristics of narrative realism are agreed upon by all: verisimilitude, a linear plot structure with familiar characters based on our notions of human subjectivity, whether psychological, moral or stylistic, and, perhaps most importantly, written in a transparent language that is loathe to announce itself as part of the mechanism of representation or even as language *per se*. (Its counterpart in poetry is a kind of personal or confessional, often narrative form based on a similar rendition of subjectivity, though with perhaps more latitude in the self-consciousness of its use of language.) In other words, while narrative realism has countless variants, it is always characterized by what Carla Harryman calls "an addiction to transparency," and perhaps little more needs to be said of it than "I know it when I see it," Supreme Court justice Carter Potter's enduring pronouncement on pornography. Even a cursory look at Ben Marcus' "defense" of experimental writing reveals that the lacuna at the heart of his argument is the lack of a clear definition of the experimental.

In general, "experimental writing" is a grab bag, which refers loosely to the great variety of texts, methods and authors that generally fall outside of mainstream publishing. It is notable that the term is never historical: no one refers to iconoclasts like Gertrude Stein, Antonin Artaud, Raymond

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Roussel or Laurence Stern as experimental writers. For the most part it is reserved for writers outside the radar of big publishing and still outside of the canon. Part of the machinery of canonization is a reevaluation of popular success against critical acclaim, and the experimental avant-garde of the past generations has always provided the fuel if not the fodder for this process. “Experimental writers” seem always to be contemporary, and they are primarily assessed in terms of form, not content. Radical content in conventional form, like Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, is often downgraded in favor of formal innovation even when the content is opaque. Within most conventions, what is generally valorized is the righteous combination of innovative form and content, an assessment hardly modern at all; perhaps this makes some sense, though today content is often passed through the “realist” filter of judgment.

But perhaps it is useful, or at least convenient, that the term experimental is vague and imprecise, like *fiction*, *poetry* and *documentary*, a generic term that belies the contested territory of both the advocates and the critics of the experimental. Linked as they are to modernism and the avant-garde, most experimentalisms still labor under Ezra Pound’s injunction to “make it new.” Unlike today’s experimental writers, however, the historical avant-garde generally developed programs of work accompanied by theories and manifestos that linked the aesthetic with the political. While today’s experimentalists mostly subscribe to a kind of open pluralism, the will to innovate is generally still the minimal qualification that makes the term useful to those who advocate it. To those who use the term dismissively, the experimental is often linked to nonsense or masturbation, suggesting a kind of morality at play in both sex and text.

The best-selling novelist Jonathan Franzen describes two kinds of writers: one who works on the basis of a *contract* with his readership (for example, meeting to some degree his readers’ expectations on accessibility and following certain conventions of verisimilitude); the other who stakes his claim on *status* within his field, usually through dense experimental texts that confound a reader’s expectations. While Marcus worries about this newly declared war against texts that require the reader’s active participation, for conservative commentators like Franzen, “difficulty” is the *sine qua non* of the worrisome experimentalist

writing that is eroding the readership of “serious literature” in America. While Franzen’s argument against William Gaddis, “Mr. Difficult,” is frail enough to topple without much prodding, a fearlessness and even vertiginous pleasure in difficulty is a characteristic of experimental writing from Laurence Stern to Kathy Acker, from James Joyce to the Oulipo. But this is not a ubiquitous feature, for many notable experimental texts are painfully simple, for instance, Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* or John Cage’s *4’33*. Why then can experimental works, loved or hated, be so easily identified by such a wide spectrum of audiences and writers? Is it their challenging of a hegemonic mode of art making, or simply that they fit within a recognizable set of gestures?

Our extra-literary idea of the experiment originates in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, when science moved from what was called Natural Philosophy to a systematic experimental procedure that insisted on *experience* as the necessary foundation and test of all reasoned conclusions. Pre-scientific natural philosophy was reluctant to engage in experimentation. Though Aristotle’s observations of nature were as acute as his observations of poetry, these led not to predictions in the way modern scientific theories do, but rather to useful lists of categories and classifications generated by deduction.

Not until the seventeenth century did natural philosophers begin to test their theories with actual experiments. Francis Bacon railed against deductive thinking and told natural philosophers to stop speculating and start observing. We must torque and twist nature, Bacon said, “put her on the rack,” believing that if we probe, test and prod enough we can control her through knowledge. But Bacon didn’t propose a new philosophy; he proposed a method of deriving knowledge based on experimentation, proof, and the use of mathematical formalisms. Aristotle believed that math was not useful for the natural world (because the realm of mathematical forms is unchanging, while the natural world is constantly in flux), but the rise of modern thought-paradigms—partially based on the Pythagorean belief that under all the apparent change in nature lies a stability that mathematics can grasp—toppled the predominance of Aristotelian ideas, paving the way for new practices. Modern science begins when Galileo, Keppler and Newton start to incorporate in their work both mathematical formulations and the hypothetical-experimental

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model in which the outcome of an experiment, either positive or negative, is used to modify and perfect the hypothesis itself. Though the scientific method may tangentially lead to advances in our technological capacity to control nature, for many philosophers of science, what distinguishes this episteme from all others is not its practical applications, but its hypothetical-experimental method of proof and refutation.

Though Plato banished poetry from *The Republic* because its magical power can so easily be used to deceive, Aristotle placed it beside rhetoric as a discourse in which the elaboration of form and figures was married to ethics. He also placed poetry among the arts, as a mimetic *techné* (craft) allied with an episteme (knowledge) whose essential character is the fictive. In other words, for Aristotle, poetry relates not what happened, but what might have happened if some potential path of action had been opened. This is where notions of the poetic swerve most from (modern) science: in poetry there is nothing definitive to prove. The scientific experiment is valid or invalid, with few intermediary positions.

The literary experiment is perhaps best measured in its potential. The craft involved with the literary experiment is elaborative and it both exceeds and comes short of the requirement of epistemic knowledge, neither proving nor disproving—as perhaps its most distinctive element is play. For Johan Huizinga, play is of a higher order than seriousness because, while seriousness seeks to exclude play, play itself can very well include seriousness. The potential of play in experimental writing is not only within the realm of language and verisimilitude, but also in the relationships of writer to author and author to reader.

While we today might think of this potential-experiment as pure fiction, for both Aristotle and some more recent thinkers, such as Huizinga, Augustus Meinong and Gilles Deleuze, it is precisely this pretense—the practice of inventing imaginary situations in play—within the potential, rather than an exploration of the actual, that endows poetic knowledge with its unique characteristics. Rather than pursue the delineation of experimentalism through what it negates, I would argue that this poetics of potentiality is one fruitful way we might choose to think of the experimental in contemporary literature.

to follow
Viegner, see
•Potentiality:

Matias Viegner [1 of 2]