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Something More Than This

Near the turn of the millennium, I wrote an essay that explored the Fibonacci sequence through the death of my father, filled with many numbers, but mostly five: the number of digits, and how they form a living hand. I had been reading an old out-of-print book called *Patterns in Nature* and falling in love with the photographs of spiraling succulents and sunflower seeds. I don't understand numbers well enough to understand why these patterns are beautiful, but I believe in their calculability. In a sequence of the first twelve Fibonacci numbers, *eight* and *one hundred forty-four* are "non-trivial perfect powers," which is meaningless to me. When I multiply eight and one hundred forty-four together, I am given one thousand seventy-two. Still meaningless, perhaps. But if imbued with meaning, or if explored in other contexts as more than a number, I find an essay.

In the year 1072, the Song dynasty scientist and statesman Shen Kuo was appointed as the head official for the Bureau of Astronomy, where he plotted orbits three times a night, for five years. He was the equivalent of a Da Vinci or a Galileo, hundreds of years before Benjamin Franklin, Tesla, or Richard Feynman.

He proposed gradual climate change.

Made topographical maps.

Discovered artifacts.

"Because I had only my writing brush and ink slab to converse with, I call it Brush Talks," he writes of his essay collection. His chapters are characterized by the number of paragraphs, and someone

has noted they amount to 584. I do not understand the importance of these numbers, though I comprehend numerical obsessions.

As described in his *Dream Pool Essays*, Shen Kuo enjoyed the company of the “nine guests,” his figurative names for his musical instrument, his favorite board game, Zen meditation, ink, tea, alchemy, poetry, conversation, and drinking wine. I suddenly wonder about this man who was so many things. (“Mathematician, astronomer, meteorologist, geologist, zoologist, botanist, pharmacologist, agronomist, archaeologist, ethnographer, cartographer, encyclopedist, general, diplomat, engineer, inventor, academy chancellor, finance minister, governmental state inspector, poet, and musician,” says Wikipedia.) He wrote the first known description of a tornado. He studied fossils and hypothesized landforms changing until mountains were far from the sea; he recognized that bamboo had grown in places it would not again, because of climate change. A century before Francis Bacon he understood the rainbow’s spectrum. He recorded an eyewitness account of a UFO, and for the tenth century the description is refreshing, almost contemporary.

Shen Kuo writes: “Those in the world who speak of the regularities underlying the phenomena, it seems, manage to apprehend their crude traces. But these regularities have their very subtle aspect, which those who rely on mathematical astronomy cannot know of. Still even these are nothing more than traces.” This passage is referenced by Nathan Siven in his essay “Science and Medicine in Chinese History” to demonstrate

the typical belief [. . .] that natural processes wove a pattern of constant relations too subtle and too multivariant to be understood completely by what we would call empirical investigation or mathematical analysis. Scientific explanation merely expressed, for finite and practical human purposes, partial and indirect views of that fabric.

The use of constraints in writing are an attempt to place the chaos of life in an order, “for finite and practical human purposes.” To comprehend?

Numbers lead me to read sentences like “Thus, a male bee always has one parent, and a female bee has two.” Questions challenge me to read on, indefinitely. (Why not thirty-four, I ask myself?)

The reason I’m looking for is almost twelve years ago when I’m exchanging essays with a group of friends and someone, perhaps Patrick Madden says— “Let’s write a short essay using a prime number as the formal constraint.” The archive is lost to me, but I find discussion in my email about the 409 project: we each wrote an essay with exactly that number of words and a deadline of April the ninth. Later we wrote another piece which was due 6/13, with—as you would expect—613 words.

Some of us were finally beginning to publish. Others were reading deeply into vast oceans of words and finding hidden paths.

(What do you do with numbers? Do they console you? Perhaps the reverse?)

Dearest M— on prime numbers:

“This a-tomic, from the Greek, irreducible, Democritus-ian, un-cutttable, relative indivisibility, as some kind of theme, subtext, over-text”

(Essays?)

But we were all suddenly alone, you see.

Outside of poetry, constraint becomes avant-garde. The poet employs sestina, ballade, pantoum, ghazal, villanelle, sonnet. For the prose writer there are sentences and paragraphs. Prose poets may create fragmented narratives or rely on paragraph structures and condensed language to convey everything, to be poems which do not verse. (Ad-verse?) Words begin to play at disguise.

The writers of *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or OuLiPo, were my first introduction to constrained writing. Georges Perec’s listing, word mapping, and re-imagining of the page’s space attracted me. I have

never read his 1969 novel, *La disparition* (The Disappearance), either in French or in its English translations, but found the story of the work to be evocative. A lipogram, the most ancient constrained form, omits a single letter, which is what Perec does in *La disparition* by foregoing the letter “e.” English translations include Gilbert Adair’s *A Void*.

In “Reading Georges Perec,” scholar Warren Motte explains:

The absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, and the absence of the E in *A Void* announces a broader, cannily coded discourse on loss, catastrophe, and mourning. Perec cannot say the words *père, mère, parents, famille* in his novel, nor can he write the name *Georges Perec*. In short, each “void” in the novel is abundantly furnished with meaning, and each points toward the existential void that Perec grappled with throughout his youth and early adulthood. A strange and compelling parable of survival becomes apparent in the novel, too, if one is willing to reflect on the struggles of a Holocaust orphan trying to make sense out of absence, and those of a young writer who has chosen to do without the letter that is the beginning and end of *écriture*.

Mother, father, parents, family, (self?), writing: all absent.

In the same meticulous essay, Warren Motte maps the structure of Perec’s *Life, A User’s Manual*, explaining the “formal arcana” that “constrain and order every aspect” of the novel over seven hundred pages:

The sequence of chapters in the novel is determined by a figure from chess known as the “Knight’s Tour,” in which a knight visits every square of the chessboard once and only once. Another organizational constraint is still more arcane, and involves an algorithm borrowed from higher mathematics known as the “orthogonal Latin bi-square order 10.” Perec used that algorithm to elaborate pre-established lists of the 42 different elements (objects, characters, situations, literary allusions and quotations, and so forth), that would

figure in each of the ninety-nine chapters of *Life*. What results from processes such as those is a text that is arguably the most highly “constructed” novel in French literature.

Does knowing the underlying formal arcana help us to enjoy either text better?

I’m inclined to admire structure within a crafted text as much as I do the effect. Rarely am I such a sensualist that I find a body of words and a story satisfying enough. Surely other readers also find a subtler pleasure in an author’s obeisance to form? How delicious to know the secret code!

Before the prime number constraint my friends and I explored so many years ago, never had I worked so hard to limit words to a fixed number. The fixity made the exercise meaningful and difficult. In *The Poetics of Music*, Composer Igor Stravinsky insists that form strengthens our creativity:

In art as in everything else, one can build only upon a resisting foundation: whatever constantly gives way to pressure, constantly renders movement impossible. My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself [. . .] my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.

When Hamlet says “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” he means for all of us to hear it, and for all of us to say it. The length of line and breadth of tone: the Celtic and Roman tongues, completely overtaken by Anglo-Saxon words; the Latin words written by Christian monks. Then the terror of Vikings, the conquering Old or Anglo-Norman, and a delicate overlay of classical Latin and Greek, all leading to the Original Pronunciation of Early Modern English that would have been spoken by Shakespeare himself. The Great Vowel Shift is a bare hand smearing the canvas of sound; we lose dirty puns and embedded rhymes. I wonder if a return to Old

English would amount to more than abandoned grammar and punctuation. In time the Bard would be missed by someone.

(My students claim to not enjoy Shakespeare and most are terrified of math.)

The first time I published a counted piece, my prose parsed into stanza paragraphs with exactly twenty-eight words in each section.

That last sentence had 21 words for comparison.

The previous sentence, only eight.

Five, eight, and twenty-one are sequenced discreetly (discretely?) in Fibonacci's first twelve numbers.

But my essay was written with twenty-eight word segments because I have twenty-eight teeth and the essay was about sex, aging, anxiety, and the loss of power. It was an odd essay, and the first that looked more like a poem than anything I'd written. Counting words was a tool of concision, and with a four-year-old, all of my essays were becoming briefer. I contemplated a collection of essays called *Shortages* and then lost interest in writing them. They were going to have word counts of only prime numbers.

Then one New Year's morning I woke up alone in my hammock having drunk a great deal of absinthe and sparkling wine mixed together in imitation of Hemingway. I had the distinct sense that I wasn't alone, but Johann Sebastian Bach was eyeing me sternly because I had frittered my time away on little essays and hadn't written anything substantial. Concerned that he was right, I began to obsess over what I considered his greatest work. *The Art of Fugue* had always fascinated me but I didn't know why.

It didn't seem enough at first to simply write an essay for every fugue and canon in *The Art of Fugue*. Many months passed before I began to want the prose pieces to explore as many forms as possible; for each to have a precisely counted component matching the number of measures in each of Bach's

compositions. Clues were encoded in a way (hopefully) not immediately apparent or distracting to the reader. It wasn't until the book was under contract and I was days away from sending the final copy to the editor that I read a mathematician's interpretation of Bach's work demonstrating how he had employed the Fibonacci sequence in the number of measures in each fugue and canon. Though Bach was a lover of riddles and games, I did not at first comprehend the humor of the joke that had been played.

For once, obsession revealed something significant to me and I was stunned mute.

I had written in a constrained word count for so long that I began to write essays with numerical impositions. A birthday letter to a man I'd met in Iceland was in stanzas with fifty-three words each. It was his 53rd birthday, but I doubt he read it or even noticed. (Don't waste concern here.)

At a conference, I struggled to compose a panel paper until I decided each paragraph would be exactly one hundred words.

An essay about genocide, ten years as a draft, was converted into paragraphs of one hundred eight words each and completed.

A few nights ago I explained my predicament to a math professor who laughed buoyantly because she understood my obsessive self-pleasuring.

One day you wake up and your hand is a set of five.

One day.

Life feels arbitrary sometimes and I just want a number on every last thing. It's the difference between a godless world and one that might be godded; an organizing principle that for once is graced by being figurable instead of figurative. One that doesn't eschew linearity for its dullness, but because words derive from an endless, continuous source. Each paragraph's texture becomes tightly woven as sentences lose their chaff and words become valuable and visible all at once. My poetry textbook surprised me right there on that ground below the mosaic of light between two oaks. My students thought I was teaching but

secretly I was reading: English is a rhyme-poor language, but poetry had retained rhyming structure as a way of proving the harmonies of the celestial world. Pythagoras, Fibonacci, Bach; they had seated themselves together on a blanket just within my view.

(Whispering?) As if they are nothing but traces.