

**20. Could Be Inquiry:
A Process Poem**

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Could Be Inquiry was born a process poem, generated using an enumerated sequence of formal grammatical constraints to journal daily experiences. Procedural poetics tasks writers with fresh and exciting challenges by providing, sometimes prescribing, a map of operations to follow. Like following a map's projections of space through the personal experience of travel, procedural poetics, no matter how constrained to a routine of operations (i.e., no matter how systematized or automated), unfolds as a human

journeying through language. The stance of the author is, if anything, a straddling of the acts of reading and writing. Meaning happens, and you, by perceiving it, selecting and assimilating it personally, animate the text as your own. If “the conception of the text as a map or model whose final constitution requires the reader’s active response is a theory of reading,” as Charles Bernstein (1986, p. 236) suggests, procedural poetics works “in contrast to the predetermined interpretations of a text based on the primacy of self or of logic, it is the formal autonomy of the text as model that elicits a response, an interpolation” (p. 236).

“It is here”, observes Lyn Hejinian in the *Language of Inquiry* (2000, p. 203), “that the epistemological nightmare of the solipsistic self breaks down, and the essentialist yearning after truth and origin can be discarded in favor of the experience of experience. The person, in this view, is a mobile (and mobilized) reference point, or, to put it another way, subjectivity is not an entity but a dynamic.” Realized in her work *My Life* (2002), the “autobiography” is converted into a map of linguistic relations assimilated as a *self-in-process*. The author is part of a generative process, rather than the *creator* of the self’s literal representation. As Louis Armand (2007, p. xviii) observes, “here the ‘poetic subject’ has become both a reflection on the conventions that frame or situate it and a self-questioning of how poetics is ‘communicated’ or disseminated.” Publishing the product of process-driving poetic inquiry: a) suggests reconnection between the subject and the object of inquiry, and; b) rejects subjectivity as the *primary* matter of expression (Aji, 2005), and thereby, poetic inquiry. In essence, the poem exists as a doing, rather than a being, a work that is forever, upon encountering each new reader, *in-progress*.

Marjorie Perloff (2004, abstract) writes, “the cardinal rule of procedural poetics is that the constraint in question is not just

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a formal device but becomes a thematic property of the poem or fiction,” attesting to the mutualism of content exploration engineered into the formal device when applying procedural strategies. Procedural poetics can fruitfully inform us about dialogical contexts of our future encounters in increasingly rule governed (algorithmically generated, translated, and re-encoded) exchanges of meaning (Seaman, 2010). The automatons’ communicative presence — as experienced through computer interface constraints, formalized machine-language expressions that format our electronic discourses, automatically generated messages, and so on — becomes exposed to inquiry (James, 2009). Procedurally-based, digital poetic inquiry examines underlying codes of our network behaviours. These practices, as Sean Cubitt (2010, p. 163) suggests, include “e-poets [using] procedural and generative engines, including convolution algorithms and Markov generators to disrupt the probabilistic flow of message, to emphasize the autonomy of the machine as a partner in communication, to undercut the apparent rationalism of the web, but most of all to generate unforeseen and unforeseeable combinations of language.” The rule of constraint becomes at once a generative principle (Deming, 2009), productive for both the object and subject of inquiry.

Similarly, a maxim of the mathematically inclined Oulipo (see Motte, Jr., 1986) an influential French movement focused on procedural poetics, states *a text written according to a constraint describes the constraint*. Accordingly, “there are as many possible constraints as there are poems, and the constraint is not an external form that is readily recognized but may be a rule that remains largely hidden to the reader” (Roubaud, 1998, p. 42). Constrained writing is not new, and well-before Stephane Mallarme processed his seminal poem *Un Coup De Des, Jamais N’Abolira*

Le Hasard in 1897, as a “new art” of possibility, we encounter chance-generated and procedural texts, even in antiquity, as Charles Hartman does in *Virtual Muse* (1996) when referencing the ritualistic prophecies of the Sibyl at Cumae. Today, these combinatorial possibilities remain significant (Watkin, 2007), because — even working under profound formal constraints, for example Jackson Mac Low’s *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1971), or literal constraints, as Christian Bok does in *Eunoia* (2001), his best-selling series of multi-vowel lipograms — the river of language will seldom produce the same poem twice; and if it did, that, too, would be a discovery worth celebrating.

Digitally, the language as river metaphor is now streaming through data *feeds*, such as RSS feeds, triggering automated information dissemination, in the feeder’s fashion, processed and delivered instantly to users. Data feeds can be used to inquire into natural languages-in-transition, language reconfigured while swapping mechanical and digital media, here one catches a glimpse of “metadata as poesis,” what Thom Donovan (2010) sees conjured in Tan Lin’s (2004) *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary* and poems gone wild online, running logos-based algorithmic constraints, such as Jón Örn Lodmefjörð’s “Goggi” which samples blog entries from Google search engines (<http://www.nokturno.org/jon-orn-lodmfjord/>); another epic example is Andrei Gheorghe’s “The Longest Poem in the World” (<http://www.longestpoemintheworld.com/>) composing itself by “aggregating real-time public twitter updates” with 140-character limits, and selecting rhyming couplets from the information overflow. These poems weave the process of selection from the automaton’s spool and authorship hides in the network of users relating their day to day concerns, and, by extension, these poems shed light on the data environments we inhabit (Seaman, 2010).

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The poet literally disappears, with a single exception that the code is unprocessed by its own algorithm — a notable exception, as Floyd Cramer (2005) points out. Poets using procedural constraints eavesdrop on the automated society with its interlocutors of mundane (and fantastical) life online (Lennon, 2000).

Digital procedures are not at all superior to purely analogue processes of chance generation and constrained composition for poetic inquiry. It is through experiencing the unfolding of the process itself, whether by automated or intellectual calculus of selecting options and possibilities, that, “the procedural poem brings material pressure to bear on the supposed ‘evanescence’ of information” (Schiavetta, 2000). Poetic inquiry should be open to all people for whom the joy of watching meaning emerge from language makes the effort of playing with words and syntax worthwhile. I would go further to suggest that poetic experimentation with rule bound constraints, (literal, grammatical, mathematical, conceptual, and so on) which rely less on the authorial exploitation of language than exploration of po/e/tentials in a target discourse, is a missing link in the teaching of writing, especially as this applies to the context of language study and acquisition.

With a pedagogical goal in mind, the applied value of processed-based, experimental writing can be emphatically stated. The subject of inquiry is language, and the object, to discover *how* it can mean, not only what can be achieved by having one’s say. This is to look sideways at the enterprise of teaching composition, eschewing the privilege provided to social uses of language for the type of exploration that believes less in the drama of the explorer than the value of thing discovered. As Bernstein (2007, p. 5) insinuates, “Sometimes one has to shake off even the most sophisticated modes of self-presentation (or self-concealment) to find a sense of where you are.” Procedural poetics suggests

the efficacy of aesthetic praxis for the expert and novice practitioner alike, and, as David Huntsperger (2010) argues, this praxis foregrounds the changing role of literary labour in an age of increasingly automated, digitized communications.

Could Be Inquiry is a playful engagement with the remarkable evolution of procedural poetics — appropriated and applied within the context of my life amid noise, as a teacher of teachers of literacy. From this stance, I understand procedural poetics to be applied language study, capable of inspiring memorable literary works, but also filled with sheer amazement for the writer — or writers, since an operative constraint can include the number of authors (1... ∞). “Writing” and “reading / studying” are utterly interpolated, thus interactive play among writing pals of any age, using *a priori* procedures, perhaps specified texts, specified operations for choosing texts, selecting fragments, ordering, rearranging, editing, shaping, soon becomes engrossing, and this quality of becoming engrossed in the journey of discovery is essential for gleaning non-superficial knowledge. Given the strong emphasis procedural poetics places on language processes, procedural poetics, as a mode of inquiry and learning, belongs in classrooms, that is, writing as the reading of *potentials* that become visible under the focused attention on constraints and disciplined aesthetic selection of linguistic resources. This focus on a finite set of textual operations frees up the writer for the work of imagining meanings and experimenting with voicing, pacing, and word play.

Sciavetta specifies two criteria that, whether “recognized or denied,” distinguish procedural poetics from other formalist and neoformalist genre conventions, such as sonnets, which are also schematized and constrained. The delimiting criteria are

- 1) the feature of “non-normative systematicity,” which suffices to define all reading and writing constraints;

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2) the feature of “textual objectivation” of this non-normative systematicity, which helps to define the field of constrained texts produced by the common action of reading and writing constraints.

Following constrained creative procedures allows student-centered inquiry to take place strategically, with constraints designed to meet individual learning needs. The invention of a constraint is as central to the creative process as the procedure itself. But, while some constraints operate solely at the level of the letter and word (as do games, such as crosswords or computer word games, and alternatively forms of examination and assessment, such as cloze tests), the key to integrating procedural poetics into language education is to incorporate constraints from multiple linguistic strata. This way we can build very specific curricula out of constraints designed for strategic pedagogical interventions. Instead of a dull exercise (e.g., the filling in of preformatted blanks) each procedural operation illuminates specific linguistic features and functions through creative and often profound inquiry into ordinary language use. A founding member of Oulipo, Marcel Benabou, in his essay “Rule and Constraint” (Benabou, 1986), offers a matrix of possible constraints to bring about effective procedural composition. The linguistic strata range from letter, through phoneme, syllable, word, syntagm, sentence, to paragraph, upon which operations ranging from displacement to substitution, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, deduction, and contradiction can be performed. Although mathematically inspired, these operations have clear correlatives to common editing and revising procedures. From this point, one can begin to see the expanse that lays ahead, a textual expanse of almost limitless possibility, perhaps the foremost frontier of the writer as a student of language — a task for which procedural methods of poetic inquiry offer great promise of discovery and adventure.

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Could be frankly welcome or otherwise expected to breathe in the stable of making meaning; problem is, I'm ambivalent as noise.

Could inquire with dust. Be still my fleeting heart. Now I know how mothers feel, seeing from both sides of their heads.

Poetic inquiry is about time mismanagement. In the eighties West Coast poets had stickers: PDU or, Poetry Demands Unemployment.

Sloppy theory before coffee and by eight I'm slinging grammar's pedagogy, parsing, hashing, cashing in on words like a Google bot; by noon, why Shakespeare.

Dear Poetry, I am sorry that I was too busy teaching to answer your text message. Did you come up with word of the day? Yes, "eye-ache".

Someone always suggests woodsy. I say brouhaha. Annie says yarmulke. Use it in a sentence. Get business cards saying Bio-interoperability Expert.

Can only write poems when avoiding other deadlines or sick from draughts. I flatten out like a cryogenic frog. "Listless" arrests me; "ex-pensive" locks the cuffs!

Could use la-di-dah as a verb. What am I working with here, hawk or handsaw? You decide when this tune blows southerly, only hear hubbub.

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The book I am working on, "Why I Hate Myself and Other Tales of Learning" is a living book. It has been inquiring about you.

Bi-pedagogical or otherwise predisposed? Requires plastic heterology and sonar homophonics. Noise is a readerless text. Often goes without saying.

Could be read as something never written. Could even be backward about-face off centre and cinematically upbeat. Later, can't believe my good fortune.

To manifest is magical art. Could be why gifting materializes inquiry. Struggle, though, with my gift as the citizen of heroic, helpless nations at war.

Here on the periphery of glocal, nothing makes matter matter. Aboard #4 for the fourth time today: Tomorrow's destination, today's lifetime.

Could be winning in a Skinner box (e.g. use only verbs that are also nouns, adjectives, adverbs even): Right hand paper cuts. Left foot stop starts.

What are the fantastic things you will do when you are a poem?
When I am a poem I will pick up the ocean and let it spill out my eyes —

The whale fish, shipwrecks, manta rays, rainbow knuckled coral, and the bones. Oh the bones, like slivers dozing cold and weightless among my thoughts.

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These ones are marks. Everybody's a mark. Competitive ethos of schooling takes over; anger at the marks making you one, and me too.

The tireless judgement, grading machine scoring hard ground, chalk passing on a blackboard of risk, origami notes, back seat silting writs.

Cool is a cenotaph for space needles. Here lies a scraper of skies, sampler of dusk, the yet-again of a tagline describing doubt in the last legally alienated nation.

Or provides enough headroom for all frequencies — X-ray dictionaries dividing the universe, defeat on ramparts of a thesaurus waiting for news I cannot deliver.

Could inquire with school kids by collecting garbage. Write large horizontal letters spelling O B L I T E R A C Y across the field.

Could expand the market with phew, ph-f-f-it, wiz-zz, whirrrr, the stereo typesetters clock, a cloche cliché, rocks a nugatory noise-sense.

Could turn in afterlifelong learning lesson plans nagging like the dirty orphanage of corporatized consciences. Could be a blame game.

Could be Upskilling Blatant Complicity, aha, you got me, drowning the Wakemap Mound and where we fished for cannibal owls in the museum of dongles.

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“Actually is the antidote to media,” a Japanese professor tells westerners who still can’t laugh and think at the same time. ROTFL from Zen on.

Could be harder that it looks, better than it feels, further than you know. Arp saw waves horsing around posing as analog emetic remainders.

You are what you delete. Merry-go-round Robin Hoods wink with veiled edits and bandit manifolds, the next mission: Dream conspicuously.

I sing, “Under the surface of the climate, in proximity to towns and seas, near apartments of the dreary cling — water falls on Ptolemy,” incessantly.

Could wake in dread of the first days post-surplus when reason, that rickety lexical bandwagon with one wheel smaller than its twin, is no longer within.

Howls with wolves, opines with water, teaches with wood: tech’s a jolt, pencils, boards, and buildings, desks, doors, and drawers notwithstanding.

Could be inquiry by journaling to dwell in a language that is feral and in a wilderness of connotation wielding a simian zoom I remember this.

This is timed for 10 AM. Please man, it’s me, open up! “Hath each a choice with the help of advertising”. Gotta make it to noon with Freud’s outer nephew.

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The public-walk, fingering a single-file wrap-around self-image where a small smear blemishes the once bright background of a captioning career.

Down pours four-hour Siwashed abridgements — kneed kneepads next time. Could open a dead letters' fugitive press. Could scale the text to a century by the cannery.

Mirror, presto in evolution through evaluation; press to test this assessment profile. Seen, the mean cooks under controlled yearning, a table-turning remix.

Robopoetics rehashing the good ship lollipop in a morass of exhausted attention spam. Microwaves dangling participles that burn in 5 alarm fire sales.

Flame the entitled with a bucket of pleas? Oh please, say cheese to flamboyant photo ops: Aeon's apathy, ear buds blooming in the Public retreat from us to us with us.

Cut Vinyl, sweet as Belle Aire, unstuck my craw strewn with glyphs of gas. Could be Assyrian chanting or rebab, even Artaud, screaming. Goes to show regardless.

Meditation: Concentrate on the noise of the body, the organs minding your business. Later, hear genetic noise, mute chromosomes, waking dormant DNA.

Metabolize vitamin C, reap keenness of smell and flocking kin reflex. Concentrate until the reverted invertebrate reverberates a cascading million-year memory.

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Could write a song. The world's online and aren't you impressed?
Poetic inquiry comes at the end of an irreproducible coping
mechanism.

Know two ways around it, when you're in peak form, complex
failure is a thrill. Let's return to a place that is a field folded
between hemispheres of Duncan's gift...

Conversational chatter between god and artificial intelligences —
the data feed. You can feed it anything. Garbage. Radio. A Vermeer
Toothpaste...

Nothing to feed the feed, but feed itself. The lesson of the corvine
is to accept noise, caw and own it: the Internet is a pop power
line, a rookery.

Massively Multiplayer Organism ingests expiry dates: Obverse
critical mass extinction in the endgame engine theorized under
enabling cold war constraints!

Without noise procreation is joyless, arts and athletics are devoid
of genius, magnificence goes un-savoured, perchance to dream in
an empty space?

Making claims for things inaccessible, inexcusable, forgotten:
Excitement is a bi-product of noise in the brain, and enthusiasm,
of noise in the soul.

Could be a bowl of dust, broke up, rapt about life, leaving some
for next time. Scheherazade does, so we slow and whoa on
through drafts.

Ambiguity, wherefore art thou! Is this too honest? In temples
vigorous with almighty triangulation, grace assumes disciplined
positions, geographies in fingertips.

What means of ends and means? Could be answers are lovers with
banquet eyes — could be a joy stick in the mud, a josh stuck in his
tree, a white blood cell phoneme.

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