

“Productivity of Constraint”: Wit Pietrzak in Conversation with Philip Terry

WP: To begin with, some orientation points. You were born in Belfast but have lived outside Northern Ireland for extended periods of time. How much do you feel part of the Irish literary tradition? And is a notion of tradition a relevant idea for you (especially in view of the advice the poet-pilgrim receives from Dr Moss in your rendition of *Dante’s Inferno*: “Steer a path between the mainstream and the / Experimenters, that way nobody can claim you, // You’ll always be your own man”)?

PT: I left Ireland when I was around 11, at the height of the Troubles. Since then I’ve lived in England and in France. My sense of a poetic tradition, to start with that, is one that stands in opposition to the mainstream English tradition of the Movement, looking beyond that to European, and American traditions, especially the New York School. Irish traditions have their place here—I still find richnesses in the work of Heaney, for example—but the important Irish figures for me have mainly been prose writers, or writers best known for their prose, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Joyce and Beckett. Taking the novel tradition more generally, I am most drawn to the anti-novel, writing that questions the assumptions of the well-made novel, whether that’s in Robbe-Grillet or Perec or Thomas Bernhard. The line from *Dante’s Inferno* that you quote perhaps hints at my anxiety at being claimed, or overly influenced, by any single tradition, as well as my conviction that, however experimental the work is, it needs to be accessible.

WP: On a related note. One could argue that in spite of itself almost, modern Irish literature was born in experiment (whether through the unwilling innovativeness of the Yeats-Synge camp or the very willing, almost willful, experimentalism of Joyce and later Beckett) but then that aspect of Irish writing has left the limelight, with for example Denis Devlin

and Brian Coffey receiving less attention than more conventional poets like Kavanagh. Your work features some of the most exciting experiments in contemporary English-language poetry but you tend to derive them from Oulipo rather than either the Irish or the British avant-garde traditions. What is your take on Irish innovative poetry and prose, both past and present, also as compared to the situation in Britain? And where would you situate your own brands of experimental writing? (Forgive the breadth and the generality of these two questions but I feel they can set the scene for the readers who might be less familiar with your work.)

PT: As I said earlier, the Irish experimental tradition, for me, is to be found in Swift, Sterne, Joyce and Beckett. These writers are open to the play of language, the play of the signifier so to speak, which is something I also find in Oulipo and its use of the lipogram, for example. Much Irish writing seems to me to have something in common with Oulipo, which may be to do with the constraint of working within the English language itself. Heaney, as I argued recently in a piece in the *London Review of Books*, is sometimes an instinctive Oulipian, as in his poem “Two Lorries,” where he rings the changes on the sestina using homophonic variations on the end-words. This is also the case with the most interesting and exciting poetry now being written in the UK. A key figure for me has been Tim Atkins, whose exhilaratingly free translations of Petrarch and Horace, and most recently Ovid, are explosive, opening the page up to almost infinite possibilities of play and language. Without his example, I’d never have rewritten Dante in the way I did, though even here the influence is more in the idea than the execution.

WP: On to more specific matters. *tapestry* retells the story of the Norman conquest through the eyes of the nuns who are charged with weaving what would become known as the Bayeux Tapestry. The novel features a brilliant language woven out of English, both Early Middle and contemporary, French and Latin, inviting comparisons to *Finnegans Wake* (an episodic character in *tapestry* is named Eyrawicker); but also, to name only the more obvious allusions, it harks back to *The Canterbury Tales* (the nuns tell each other stories that lie behind the fragments of the tapestry each is working on) and the *Decameron* (the nuns’ stories are a form of respite and relief from the pent-up traumas of Norman oppression). How conscious were these parallels? How does the language correspond to the nuns’ yarns that the scribe compares to the mazy flightpath of a bird, “since [birds] do not follow STRAIGHT LINES”?

PT: In the history of literature in England you have work in Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Middle English, and some writings in Anglo-Norman,

but there's a gap in the history between the Anglo-Saxon works and the early Middle English works. What I was trying to do with the language in *tapestry*, and nobody has really picked up on this, was to invent that language that came between these periods—which is why it's a mish-mash of lots of different kinds of language. The occasional veerings into the contemporary add something comic—it's a clash of languages that I find in the New York School—but they were justified for me by the fact that the narrator has an ability to see into the future. The parallels between this work and Chaucer and Boccaccio are absolutely conscious—I reread these writers several times while working on the book, as well as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and many now forgotten poems recounting the Norman Conquest. But the main engagement is with reading the images in the Bayeux Tapestry aslant, as telling counternarratives to the official Norman story. The most obvious image that can be read in this way is one depicting a mother and child fleeing a house torched by the Normans, but there are many others, which give the fabric of the stories. The stories, then, are drawn directly out of the nuns' stitches, and this goes for the writing too, with its weave of different kinds of language. Finding the right language, essentially a lost or repressed language, was crucial in letting these stories come out, and they are all stories which run counter to the straight lines of the official Norman propaganda which the Bayeux Tapestry seems to encode.

WP: *tapestry* keeps returning to the idea of parallel versions of one's life story. The novel ends with the scribe admitting that like the nuns' yarns stitched into the margins of the tapestry, her chronicle is "unjustified" followed by the word amen. Playfulness belies what is a staggeringly complex suggestion: the chronicle is indeed unjustified in the sense that it is not verifiable by lived experience (many stories revolve around King Harold's fate after the battle of Hastings, all hearsay), reason (most stories include magic realist elements) or the royal approval (King William mustn't know of the secret meanings behind the tapestry); but then the text of the novel is justified on both sides, so that it seems the form is what after all yields justification to the arbitrary assortment of yarns. Could you justify this "unjustified" ending?

PT: To begin with the idea of parallel versions of one's life story, there's a sense in which the whole book is conjured out of my own name, Philip Terry, though I've tended to keep quiet about this. Philip means "lover of horses," and horses occupy large sections of the Bayeux Tapestry—and played a crucial role in William's victory at Hastings. Terry can be traced back to the French "terre isle"—literally "earth island" or even "slag heap"—but it can be seen to signify also the mounds of earth erected by

the Normans on which they built their castles, the construction of which are depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry. With the word “unjustified” at the end of the novel, it’s fair to say that my original intention was to have the text of the novel unjustified throughout, which would have given this moment added force, but this was lost during the publisher’s typesetting of the book. But the point stands—the stories are unjustified as far as the Norman account goes, the “justified” propaganda, but they carry their own truth. It is also a woman’s truth, as is hinted at in that “amen,” which can be read as “not men” or “without men.”

WP: Moving on to your poetry. *Quennets* utilizes Raymond Queneau’s constraint-predicated form that he employed in his last book *Morale élémentaire* (which you translated). However, you explain in the note at the end of the volume that the first sequence of poems, “Elementary Estuaries,” is “based around estuary walks in Essex,” the next one traces the walk round the Berlin Wall Trail, the titular “Mauerweg,” and the last “Waterlog” “retraces the steps of W. G. Sebald through Suffolk” which he recounted in *The Rings of Saturn*. Such precision in relating the poems to place and personal history emphasizes the biographical element in the construction of the book but at the same time one of the effects of the poems is that the “I” is reduced to the “eye”: it is the connection between the landscape or cityscape and the language that comes to the fore. As a result, one suggestion is that the poems allow language and material reality to speak out, with the human subject being only a space on which this language-matter interplay is registered. Could you say more about these tensions between the personalized motivation of the book and what seems to be an attempt at releasing language from the overbearing presence of the speaker? Furthermore, it would seem that you dispose of the I-constraint in favour of or by means of adopting and adapting Queneau’s formal constraints.

PT: *Quennets* grew out of work we were doing at the University of Essex on an MA course called Memory Maps, set up by Marina Warner. The idea was to explore what was then an emergent form of writing on place, the psychogeographical, which had historical roots in East Anglia going back to Sir Thomas Browne, that simultaneously explored history, folklore, biography, autobiography and fiction. I thought I could bring Oulipo to this—which, like psychogeography, has connections to the work of the Situationists—as well as poetry. The idea that the “I” of the poems is reduced to an “eye” was an observation made by Kevin Jackson, and it wasn’t something I was conscious of when writing. But it is true that the poems are about an engagement with place, or places, and the places in question were not ones I had a particular history in relation to. So

autobiography was not part of the mix, the poems were more concerned with immersion in a particular place at a particular time so as to let this space itself speak, though the “I” returns in certain places, in terms of an intersubjective “I.” So at one point in the Berlin walks I started to hallucinate after walking too far on one particular day, and this hallucination comes into the poems. Elsewhere the poems are made out of found text, signs, scribbles, information panels, and overheard voices encountered during the walks, and here the aesthetic is one of collage, where the writer is more of an arranger of text than a creator as such. The “I,” then, is always at a distance, but always capable of emerging into the present of the poem, but not as a historical subject, rather as a subject-in-process, a subject-in-the-moment. In this sense the subject in these poems is formed by the activity of walking, rather than being a subject with a prior and given identity. This is something like the “paper author” that Roland Barthes refers to in his essay “From Work to Text”—he has Proust in mind—where in a work consisting of a tissue of quotations, the author may still make a return, but on a different level.

WP: And again, on a more general note. What is your writing process like? I would imagine it varies, but are there any discernible patterns? At what stage do you determine what constraint(s) will be adopted? Does form precede the content, do they emerge jointly?

PT: The ideal work, for me, is where the form and the content are indistinguishable, like the two sides of a sheet of paper. You can think of an idea you’d like to write about, but you may never get it written if you can’t find the right form which enables it to take shape in language. With *tapestry* the idea of telling this from the point of view of the women embroiderers occurred when I first looked at the Bayeux Tapestry, when I was living in Normandy. But it was years before I found the language in which to tell it. Here an idea preceded the form or “constraint,” with *Quennets* it was perhaps the other way round, though as the work proceeded, the form had to be adapted to accommodate its material, as you mentioned earlier. You could say my process is twofold, then, and involves throwing up ideas and new forms, but only when these coincide or begin to mesh, does the space for writing open up.

WP: Although the political implications of a book like *tapestry* or *Dante’s Inferno* are clear, it is *Dictator*, a retelling of *Gilgamesh*, that foregrounds the critique of imperialist policies of ancient peoples, as well as of modern empires: “+ + + day | and night | he [DICTATOR] make | the weak | suffer / + + + day | and night | he ag | ent hunt | down. . . | the ref | ugee | who come | to the city | for shel | ter + + + / + + + day | and night

| he sec | urity pol | ice beat | the ref | ugee | in the | prison | behind | closed door.” The import of these lines echoes with a denouncing cry against all manner of tyrannies, the US being the latest addition. Moreover, the translation was undertaken as part of the Stories in Transit project that organizes storytelling workshops in the UK and in Palermo. Could you say something more of your role in the project? And, inevitably on these sort of occasions, the pressing question is to what extent do you believe that poetry can make something happen?

PT: Stories in Transit was set up by my friend and ex-colleague Marina Warner and I've been involved with this since it began. We work with refugees in Palermo, and the basic idea is that while governments may, at best, offer these young people asylum, and give them citizenship, clothes, and even a mobile phone, that their imaginative life isn't catered for. We get them involved in storytelling, which is something they already have in their cultures, as they often come from countries where traditions of storytelling are already rich, often richer than they are in European countries. We use drawing, animation, music and theatre practices, as well as poetry and storytelling, and the results are often startling. One of the projects we did in Palermo was to perform a version of *Gilgamesh*, and it was this performance, and the experience of working with these students, that partly fed into my version, *Dictator*. The lines you quote, about the treatment of refugees in Europe, aren't in the original poem, even if the figure of Gilgamesh is to some extent a tyrant, at least at the beginning of the poem, before he encounters Enkidu. Stories in Transit has had a really positive impact on these young people's lives, and has been transformative in a real sense: it has made something happen. Whether the same can be said of poetry in general it is hard to say, it's an old and vexed question, which goes back at least as far as Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." But poetry, partly because of its non-commercial status, can speak outside of the norms of neo-liberal economies, it can act as a witness, and it can give us a space in which we can say that which otherwise might not have been said. It can create a space in which we can think. In that sense, rather than make "nothing happen" poetry can make "nothing" happen, and in this nothing, this pause, something new can emerge. Poetry finds a way, it is "A way of happening" as Auden puts it later in the same poem, in a line that is often forgotten.

WP: While on the topic of *Dictator*, the poem features another amazing re-invention of English, which mixes Jean-Paul Nerrière's Globish with attempts at evoking cuneiform through the division of words into two-syllable units. In your afterword you explain in more depth the rationale behind the poem's formal experiments but I wonder if (and if so, how) the formal constraint you adopted speaks to the politics of the poem.

PT: As I said earlier, for me form and content should be one. Here the form, the language, is a version of Business English. And just as *tapestry* inverts the language of propaganda found in the Bayeux Tapestry, here the work of the poem is to invert the language of business, the language of neo-liberalism, somehow squeezing poetry out of this economically oriented language, and othering it as it does so. It interested me, too, that the poem was first written in cuneiform, a script that had its origins in methods of recording business transactions, and that the poem itself dealt with trade, as epics frequently do, here trade in hard wood. So the form is absolutely enmeshed with the politics of the poem. On another level the original poem is about deforestation, so there is always already a political aspect to the poem, one that is obviously increasingly relevant today.

WP: *When Two Are in Love or As I Came to Behind Frank's Transporter* is another genre-defying composition. Divided into thirty two chapters, each beginning with a sentence or sentences that are later altered at every subsequent iteration through substitution of one word at a time, the book tells stories of love and violence, whose fate, it appears, is determined by the operations of language. The opening sentence, "We held hands and walked along the beach," after thirty two revisions becomes "They swapped shotguns carefully, hurried down way-marked coast." The aura of levity is, however, tampered by recurrent images of violence and bloodshed, as though to suggest that regardless of how innocuous one may be, he or she is only one wrong word from becoming a full-throttle assailant. Could you say a little more about this linguistic potential for violence in the book?

PT: I don't think there was any intention to tip the stories here towards violence, but you are right, this happens quite frequently. On a narrative level, I suppose it echoes the method of composition. The book is written in collaboration with James Davies, and having set up the base narrative—a kind of pastiche of a Mills and Boon romance—we would change one word at a time in alternation. Of course, each of us saw directions we would like to push the metamorphosing narrative in, but we were unaware of each other's intentions, so often James would send things in a direction that completely contradicted and threw off track what I was trying to do, and vice-versa. So violence is at the very heart of the compositional process. At the same time, the kind of romance that Mills and Boon publishes, always has potential violence in the wings, the violence that comes with rejected loves, or just plain rejection. Romance can always tip into another mode or genre, such as tragedy or crime. The rejected lover of Mills and Boon can easily change into a stalker.

WP: Also, *When Two Are in Love*. . . bears some similarity to “50½ Crime Novels for Beginners” from *Advanced Immorality*, in that both turn employ plots from popular fiction, romance and crime respectively. Mathematics, it seems, is quite a violent business? Could you say more about this permutation technique and how it informs your work?

PT: One aspect of Oulipo, which stems from their interest in mathematics—originally Oulipo was set up, at least in part, to explore the ways in which mathematics could make a contribution to the creation of verbal art—is what they call “combinatory literature.” Oulipo have done a lot of work on this, which they trace back to the combinatorial mathematics of Leibniz, and the poetry of Ramon Lull. You find this in the fiction of Italo Calvino, where he often presents not just a single narrative, but a dizzying array of different and contradictory narrative possibilities, as in his short story “The Count of Monte Cristo.” And permutation is found in the work of other Oulipians, such as Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*, where a single story is told in 99 different ways, and Georges Perec’s “81 Easy-Cook Recipes for Beginners,” where a small number of instructions are combined and recombined to create a seemingly endless variety of recipes. I used the same method in “50½ Crime Novels for Beginners,” though less systematically than Perec. It’s a method which is used in *tapestry* too, most obviously in the tales about King Harold, but it isn’t something I have used systematically in any single long work. As to the “violence” of this method, while that may happen, as it does in *When Two Are In Love*. . ., it can also open into the opposite of violence, in that it can create an open form of possibilities. In that respect it is playful, even childlike, and funny, as so often in Perec.

WP: A lot of your work is to do with rewriting of classics: in addition to *Gilgamesh*, Dante’s *Inferno* and Queneau’s formal pattern from *Elementary Morality*, there is also the superb revision of Shakespeare’s sonnets. What is it that attracts you to such revisionary work? What constraints have you encountered when reworking *Inferno* and Shakespeare (your poet-pilgrim questions his ability to approach a work such as *Inferno* but finds the strength to carry on and does a brilliant job along the way)?

PT: My interest in rewriting goes back a long way. I’ve always liked this kind of writing, which is often seen as postmodern, and which you can find in feminist revisionings of classic texts and in works like Robert Coover’s *Pinocchio in Venice* and Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote*. One of its appeals, among many, is that it liberates you from autobiographical writing. One of my first books was an edited collection of stories revisioning Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphosed*, with contributions by Margaret Atwood, Michèle Roberts and A. S. Byatt among others. But it was largely the work of Tim Atkins—

and also Stephen Rodefer—which opened my eyes to the possibilities for poetry here, and which indirectly led me towards tackling Shakespeare and then Dante. In *Shakespeare's Sonnets* I used a variety of more-or-less Oulipian constraints, rewriting the sonnets by using only one vowel and so on, but the majority of the poems were composed by using collage, collaging together the Shakespeare with found text taken from broadsheets, where a piece on anti-ageing products, for example, could stand in for a sonnet concerned with the process of ageing. If the word “star” appeared in the poem, I’d use the *Daily Star*, if the word “world” appeared, I’d use *The News of the World* and so on. With the Dante, there wasn’t really a “constraint” in the Oulipian sense, unless you call the method of translation “up-to-date” after Harry Mathews, but when I showed Harry this book, while he really liked it, and called it a “smasheroo,” he didn’t consider it to be particularly Oulipian. The work here is one of finding equivalents for the historical situations in Dante—substituting Belfast’s Catholics and Protestants for the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Dante’s Florence, substituting Bobby Sands for Ugolino and so on. It is more like performing Shakespeare in contemporary dress than anything strictly Oulipian.

WP: Finally, what are you working on now?

PT: Like Calvino, and like Perec, I tend to work on a lot of books at once. Perec compared this to farming practices, where one field might be left fallow for a year while others were in use. I’ve got a book coming out next year from Carcanet, called *The Lascaux Notebooks*, which is one of my favourites. It invents an author who the book is attributed to, Jean-Luc Champerret. Champerret takes the signs found at the Lascaux caves, and which archaeologists say we can’t read, and ascribes meanings to them—a sign resembling an upturned “v” becomes a mountain, a sign resembling a line of dots becomes a path, etc. And then he inserts these signs in 3x3 grids which are also found at Lascaux and reconstructs poems out of them, the first Ice Age poems. Apart from that I’ve just published a book of poem-objects in a box, *Turns*, one of them ringing the changes on “I wandered lonely as a cloud” in a combinatorial way to get alternative sentences, like “I wintered silent as a cop”—it’s a flip-flap book, like Queneau’s *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*. And I’m working on some other things, including a book called *From* and a book which uses Oulipian forms to document the pandemic, called *Covids*. *From* is a book which consists of extracts from books I’d like to write but perhaps don’t have time to bring to full fruition, in a word it’s a book of fragments of novels, plays, poems, essays, etc. A proleptic anthology in a word. It’s fun, and it solves the problem that all writers face, in that we can’t write everything we want to write because we don’t have time. As *Tristram Shandy* puts it,

the more we write the more we have to write—“Will this be good for your worships’ eyes?” Apart from that I’ve written a play about Boris Johnson and the pandemic, a kind of rewrite of *Ubu Roi*, but I’ve no idea how you go about putting a play on, so it might just remain on my laptop.

Wit Pietrzak is Professor of British Literature at the University of Lodz, Poland. He specializes in modernist Irish and British poetry, and theory of literature. His recent publications include *The Critical Thought of W. B. Yeats*, *Constitutions of Self in Contemporary Irish Poetry* and “All Will Be Swept Away”: *Dimensions of Elegy in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon*.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2231-7036>
wit.pietrzak@uni.lodz.pl

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Philip Terry was born in Belfast, and is a writer and translator. He is the editor of *The Penguin Book of Oulipo* (2020) and of *The Lascaux Notebooks* (2022), the first ever anthology of Ice Age poetry.
pterry@essex.ac.uk