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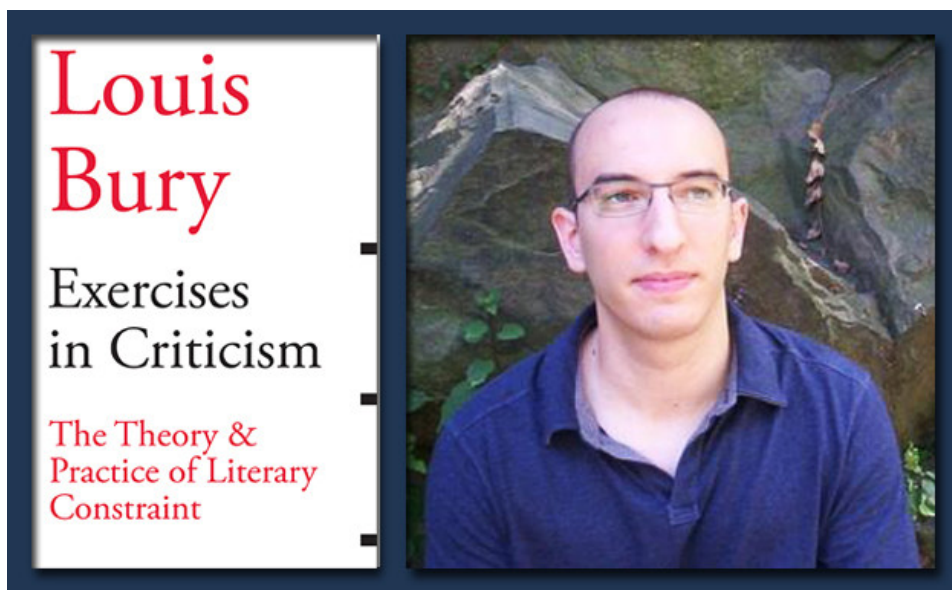
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Toward an embodied critique

A review of Louis Bury's 'Exercises in Criticism'

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Exercises in Criticism: The Theory and Practice of Literary Constraint

Louis Bury

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Early this spring, I perched on top of a table (it was the only space left) to hear [Fred Moten](#) talk about [“Blackness and Poetry.”](#) The room was teeming with poets, critics, academics, and students. At the end of the talk, a question about the contemporary “mania” or “fetish for rule-based constraint-based poetry in a lot of poetry circles” was asked. More specifically, Nada Gordon wanted to know what this contemporary mania for rules might be a symptom of. Another way to ask this question may be, what does the phenomenon that Louis Bury calls the “recent efflorescence of American constraint-based writing”(18) mean about us?

Moten answered that the constant making and breaking of constraint is something important, which we do all the time — sometimes on the fly and at other times systematically. “We’re always doing that,” Moten explained, but a problem comes with “the monopolization of the capacity to impose constraint or to make the rules.” He argues that when constraint-based work is done right, we all take part in the architecture. In discussing NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, a constraint-based conceptual poem, Moten explained that procedural elements are placed on readership and community. With *Zong!*, Moten describes that when he taught the book, what became crucial was the “process in which we got together to try to figure out how to read the book. But then it turned out that what we had to do was get together to figure out how to get together to figure out how to read the book.” Moten makes it clear that this undecidability, this indeterminacy, this need to collaborate, is not “infinite regress.” This is the same process of rule-breaking and -making; it is “intellectual life.”

In his new book, *Exercises in Criticism: The Theory and Practice of Literary Constraint*, Louis Bury takes part in the rule-making and -breaking of constraint-based works in order to, to use Moten’s words, “figure out how to read” these works. More precisely, Bury’s book is part of a recent trend toward using creative-critical techniques to write about procedural poetics. His *Exercises in Criticism* develops a book-length academic argument about Oulipian and contemporary constraint-based forms while also creatively experimenting with those very forms.

Oulipian literature is potential literature (Oulipo stands for “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” or potential literature workshop, which began in 1960 in Paris) that uses rules and forms — often referred to as constraints, but also as generative devices, or procedural structures — to liberate its authors from other rules of which they may be less aware. For Oulipo, constraint helps us see that the words that *just happen to come to us* are also mediated by the constraints of personal histories and pathologies, societal notions of what makes literature, and the rules of grammar and conventional forms. Of course, the recent surge, even “mania,” for constraint-based forms in North America must be doing something different than fighting the same midcentury battle against bourgeois notions of inspiration and genius and the limitations of grammar.

Bury argues that contemporary North American writers have transformed the “apolitical literary exercises” of Oulipo “into a form of cultural critique” (13). To execute this argument, Bury acknowledges the personal, performative, and bodily aspects of both constraint-based works and criticism as a whole. Each of these elements of argumentation is woven throughout the book in formal and thematic ways. The book is divided into very short chapters, or “exercises,” which fall under the larger categories of “Anticipatory Plagiarism,” “Oulipo,” “Post-Oulipo,” and of course, “The Clinamen.” Each “exercise” takes on a specific work of literature and employs its constraint to write about it.

One of Bury’s central claims is that contemporary North American writers use Oulipian practices to work through a sort of loneliness and depression that is a standard part of the experience of late capitalism. This critique of capitalism is a major divergence from the collaborative practices of Oulipo and what Bury considers their “supper club” ethos (323). The fact that Oulipian practice is taken up as a symptom of isolation also, Bury claims, charges literary constraint with new political possibility. Where the limits on options and creations of mazes may have been about an apolitical escapism for the original Oulipians, authors like Harryette Mullen, Daren Wershler-Henry, and Joan Retallack perform constraint to navigate the excessive consumer options available to us. These options at times serve as “available cultural material” and at others feel like an oppressive and “vast field of cultural detritus that surrounds us” (17).

Bury states it clearly in his lucid introduction: “The recent efflorescence of American constraint-based writing was no accident, but, rather, a response, even if unconscious, to prevailing anxieties about freedom and choice in our current historical moment” (18). In other words, most of the constraint-based writing that surrounds us critiques excess, and the aesthetic trend itself is a navigational tactic in the era of too many options. The other part of Bury’s argument — that isolation and depression is the prevailing response to excess — is illustrated when we catch glimpses of Bury’s depressive state. As Bury’s therapist reflects back to him toward the end of the book, “you’re talking about ways that you kind of feel more comfortable keeping yourself apart” (303). Bury explains that constraint-based practices of today are exercises that we do alone in order to create and perform a feeling of safety around us, or, in order to control and limit one aspect of the uncontrollable and the limitless historical moment.

Why is there a therapist’s office toward the end of a book of criticism? Another of Bury’s central arguments is about the personal nature of literary criticism in general. Bury claims that personal interests, experiences, and pathologies are always bound up in works of scholarship. For this reason, he argues that blatant “inclusion of the personal might be a more honest way of doing it” (24). Indeed, we sit in on a therapy appointment, are afforded a sneak peek on Bury’s feelings about masturbation, learn about his earliest beard hair, and perhaps most shocking of all, in a total relinquishment of the performance of critical mastery, Bury writes that if he had wanted to study Oulipo itself — rather than North American poetry that uses Oulipian practices — that he could not have done it because his French is not good enough. All these indulgences are in service of the larger project. Bury was a PhD student during part of the writing of the book (a transcript of his dissertation defense is in *Exercises in Criticism*, too) and now he is an academic.

It is intensely personal to watch Bury take on the “exercises,” which make up the bulk of the text. After a one-page meta-critical paragraph or two that describes the work he is engaging and the constraint he will use (these sections are labeled “Context” and “What I was Trying to Do”), we experience the success and failures of this bold style of criticism along with Bury. The way he executes the exercises is inspiring. The exercises are so inspiring that it feels strange to write a review of Bury’s book without engaging in some of the principles of his task. For this reason, I scatter elements about my life throughout. Even the first couple of sentences of this paragraph — with their level of self-consciousness about the criticism they perform — owe much to Bury.

I don’t know Bury, though I feel strongly that I could. I see that we have “17 mutual friends.” Now I am thinking that I should see if he is on Twitter. He’s on Twitter. I’m now following him on Twitter. Neither of us tweet much though.

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Bury’s treatment of Raymond Roussel’s *New Impressions of Africa* is honest about the difficulty of Roussel’s text — I feel a kindred recognition in Bury’s description of Roussel’s method of nested parenthetical digressions as a form of “hurtling the confused reader” back and forth (39). Bury’s chapter about Roussel sets out to experiment in parentheses and footnotes in order to avoid ever getting to the point. Yet Bury’s exquisite performance of parenthetical digressions — convincing as a mimetic critique in and of itself — does get to the heart of Roussel’s book after all. *New Impressions of Africa* is, Bury argues, “a text about the exoticism of digressions ... a text about the lure and perils of the unknown” (45). Of course, as soon as he arrives at this insight, Bury’s writing begins to zoom back out. The chapter resists expanding on this assertion. Rather, it challenges the reader to insert an essay on this topic within a parenthetical of its own. The trick, of course, is that Bury’s “exercise” has argued exactly this point: we finish this section knowing quite well the aesthetic of the aside and the type of reading that digressions suggest. It is a playful but diligent reader who wades through the text — the same reader who may click link after link on a Wikipedia article, circling through pages and pages about “tableaux vivants,” “iconography,” and “Frida Kahlo” in order to return, ultimately, to finish the end of the entry about Raymond Roussel.

In the preamble to a reading of Dodie Bellamy’s *Cunt-ups*, Bury gives us this gem: “If the medium is indeed the message, then the message of so many of these chapters seems to be that I want to be a medium” (111). The process of writing literary criticism is engaging with the multiple texts you take as your object; Bury channels these texts, he lets them speak through him and also with him. This is an open and generous mode of engagement. In the same section, he shares another secret of literary criticism, which, because of the “cut up” constraint Bury is performing here, is presumably written partly by Bellamy and partly by Bury: “Criticism must necessarily hear the boiled skull in your voice when what the critic performs is competence, expertise dismembered” (116). Bury’s writing does not perform “competence.” It is full of captivating attempts and fascinating failures, and it ultimately adds up to a critique of expertise that goes beyond dismemberment. It is expertise chopped and diced.

His chapter about Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*, “The Exercise and Oulipo,” reveals *Exercises in Criticism*’s design. Like Queneau’s text, Bury’s exercise here is to rewrite the same content in multiple different styles. The “styles” that Bury chooses to take up range from “Gertrude Stein” to “Morning Talk Show Host” to “Postcolonial,” and it is here that we glimpse the multiple academic lenses and frames that the book employs. His glosses on “reader response theory,” “New Criticism,” and “Marxism” function the way mandatory dissertation footnotes might — they situate his criticism within a discourse — but in a delightful, pleasurable way.

An argument about conceptual poetry as criticism is also an important part of Bury’s critical model (35). Bury sees the gesture of conceptual writing as performing the work of criticism. His chapters on

conceptualists Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place show this somewhat, but the argument is brilliantly made through Bury's own altered poetic text "To the fact, to the point, to the bottom line (on my grandmother)" in the "Clinamen" section of the book. "To the fact" is a gorgeous stand-alone work, based on the notebooks and interviews of Bury's grandmother, a Jewish-Polish immigrant and Holocaust survivor. The piece is almost entirely in Bury's grandmother's words; we learn about a food shortage in the Jewish ghetto, and how she was separated from her family because she "could pass for a Polish looking girl" (233). Her personality comes through in thank-you notes, letters, documents, and journals. Here Oulipian-style exercises begin to erupt in otherwise unlikely places. The reproduction of a page in her notebook called "negative," presumably notes for improving her English, catalogs words that begin with the prefix "in" (273). The list goes on and on in columns: "injustices / injustice / insecure / insensible / insensitive ..." By the time we get to "inert," we see that Bury has done it — performed conceptual writing as criticism as personal expression as critique of Oulipo.

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Bury's argument about the ways in which constraint-based practices implicate the body is the most exciting to me, and it is the one that remains the most latent — the most potential, to use Oulipian terminology — in the text. Bury designates the chapters "exercises" to "evoke the term's corporeal dimension" and to suggest that "literary constraint has bodily implications even if only by analogy" (15). Sure enough, along with Bury's personality, his body comes into view in this book. We learn that, when he is writing, he has to "go to the bathroom more often than usual," for example (159).

He is not the first to make an argument about the connection of constraint-based practices to the body. Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young use a "slenderizing" technique from Oulipo in their essay "Foulipo" to suggest an active feminist practice in the use and perception of constraint.^[1] They ponder why most language-constraint-based works have been written by men, and also why feminist performance art from the same moment as Oulipo has not had a larger impact on current aesthetic trends. The essay makes a robust argument about feminist reading practices for literary constraints.

When I read this book, I was in the very final stages of a literature PhD program, just like Bury's speaker. One of the chapters of my dissertation deals precisely with the ways in which literary constraint has bodily implications and bodily constraints have literary implications. In the chapter, I examine feminist body art and also Oulipian practices. More largely, many of the issues that interest Bury interest me. For example, techniques of conceptual writing that could also be construed as criticism interest us both. I had previously read most of the works that Bury discusses in his book, but not all of them. I write briefly on *New Impressions of Africa* in a different chapter of my dissertation; I have taught Harryette Mullen's work every quarter since I started creating syllabi; I haven't read Doug Nufer (I wouldn't voluntarily admit that at a party, but *Exercises in Criticism* puts me in the mood for spilling it).

In his effort to depart from Spahr and Young's essay, Bury writes that a dichotomy cannot be made between the body and constraint; rather, "with the notion of the writing exercise, a tantalizing analogy between language and the body underlies Oulipian practice" (66). I'm not sure that Spahr and Young would disagree. However, their writing is about the female body and its lack of representation in constraint-based work. Bury's body, even as it is represented in the text through all kinds of "tantalizing analogies," is not a female body. It is perhaps the typical artist's body — or critic's body — represented more fully and completely as such. In this way it is, as Bury hopes for, more honest than most criticism.

For example, though he "gropes" and "attempts to spread his seed freely" in his work on Harry Matthews's text, *Singular Pleasures*, this is the one section of the book where constraint seems to entirely disappear. The generative device used dictates that colons appear in every sentence in this

section, and the punctuation is remarkable. But it is not restrictive or constrained. The piece recalls Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* in which Acconci loudly masturbated under a ramp in a public gallery space (1971), or Nam June Paik's *Young Penis Symphony*, a performance of artists pushing their penises through a large butcher paper, making holes and patterns (1962). These works critique the liberated or "free" persona of the male artist, able to spread his fertile creativity uninhibitedly. Bury's exercise does not recall works about bodies under constraint like Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, where she underwent a diet to "carve" her body and documented it in nude photographs (1972), or Marina Abramović sitting on ice for predetermined amounts of time (1975), or Adrian Piper's *Catalysis I*, where Piper inhabited crowded public spaces after her clothes had been soaked in cod liver oil, vinegar, rotten eggs, and milk (1970). In fact, Antin, Abramović, and Piper's works would not be useful to Bury's argument because they are not about excess of choice, but about lack of choice — they are about the real, material, patriarchal constraints of the everyday. These works certainly perform a critique, but they perform a critique of ideology. They perform critique of lack — lack of recourses, lack of options, lack of possible representations — not of excess.

When Bury writes about the work of Bernadette Mayer, Harryette Mullen, and Dodie Bellamy, I hear echoes of the feminist tradition of integrating the body into the work in a very material way. Mullen's "damning enactment of language's inherited — and largely hidden — biases" (117), for example, may be part of this tradition of ideology critique.

Though Bury doesn't mention feminist performance artists of the 1960s and '70s, or their tradition of what could also be considered constraint-based work, he does engage a discussion about the ways that gender and identity imply or disavow certain forms. In fact, his critique of a type of purely representational gender politics is exciting. Bury shows that analyzing a text "based on what's missing from it" — his example is the question, "why are there so few female members of the Oulipo?" — could continue ad infinitum. Sure enough. He performs this possibility in the chapter "Absences, Negations, Voids," in which Doug Nufer's novel, *Negativeland*, is appraised by its lack of ice cream trucks, sherpas, and positive thinking. Bury may be arguing that instead of this never-ending expression of lack, we should attend to what is there, and in this case something like a clever critique of masculinity may be in order.

But the chapter "Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Robert Fitterman's *This Window Makes Me Feel*," the place where we expectantly (myself, excitedly!) look for such a critique, the technique seems to suggest that arguments, or academic critiques of any kind, are interchangeable. In this section, Bury performs a mash-up of academic articles from JSTOR and Jane Tompkins's "Criticism and Feeling." The end result is a sort of uneasy caricature of academic feminism. I wonder what I am missing, because it seems to me that the possibility for the type of brilliant helpful work that Bury gestures toward with his critique of representational gender politics comes from this world of academic feminist criticism. This mash-up shows that nothing is outside the boundaries of ludic creative-critical play — but unlike the other sections in *Exercises* that also show this, "Cultural Politics" does not slyly reveal that the argument was there all along.

Bury's critique of masculinity actually arrives in "One should not try to go over the limit," the section of the book that prints a questionnaire that Bury wrote for his father, with his father's answers. Here we see his father's reluctance to analyze his feelings or experiences — his father leaves blank questions like "How come you never tried to teach Emily and me Polish" and "Discuss a sublime experience you have had" and "What is the nature of our relationship." The white space below each question seems aggressively uninformative. Bury's father believes in limits and composure. In Bury's therapy session, he describes his father as shy (295), but in the questionnaire Bury's father appears pointedly guarded. This is tied to Bury's confession in therapy about how masculinity works, that "men are supposed to be silent and stoic and strong" (299).

As Bury ruminates on his sense of being a writer as a way of being in the world, we can't help but wonder how this notion of the silent and strong writer plays out within the argument of *Exercises in Criticism*. What does this sense of being a writer — a strong and silent one — mean for constraint-based practices? It has something to do with the loneliness that makes us feel alone. This is the writerly, strong, lonely silence that separates us — and it is undeniably masculine. Thus Bury's critique of masculinity is bound up in his writing, his body, and the personal aspects of his life. And for Bury, the honest way to go about making the argument is not to talk about what is missing — but rather to discuss the excess on which each one of these aspects of the book relies.

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Exercises in Criticism is not the only recent work to attempt to answer Nada Gordon's question in Fred Moten's talk. And it is not the first to use rule-making and -breaking to do it. Bury's book is part of a contemporary constellation of creative critical work on Oulipo and Oulipian practices, including Daniel Levin Becker's *Many Subtle Channels* (Harvard University Press, 2012), editors Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young's *A Megaphone* (Chain Links, 2011), and editors Matias Viegner and Christine Wertheim's *The /n/oulipian Analects* (Les Fignes Press, 2007). All of these works deviate from standard scholarly or academic form in their discussion of constraint-based texts, and each book has an important claim to make about the form and ideology of criticism more generally.

The /n/oulipian Analects is a collection of papers and presentations from *noulipo*, the conference which took place at CalArts in Los Angeles in 2005. Like Bury's book of exercises, this collection of essays focuses on the legacy of the Oulipo among Anglophone writers, rather than on the French group themselves.^[2] The form of the *Analects* is like a labyrinth, with all the essays, talks, and questions alphabetized by title or theme. Want to find the book's copyright page? Look under "C." The effect is something like Raymond Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa* — it takes a diligent, albeit slightly irritated, reader to follow an essay through the *Analects* — but when one does, the result is like a conversation, which spirals forward. It allows the reader the role of interlocutor, making connections and networks within the materials. Bury's book is indeed more systematic in comparison. I have never been to one of those "boot camps" in public parks, only watched them with curiosity while eating at picnics or taking strolls, and reading Bury's exercises feels a little like this. We are transfixed by the exertion, but we don't take part in it.

Among other creative and scholarly essays, Spahr and Young's "foulipo" was written for the conference and printed in the *Analects* (it also included a performance in 2005). The essay is also included in *A Megaphone* alongside several other "enactments" by Spahr and Young that are scholarly and creative, action-based, political, and academic.

The most recent of this constellation, Daniel Levin Becker's *Many Subtle Channels*, which focuses on French Oulipo, suggests a pleasure-based, reader-centric understanding of Oulipian practices. To this end, like Bury, he exposes that the object of his critical work is deeply personal. Unlike Bury, he doesn't perform any constraint-based exercises in the book. (He does perform these types of exercises elsewhere — as a member of Oulipo, he writes constraint-based fiction, and creates constraints.) The project of *Many Subtle Channels* is friendly and pedagogical: Levin Becker argues that constraints — thinking about them, looking for them, creating them, employing them — make us better readers as well as better writers and he explains their use, function, and history to that end.^[3]

Exercises in Criticism is different because of its book-length focus on recent Oulipian forms. For this reason, it could replace the now almost twenty-five-year-old *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* by Joseph M. Conte, the major and traditionally scholarly work about constraint-based forms and practices in the US.^[4] Bury's book is thrilling for its exercises, which are like distinct essays that illuminate an individual work. In this way, it is not quite a book of sustained criticism. Conte's book, though academic in form, likewise feels this way; in the typology it creates,

each category of serial and procedural form is fairly disparate. The other collections I mention above celebrate the partial, the fragmented, and the piecemeal. Indeed, this could be a characteristic of constraint-based works — they resist overarching argumentative claims — and this quality of Bury’s book shows that he’s in on the secret.

If recent constraint-based literature — texts by Mullen and Fitterman, for example — “critiques excess by farcically enacting it,” as Bury claims it does (19), Bury’s *Exercises* seems to do as much for contemporary criticism. In his avoidance of “monochrome argumentation” in his treatment of Roussel, his attempt at becoming a medium for Dodie Bellamy, his love letter to CAConrad, in his 330 pages of thrilling endeavors at getting to the point, we get the sense that a crucial part of the argument is the sheer heft and sprawl of the work itself. Part of the argument is the very performance of these exercises, and we delight to watch.

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1. Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, “Foulipo,” in *A Megaphone: Some Enactments, Some Numbers, and Some Essays About the Continued Usefulness of Crotchless-Pants-and-a-Machine-Gun Feminism* (Oakland: ChainLinks, 2011), 31–42.
 2. *The /n/ouliplan Analects*, eds. Matais Viegner and Christine Wertheim (Los Angeles: Les Figs Press, 2007), 103, 149.
 3. Daniel Levin Becker, *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 14.
 4. Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

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