Cluster Essay

Anticipatory plagiarism and the *ex post facto*-garde

Chris Piuma

Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Abstract This essay uses experimental writing and reading practices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (such as those of the Oulipo or of conceptual writers) to dyschronously uncover or recover pleasures in premodern texts that have been difficult to articulate or were completely unrecognizable as potentially pleasurable. In particular, it deploys the Oulipian concept of anticipatory plagiarism to call attention to this process by which aesthetic pleasures occur well before they are culturally or socially construed.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2013) 4, 305–309.
doi:10.1057/pmed.2013.20

The following text has not been edited from the version presented at the 46th International Congress on Medieval Studies for the panel ‘Queering the Muse: Medieval Poetry and Contemporary Poetics,’ sponsored by the BABEL Working Group (a fault: a failure to adapt to a new environment). The only changes made were this introductory paragraph, the bibliographic references, and the sidenote. After this paper was presented, those who had heard it usually referred to it as a ‘piece’ rather than a ‘paper’ (a fault: failure to meet academic generic standards). More faults: an ahistorical combination of postmodern reading and writing practices with premodern texts; an unprofessional combination of the bonds of love (friendship, family, romance) with academic discourse; an employment of a conversational or performative tone; only the most meager disclosure of its theoretical underpinnings; an incomplete catalogue of its faults; a morbid preoccupation with the faultiness of the human.

Aamodt. Adatto. Allen. Andersen. Anderson. Anderson. Anderson. Anderson. Antolini. Arce. Archer. Arechiga. Arnold. Ascher. Auricchio. Aver. Baker. Baldrige. Barney. Bartley. Baseel. Baunach. Beach. Beaulieu. Becker. Bedolla Huerta. Beers. Behrman. Belsher. Benjamin. Berry. Berry. Bettis. Blechschmidt. Bodle. Boehm. Boland. Boley. Bolosky. Bolton. Borgen. Boyce. Bracamontes. Breuer. Briscoe. Broderick. Broderick. Bronson. Brooks. Brown. Brown. Brown. Brown. Brown. Buchanan. Buchsbaum. Bui. Bullard. Burr. Butler. Cadonau. Candela. Canfield. Cannon. Cantrell. Carey. Carniero. Carrico. Cartwright. Casey. Casey-Lee. Caspersen. Cassle. Castillo. Cermenelli. Chan. Chau. Choi. Chou. Christian. Chung. Clements. Cline. Clinton. Cochran. Collins. Condon. Conn. Cook. Coombs. Corbin. Costanzo. Costello. Couture. Cox. Crain. Crawford. Crawford. Cromer. Cunningham. Curtis. Czuba. Dahlstrom. Daly. Daniel. Darby. Davis. Dawson. Day. De Francisco. Deason. Decker. Delong. Derrick. Diaz. Dillon. Dills. Dinsdale. Dixon. Dobell. Dobler. Dodd. Dodgson. Dolack. Donaldson. Donigan. Dowty. Draney. Dubintsov. Duc. Dunn. Dunn. Dyal. Eads. Eaglin. Earl. Edwards. Edwards. Eichler. Einstein. Elder. Engman. Erickson. Erp. Evans. Evans. Evers. Farmer. Farr. Faust. Faustini. Fleener. Flores Garcia...

David Abel, 'Closet Drama', 2004

1. About seven years ago I spent a good ten minutes listening to David Abel recite Anames. Abel is a poet, and we were at a Sound Poetry Festival, so we were meant to hear this list of names as a poem. There was a note in the program that indicated the list comprised the names of everyone who had died in the past three months in Multnomah County, around Portland, Oregon, where the reading took place. I found it to be an interesting and even moving reading. My mother is not generally a big fan of 'experimental' poetry, but she was there and she also found it to be interesting and moving. And so I want to think about this.

2. A few years after that reading, I read Ernst Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. While discussing 'Consolatory Oratory,' Curtius writes:

Agius of Corvey heightens this biblical *consolatio* in the poem he composed in 876 on the death of the Abbess Hathumod (d. 874). He points out not only the patriarchs but also their wives died; likewise the Apostles and others besides. It takes him over a hundred lines (*Poetae*, III, 377, 229 ff.). Laudable industry! But hardly a 'touching lament,' as it has been called. (Curtius, 1953, 80–81)

Curtius here proposes that 'laudable industry' does not necessarily result in a 'touching lament,' and I thought: Well, maybe.

3. Conceptual poetry is big right now, or as big as such things get. Marjorie Perloff, former president of the Modern Language Association and inveterate

backer and promoter of up-and-coming ‘avant-garde’ poetics, has made it her hobbyhorse lately (Perloff, 2010), and a hefty anthology of conceptual writing was published recently (Dworkin and Goldsmith, 2011).¹ Conceptual writing (or conceptual poetry; the terms may or may not be interchangeable) is, at its purest, more about the idea behind the text than the ideas in the text. Kenneth Goldsmith types all the words in an issue of the *New York Times* – articles, advertisements, page numbers, obituaries – ignoring column divisions, just reading left to right, and publishes the result as an 840-page book (Goldsmith, 2003). Laudable industry! But, in fact, yes. Conceptual writing encourages us to valorize the *idea* of the text regardless of its content. Goldsmith’s book is industry for industry’s sake. It is a monument to that industry, and it is that monumentalism that we might be moved or intrigued by.

4. When we listened to David Abel’s poem, we could appreciate it for its conceptualist monumentalism. We could think: This is a list of the names of the dead. These were not the famous and holy dead of Agius’s poem; these were the ordinary dead. Oregon law keeps personal or specific details of deaths confidential; names and dates are all that the state will publicly proclaim of our deaths, and here Abel was publicly proclaiming them.

But there were details about the act of proclamation that were moving as well. The names were in alphabetical order by month of death, and as Abel read through each month’s list, the procession of the alphabet was one of the few threads the audience could follow, and that alphabetic procession felt as inevitable and familiar as, well, as the march to death itself, which sounds a little corny when I put it that way, but which was nevertheless effective during the reading. At times, Abel had to guess at how certain names should be pronounced. The society from which those names were drawn is manifestly a multicultural and multilingual one, and the materiality of the languages of those names – with all their inherent potential for interest and intrigue – was brought to the forefront in their recitation.

5. This occurs in Agius’s poem as well. He is writing in elegiac couplets, which means trying to work Hebrew names into a Latin meter. Working names into Latin metrical verse is a challenge, because names don’t always fit into the metrical patterns allowed in verse. Hebrew names are a particular challenge, since it isn’t always clear how the name should scan. And Hebrew names surely sounded as odd to medieval poets as they do to many of us today – that is to say, they could assert themselves as language outside of a meaningful context – especially stacked up in a row. Agius offers several lines or couplets that are nothing but names fitting tightly into hexameter, Tetris-style.

6. Again, laudable industry! But does this sort of formal showboating fit with Curtius’s demand that this poem be a ‘touching lament’? Well, maybe, maybe not, but we can certainly recognize it as another source of literary pleasure, a

1 A feminist anthology of conceptualist writing has since been published in response to this anthology (Bergvall *et al*, 2012). Three days before this piece was presented in Kalamazoo, Goldsmith had, in fact, read at the White House as part of President Obama’s ‘A Celebration of American Poetry’ event.

particularly Oulipian pleasure. The Oulipo is a group of mathematicians and writers that formed in 1960 in Paris in order to investigate new forms for literature – Oulipo is short for ‘*ouvroir de littérature potentielle*,’ a ‘workshop’ or ‘sewing circle for potential literature.’ Oulipian writing, then, often features elaborate forms or constraints. Georges Perec’s novel *La Disparition* (1969) was written entirely without the letter *e*; it is, in part, a lament for his mother, who was ‘disappeared’ by the Nazis and probably died in Auschwitz. The constrained writing, again, serves as a monument to his mother, all the more touching because of all the laudable industry that went into it.

But the novel is not all gloom; halfway through, the characters come across some famous poems, rewritten to exclude the letter *e*. The English translation features Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech, rewritten as ‘Living or not living: that is what I ask...’ (Perec, 1994, 101), and the pleasure of this text comes from the old wine poured into a new and tighter skin. Other medieval writers were more explicitly Oulipean in their creative endeavors – Hucbald of St Amand’s ‘*Ecloga de calvis*’ is a 136-line poem in praise of bald men in which every single word begins with the letter *c* (Klein, 1995) – but enjoying and valorizing Agius’s poem is easier now that the Oulipo have refined, articulated and given context to its pleasures.

7. Harry Mathews, a member of the Oulipo, writes:

Without a time machine at its disposal, the Oulipo has been unable to rescue from the limbo of the past those writers who, lamentably unaware of the group’s existence, could not know that they were creating paleo-Oulipian texts without acknowledgement. They have been placed in the special category of *anticipatory plagiarism*. (Mathews and Brotchie, 1998, 207)

Also known as *anticipatory plagiarism*. It’s a really wonderful idea that plays with the ready observation that people keep doing things in the past that haven’t been invented yet. Aesthetics may be socially construed, but a particular type of aesthetic experience may well be enjoyed or created long before the process of articulation and refinement allows it to be socially construable.

8. Listening to David Abel’s poem, though, my mother – a nurse – and I – a gay guy who came of age in the early 1990s – had another precedent in mind: the recitation of names at AIDS Quilt memorials. We’d sat through enough of those in our time to be familiar with the genre.

9. What to do with all these connections, with all these desires? A new desire is articulated, a new difference from what was previously understood as universal is isolated, and communities that share that difference coalesce, and some look for evidence that this desire existed before it became socially construable. This is as true for sexual desires as for aesthetic desires. This is, in fact, what Curtius was

doing in his book – looking in the Middle Ages for a precursor to his own socially construed aesthetic sense. But Curtius was convinced that his construal was the only possible and permissible aesthetics. Many avant-garde predecessors would have argued a similar thing about their aesthetics, that the ‘experiments’ they made today would be widely read – universal – tomorrow. But the queer swerve we’ve had since then encourages us to use the recovery of marginal creative practices and the reclamation of an *ex post facto*-garde to expand the list of possibilities, of differences, and of potential literatures, and to recognize that there are regions of our desire and of our humanity that we have not yet mapped.

About the Author

Chris Piuma is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto, where he studies strange modes of writing that emerge from multilingual contexts in the medieval Crown of Aragon. He is also one of the editors of *eth press*, an imprint of punctum books that publishes innovative poetry inspired by, adapted from or otherwise inhabited by medieval texts (ethpress.com) (E-mail: chris.piuma@utoronto.ca).

References

- Abel, D. 2004. Closet Drama. Poem performed at the Sound Poetry Festival II, Portland, Oregon, 28 August.
- Bergvall, C., L. Browne and V. Place. 2012. *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*. Los Angeles, CA: Les Figues.
- Curtius, E.R. 1953. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W.R. Trask. New York: Routledge.
- Dworkin, C. and K. Goldsmith. 2011. *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Goldsmith, K. 2003. *Day*. Great Barrington, MA: The Figures.
- Klein, T. 1995. In Praise of Bald Men: A Translation of Huchald's *Ecloga de Calvis. Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26(1): 1–9.
- Mathews, H. and A. Brotchie. 1998. *Oulipo Compendium*. London: Atlas Press.
- Perec, G. 1969. *La Disparition*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Perec, G. 1994. *A Void*, trans. G. Adair. London: The Harvill Press.
- Pierloff, M. 2010. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.