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Literární Sémiotika v Raných Pracích Harryho Mathewse

Literary Semiotics in the Early Works
of Harry Mathews

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BACHELOR THESIS

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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned. I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Abstract: This thesis is concerned with the early works of American novelist Harry Mathews – in particular the literary semiotics of Mathews' *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*. The work also sets out to deal with Mathews' relationship to the avant-garde collective Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle/Workshop for Potential Literature) and the collective's project of formal experimentation. "Potential literature," treated as a function of sign systems, is approached through a comparative analysis of structures and relations found in seemingly disconnected branches of mathematics.

Keywords: Harry Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, Oulipo, Constraints, Experimental Literatures, Literary Semiotics.

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Abstrakt: Předkládaná práce se zabývá ranými pracemi amerického spisovatele Harryho Mathewse, speciálně literární sémiotikou Mathewsova románu *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*. Práce též pojednává o vztahu Mathewse k avantgardnímu seskupení Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) a jejich společného projektu formálního experimentování. K "potenciální literatuře," zpracovávané jako funkce znakových systémů, se přistupuje pomocí komparativní analýzy struktur a vztahů vyskytujících se ve zdánlivě nepropojených matematických disciplínách.

Klíčová slova: Harry Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, Oulipo, (Literární) Omezení, Experimentální Literatury, Literární Sémiotika.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

My first three novels depend on non-systematic Oulipism, if such a phenomenon exists – a combination of techniques of variation and substitution that often determine the nature of narrative materials as well as their use. In *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, the accumulation of these procedures has become an omnipresent ‘table of obligations’: the text is, to put it mildly, overdetermined. From *The Conversions* to *Odradek*, the use of ‘justifying myths’ in the manner of Joyce and Eliot yields to that of ‘non-certifiable’ materials organized in quasi-systematic ways – a tendency pointing eventually to a complete Oulipisation. Appropriately enough, I had by then discovered the Oulipo itself.

– Harry Mathews, “In Quest of the Oulipo,” *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays*

In an attempt to establish a general characterisation of his early novels - *The Conversions* (New York: Random House, 1962), *Tlooth* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) and *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975 [1971-2]), Harry Mathews (1930 -) retrospectively signals his

departure from Anglo-Saxon traditions towards “Oulipo: the continuation of literature by other means,”¹ to which he is officially elected in 1972 to both become and stay its only American member. Oulipo, whose inaugural name – *Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle*² passed through the following stages: an abbreviation “OU.LI.PO.,” a proper name “OULIPO” to be finally coined as a noun “Oulipo” associated with the adjective “oulipian,” originated in November 1960 as a selective grouping of writers and mathematicians, initially divided into French members and foreign correspondents, formed around Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. A new literary group, appearing as a result of a growing need to re-establish and renew a literature seen as “deteriorated to an appallingly low level,”³ releases its first manifesto which presents the idea of “contrainte,”⁴ restrictive form, as a means of inspiration.

This thesis is concerned with the early works of American novelist Harry Mathews, his early poems, namely *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare* and his third novel *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*. In particular, the literary semiotics of Mathews’ work is taken into consideration. The first chapter presents beginnings of Oulipo, noting their principles. It also announces organisational plan of the thesis. The second chapter introduces major semiotic concepts including basic terminology and approaches. By relating form as input with form as output, a direct correspondence between the methods of analysis and the analysed material is established. Furthermore, some of the Oulipian techniques pertaining to early Harry Mathews are commented upon and illustrated both theoretically and experimentally. The third and fourth chapters deal with Mathews’ pre-Oulipian novel *The*

¹After Clausewitz, cited in Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie eds., *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 1998) 201.

²Workshop for Potential Literature.

³Jacques Roubaud, “Introduction,” trans. Harry Mathews, *Oulipo Compendium*, eds. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998) 37.

⁴The French term “contrainte” translates into English as (literary) constraint, restriction and constrictive or restrictive form.

Sinking of the Odradek Stadium. Following the principles of formal experimentation undertaken by Mathews, essential characteristics of the novel are questioned, reassessed and analysed mathematically. Additionally, literary influence in terms of quotation with adaptation is discussed. Some more light is shed on the significance of the title. The fifth chapter concludes and summarises the results obtained on the basis of comparative analysis of relations and structures found in Mathews' work and various domains of mathematics.

Chapter 2

Form: Restrictive Potentiality or Potential Restriction?

Why stratcher is though? The elements of the consep 'sign' thath you naem, and othrs giust as importort, are grasp by our outerd consciousness in a kine of frifloatin jazz continume, so when I see the infor-mation containt, the so call content, I all so *feel* the grainy-ness of the would or flaky-ness of the pent, which ar part of the so-call form, in factt I can feel too the in-formation at any rat it's only one hork of many bob-ing in the opent see of simultanity...

– Harry Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*

Oxford English Dictionary defines form as “the particular character, nature, structure, configuration or constitution of a thing; the particular mode in which a thing exists or manifests itself.” Besides, the definition of form, opposed to content or matter, vaguely ranges from “a set or fixed order of words; the customary or legal (prescribed) method/rule of drawing up a writing or document” to a frame which allows further processing and catalogisation/categorisation in function of likeness. However, it is by differences

and relational networks established between these equivalence classes within a particular system that the identity of language elements, from words down to their constitutive components, and the signified meaning is derived. In the ninth chapter of *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, Danish linguist and semiotician Per Aage Brandt bridges the gap between literary semiotics and Oulipo viewing “an object elaborated under special conditions as a sign of artist’s formal attention.”¹ In other words, to literary criticism, form provides an input to their analysis, to Oulipans, form is taken as a desired predetermined output. Therefore, it is only natural to depart from the premeditatedly designed restrictive form inspired by exact sciences to treat oulipian techniques, again scientifically, namely as a function of sign systems.

2.1 In := Form

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the rise of two independently developed studies – “semiotics” by Charles Sanders Peirce and “semiology” by Ferdinand de Saussure described in *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916).² What the American philosopher, logician, mathematician and the Swiss linguist respectively both had in mind was a general science that would study signs without being bounded by explicit systems of communication. The former proposed a triadic model of sign while the latter offered the following concept.

The sign (signe), defined as anything that is interpreted as “ ‘signifying’

¹Per Aage Brandt, “Form and Meaning in Art,” *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, ed. Mark Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 172.

²The book, published posthumously, was compiled by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye on the basis of Saussure’s lectures held at the University of Geneva.

something – referring to or *standing for* something else than itself,”³ can be modelled dyadically – as a combination of a signifier (signifiant) with the signified (signifié), the form which the sign takes and the concept it represents. Thus the sign results from the association of the signified with the signifier whose relationship is referred to as signification. Saussure argued for relational approach to signs, putting special emphasis on the formal and generalised system that encompasses them for a sign can only make sense when interpreted in relation to other signs. The conception of meanings thus became differential, based primarily on functional oppositions found in a given sign system, for instance, in a natural language. However, in that context, the connection of a signifier and the signified is considered arbitrary. By extension, the arbitrariness of signs can be applied to the sign systems as such.

Saussure nevertheless admits that usage of the principle of arbitrariness without any restrictions would lead to chaos. In other words, “if linguistic signs were to be *totally* arbitrary in every way language would not be a system and its communicative function would be destroyed.”⁴ As noted by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist and ethnologist, “the sign is arbitrary *a priori* but ceases to be arbitrary *a posteriori*”⁵ – once a sign is coined historically, it cannot be arbitrary altered which makes them “meaningful” to “members of a particular society who are competent in that signifying system.”⁶ The relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional. Therefore a signifier as a matter of individual choice would render communication inherently impossible for “the linguistic system is a complex

³Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002) 13.

⁴Chandler 26.

⁵Chandler 27.

⁶Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (Forth Worth, TX, USA: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993) 276.

mechanism”⁷ with “a certain rationality.”⁸

Since signs do not occur in isolation but grouped in complexes, their required interpretation is that of a “text.” Such analysis is either syntagmatic, based on the (grammatical) surface structure, or paradigmatic, dealing with the identification of patterns/paradigms whose presence stresses the content of discourses. Whereas “the study of syntagmatic relations reveals the conventions or ‘rules of combination’ underlying the production and interpretation of texts (such as the grammar of a language),”⁹ the study of paradigmatic relations is concerned with positive/negative connotations – the oppositions and contrasts between all the signifiers belonging to the equivalence class of those used in the text. Alternatively, “while syntagmatic relations are possibilities of combination, paradigmatic relations are functional contrasts – they involve differentiation.”¹⁰

Peirce’s alternative approach considers a triad featuring a referent/an object, a representamen and an interpretant approximately corresponding to a “non-directly included surplus matter,” the signifier and the signified in terms of Saussure’s model. The complexity of both Peirce’s terminology and style are responsible for a relatively low influence of his “semiotics.” Yet Peirce’s seminal contribution to the field lies in what he referred to as “the most fundamental” typology of signs further employed in Saussurean framework: symbol, index and icon.

In the classification based on the type of relation found between the signifying item and that which it signifies, an icon is defined as a “sign by means

⁷Ferdinand de Saussure, *A Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, 16th ed. (Peru, IL, USA: Open Court Classics, 2006) 73.

⁸Saussure 73.

⁹Chandler 110.

¹⁰Chandler 84.

of inherent similarities or shared features,”¹¹ illustrated by a map which imitates the relevant depicted area. An index naturally relies effect or cause to the signified, for example, directly connects smoke to the fire. A symbol, also known as “sign proper,” bears a non-natural, purely arbitrary relation established by conventions. For Abrams, the third sign type embraces “the major and most complex examples” – the words as principal constitutional units of languages whose signification is to be learnt.

Contrary to at least two meanings, literal and suggested, offered by metaphor the symbol provides a single fixed meaning, the literal one. The use of symbols ranges from public to “essentially private tokens whose ‘inward’ meaning have to be reconstructed for readers by specialist scholars whose findings depend on elaborate cross-reference, and on evidence external to the poems.”¹² Nevertheless, many symbols are close to conventional and can be meaningful in a certain context. The matter of significance lies in symbol’s potential to generate a traceable meaning.

Coming back to Brandt’s article “Form and Meaning in Art” treating human cognition, formal perception immediately converts “the reception of the expressive source into an intensely active (or interactive) *construction* or ‘close reading’ – a search for a ‘symbolic’ meaning, an abstract message of some sort, [...] experienced as inherent in form as such.”¹³ Brandt also argues that “artists are able to voluntarily achieve, and intentionally communicate formal perceptions.”¹⁴ Put differently, there is a relationship of equivalence between the input of the interpreter and the output of the artist who, to an extent, can control its significance.

¹¹Abrams 276.

¹²Patrick Murray, *Literary Criticism (A Glossary of Major Terms)*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1982) 159.

¹³Brandt 172

¹⁴Brandt 172.

2.2 Out = Form

In the light of the identity input – output, semiotics, providing methods for interpretation, equally suggests methods for invention – that is to treat form as a “text” which has been created just as it is going to be investigated: syntagmatically through possibilities of combination (positioning) and paradigmatically through substitution (differentiation). In a sense, the collective Oulipo, co-founded by ex-Surrealist Raymond Queneau, motivated by another avant-garde group Bourbaki,¹⁵ has taken it literally. The Oulipian Jacques Roubaud in *Introduction* to “Oulipo Compendium” summarises: “The aim of the Oulipo is to invent (or reinvent) restrictions of a formal¹⁶ nature (“contraintes”) and propose them to enthusiasts interested in composing literature.”¹⁷ Roubaud continues by stressing the inherent characteristics establishing relationships between constraints, combinatorial procedures and potentiality:

Describable, definable, available to everyone, Oulipian constraints provide the rules of a language game [...] whose ‘innings’ (texts composed according to its rules) are virtually unlimited and represent linguistic combinations developed from a small number of necessarily independent elements.¹⁸

By now, collaboratively working Oulipo has designed a multitude of greatly varied constrictive forms together with their illustrations, by rules attributed to the group despite invented by individuals. The innovativeness inherent to Oulipian constraints results from the growing degree of intentional mathematization involved in generation of the works of literature. The restrictions of

¹⁵The group intended to “rewrite” the whole Mathematics by means of Set Theory to systematise the connections between its various branches. This approach is known as the axiomatic method.

¹⁶More precisely, formal in the sense of mathematical.

¹⁷Mathews and Brotchie 37.

¹⁸Mathews and Brotchie 40.

a mathematical nature can be easily traced in Harry Mathews' *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare*¹⁹ where he uses Hamlet's famous soliloquy: "To be or not to be: that is the question." as an input/source text.

The variations can be classified according to the properties of the constraints governing the innings. The first group investigates the creative as well as generative potentiality of set ordering. Following a conventionally prescribed order of the letters of English alphabet, Mathews breaks Shakespeare's initial organisation and lists the present literals according to alphabet, an ordered set, "a sequence of elements where both the nature and the order of elements is important."²⁰ Approached *alphabetically*, Hamlet's monologue results in: "A BB EEEE HH II NN OOOOO Q R SS TTTTTTTT U."²¹

The same characteristics of order modification apply to *anagram*, seen by OED as "a transposition of letters of a word, name, or phrase, whereby a new word or phrase is formed" where the transposition is mathematically coined as "transference of a quantity from one side of an equation (or one member of a proportion) to the other." Thus, all letters present conserve the number of their occurrence but restate Shakespeare: "Note at his behest: bet on toot or quit." (02) Another way to go is to structure the original as a *strict palindrome*, "a word or a sequence of words that reads, letter for letter, the same backwards as forwards" and equally "a number, or a

¹⁹Mathews and Brotchie 111–2. *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare* is an English replica of Perec's set of demonstration of Oulipian methods published in 1974 under the name *35 Variations on a Theme from Proust*.

²⁰Christopher Clapman and James Nicholson, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Mathematics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 330.

²¹See Mathews and Brotchie 111–2. Alphabetically modified input is to be found under 01. The following demonstrations of Oulipian techniques pertaining to *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare* come from the same source unless noted otherwise. Their position in terms of Mathews' ordering is given in the brackets after the quotation. For both literary and mathematical definitions of the terms, Oxford English Dictionary or Oxford Concise Dictionary of Mathematics was consulted/cited. The usage of the latter will be further stressed when applicable.

date expressed numerically, that is unchanged when the order of its digits is reversed.” The procedure outputs the following: (“To be or not to be: that is the question”) “No, it’s(eu)queht sit. Ah! te botton roebot.”(08)

The combinatorial art of Oulipo again emerges through *permutation*, “change of form, position, state; alteration, transformation, transmutation; successive change (and) vicissitude.” Put differently, permutation is to anagram as word is to letter, this arrangement/rearrangement functions as anagram at the level of words: “That is the question: to be or not to be.”(23) The idea of changing the linear order in which a set of items, letters/words/sentences/fragments is arranged is fully explored and exploited.

The second group encompasses compositions working with a generative set whose cardinality is restricted and can be commonly denoted by “variations” on *lipogram* in S , where the writer rejects all words that contain any member of set S , namely a certain letter or letters. Hence, “To be or not to be: that is the question.”(03) is by definition a lipogram in c, d, f, g, j, k, l, m, n, p, v, w, x, y, z. Mathews consequently produced lipograms in a, i and e respectively: “To be or not to be: this is the question,”(04) “To be or not to be: that’s the problem.”(05) and “Almost nothing: or nothing: but which?”(06)

The third group concentrates primarily on the basic algebraic operation – addition that immediately imply subtraction, taken as addition of a negative number. There is a tendency to insert/delete the letter whose appearance/disappearance has a maximum effect. Put differently, the potential of this method is down to its dimension of playfulness restricted to available lexicon. *One letter added* to the fundamental part of Hamlet’s soliloquy may, for instance, output the following: “To bed or not to be: that is the question.”(11) Alternatively, the procedure *missing letter*, possibly derived from *missing word*, “a word omitted from a sentence or series of words in a puzzle in a newspaper or magazine competition, to be supplied by the competitor,”

takes away one of the t's: "To be or not to be: hat is the question." (09) In order to exhaust the technique, Mathews demonstrated the possibility of reiteration of the method/procedure in his *two missing letters* example. "Double deletion," hence creates "To be or not to be: at is the question." (10)

The fourth group investigates the equivalence classes formed on the basis of similarity/difference. The methods then make use of logic to depart from negation to question antonymy and its negation – synonymy. *Negation* can be considered a statement's inversion, more precisely, "a logical operation that converts a statement, proposition, or truth value from true to false or vice versa." Following the definition, this time, the only possible output is "To be or not to be: that is not the question." (12) as "Not to be or to be: that is the question." would be but a permutation and "Not to be or to be: that is not the question." is reducible to the negation given by Harry Mathews.

In a sense, *antonymy* is a "negation" applied at a lower level – the level of words. According to *Oulipo Compendium*, antonymy is "the replacement of a category of compositional elements by their opposites"²² Production of "the opposite or antithesis of another, a counter-term" to Shakespeare by Mathews reads: "Nothing and something: this was an answer." (20) whereas its *synonymous* variation, using substitution within an equivalence class as a means of restatement obtains "Choosing between life and death confuses me." (26) In case of antonymy and synonymy, the longer the statement is, the greater the productive/generative power of the method.

The fifth group of procedures necessitates a elevated degree of abstraction, a deeper analysis, morphologic, syntactic, paradigmatic commonly denominated by what Mathews calls *subtle insight*. The technique of subtle insight, however, only consists in logical analysis of the input. Predicated on the premise of the original statement "To be or not to be: that is the ques-

²²Mathews and Brotchie 30.

tion,” the innig produced by subtle insight claims “Shakespeare knew the answer.” (27) Nevertheless, there are various ways to enhance the potential of the approach, Oulipian passion for gamesolving naturally points out a possibility of involving logical fallacy justified analogously to signification of no form which is still taken as a form, an absent one.

Inspired by functional analysis of “the difference between the values of a function at either end of a subinterval, the upper bound (if any) of this sum when all possible modes of subdividing the interval are considered,” *minimal variation* is a procedure based on substituting or “varying in condition, character, degree, or other quality; [. . .] undergoing modification or alteration, especially within certain limits.” The restriction imposed on this particular case is to conserve the vowel quality of the original verb “be” by replacing the consonant “b.” All the three given instances present a consonant or a consonant cluster concatenated with “ee” to produce /i:/ sound: “To see or not to see,” (19) “To flee or not to flee,” (19) “to pee or not to pee.” (19)

Analysis performed morphologically helps to identify the nouns in *transposition*, “alteration of order, or interchange of position, esp. of letters in a word, or words in a sentence.” Defined by method of *W+7*, this “transference” or translation requires to choose a fixed dictionary, analyse the structure of the sentence to determine what elements (nouns, even adjectives) are to be replaced. These are looked up in the dictionary or placed in the position where they would belong alphabetically if not listed. The translation, given by *W+7*, determines the position of the substitution word, “replacing each noun with the seventh following in the chosen dictionary,”²³ producing “To beckon or not to beckon: that is the quinsy.” (07)

The last two methods categorised under the fifth group – *reductive* and *in another metre* provide the “skeleton” of the statement emphasising its main

²³Mathews and Brotchie 198.

structureal/organisational principle and convert the original form respectively. Operation reductive derives/generates a universal formula simulating a decision problem “A or complement of A – who can decide?” as “One or the other – who knows?” (22) On the other hand, iambic tetrameter organised as rhyme proper, Hamlet’s statement can be transformed in: “So should I be, or should I not? / This question keeps me on the trot.” (34)

Among others, the collection *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare* includes examples of *emphasis*, *curtailing*, offers *another point of view*, *amplification*, *interference*, *interrogative mode*, and another group based on morphisms, or mappings conserving a portion of the original statement properties, namely *isomorphism*, *homophony*, *homovocalism*, *homoconsonation*, *heterosyntaxism*, or structurally interesting *snowball with an irregularity*, a poem where the number of letters in a verse ideally corresponds to the numeral attributed to the verse in question. The organisational limits and boundaries are equally explored in Mathews’ rendering of Thanksgiving. In *Thanksgiving Day I* as opposed to *Thanksgiving Day II*,²⁴ the transformation leaves

²⁴Mathews and Brotchie 74. If the beginnings are represented by numerals and the endings by letters, the operation maps 1A / 2B / 3C / 4D / 5E / 6F / 7G / 8H / 9I / 10J / 11K / 12L / 13M / 14N to 1J / 2K / 3L / 4M / 5N / 6- / 7H / 8B / 9E / 10D / 11F / 12G / -A / 14C / 15I; “-” denotes either a missing letter or numeral.

Harry Mathews *Thanksgiving Day I*

While the ultimate daily conversation hums,
 Eight brooding cormorants dream fat diets of eel,
 And winter advances down the shopping mall.
 Buy woolens brighter as the short days pall
 To smother the cold inner eruptive zeal.
 The scattering of breakfast cereal crumbs
 Marks in its tracteries vivid as cochineal
 Our whinings (oil regimes, the worsening cost)
 Conjuring the spell of one star-motioned wheel
 Lest any Eumenides sharpen their thumbs,
 Scratch on our windows prophecies, bitter in fall,
 In cursive white spasms of incurive frost.
 No prayer to mollify the time soon lost,
 To still the fire of wounds the end cannot heal.

Harry Mathews *Thanksgiving Day II*

While the Eumenides sharpen their thumbs,
 Eight brooding cormorants dream fat in fall,
 And winter spasms of incurive frost.
 Buy woolens to mollify the time soon lost,
 To smother the cold wounds the end cannot heal.
 The scattering of breakfast cereal
 Marks in its tracteries the worsening cost,
 Our whinings (oil regimes, diets of eel),
 Conjuring the spell of inner eruptive zeal
 Lest any brighter as the short days pall,
 Scratch on our windows prophecies, bitter crumbs
 In cursive white vivid as cochineal.
 Ultimate daily conversation hums;
 No prayer advances down the shopping mall
 To still the fire of one star-motioned wheel.

the beginnings of the lines unchanged while 15 lines are obtained from 14 by rearrangement of the endings.

The survey of restrictive forms presented by Oulipo has already proved their capacity to work with logic, group theory and combinatorics. Oulipian experimentation exceeds these limits and invades even the domain of topology and geometry. In accord with Oulipian principle of potentiality, Luc Etienne used Möbius strip to present “a text that can be read in two ways, each having a distinct and (often) contradictory meaning.”²⁵ The device offered by Möbius band, “a continuous flat loop with one twist in it,”²⁶ is such that the onesidedness of the strip enables the author to present a two-stanza poem as a single coherent piece of writing. Mathematical property of Möbius band – possibility of drawing a continuous line on its surface without crossing an edge joins the first stanza (I), having exactly 29 characters per line, with the second one (II) and results in (III), ((I) + (II)),²⁷ where the meaning and overall spatial distribution are the only unconserved characteristics.

²⁵Mathews and Brotchie 193.

²⁶Clapham and Nicholson 300.

²⁷Mathews and Brotchie 194. (Harry Mathews, from *Trial Impressions*, 1977.)

(I)
I'd just as soon lose my mind
If your fondness for me lasts
I'd abandon all female charms
As long as I stay dear to you
One could seed one's petunias
Among humdrum city flowerbeds
Igniting ice is likelier than
Our remaining snugly together

(II)
if your desire turns elsewhere,
my dream of love might come true,
if you say I'm past caring for,
my deepest wish will be granted.
in distant regions of the skies,
the stars could make their way –
separating, whatever the pretext,
alone can keep my world intact.

(III)
I'd just as soon lose my mind if your desire turns elsewhere,
If your fondness for me lasts my dream of love might come true,
I'd abandon all female charms if you say I'm past caring for,
As long as I stay dear to you my deepest wish will be granted.
One could seed one's petunias in distant regions of the skies,
Among humdrum city flowerbeds the stars could make their way –
Igniting ice is likelier than separating, whatever the pretext,
Our remaining snugly together alone can keep my world intact.

The demonstration of Oulipian procedures reveals their approach to literature in general. By illustration of some of the methods, Oulipo not only provided a solid foundation for restrictive creativity but also showed a way and encouraged their members/followers to define their own/other constraints to intentionally bound their work rather than permit to be constricted by the rules defined by others.²⁸ Rephrased by Leland de la Durantaye, “the tyranny of chance was to be replaced by the freedom of choice.”²⁹ Semiotically, Oulipo and the Oulipian stands for both potential restriction, “the sign of an aridity and growing artificiality,”³⁰ and restrictive potentiality, “the sign of literature’s ever-robust energy and health.”³¹

²⁸Hence one of the reasons why the collective attributes the mechanisms for producing potential literature to the whole group; attribution to a sole person remains only seldom.

²⁹Leland de la Durantaye, “The Cratylic Impulse: Constraint and Work in the Works and Constraints of *OuLiPo*,” 18 Aug. 2010 <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~deladur/Cratylic_Impulse.pdf> 125-6.

³⁰Durantaye 133.

³¹Durantaye 133.

Chapter 3

The Sinking of the Odradek *X*; *X* = A: Stadium, B: Stadion?

Originally published in *The Paris Review*, No. 51-4, in 1971-2, later included together with his two earlier novels under the title *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium and Other Novels* (1975), coming out in French translation (*Le Naufrage du Stade Odradek*) by Georges Perec, another Oulipo member, in 1981 and recently reprinted by Dalkey Archive in 1999, the epistolary novel explores how communication works in language. Contrary to the previous two, *Oulipo Compendium* already lists Mathews' third novel, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, among his oulipian works.

According to Christian Bök, oulipian equals exaggerating the absurdist spectacle of arbitrary protocols, approved grammar, censored content, repeated message, all sharing a common denominator of generating literary texts written under constraints. In “Unacknowledged Legislation,” Bök argues that Oulipo creates a set of rules to create second order rules (the rules about the rules), listing some of the axioms used in the course of their formulation: “first, the constraint must be extremely uncomplex to articulate; second, the constraint must be extremely difficult to accomplish; third, the constraint, if

enacted, must mention its own existence; fourth, the constraint, if enacted, must exhaust its own potential; fifth, the constraint must avoid the use of any aleatory protocol; sixth, the constraint must allow the use of one optional deviancy.”¹ The above mentioned devices and literary restrictions are mirrored already in Mathews’ *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*.

3.1 ‘K’ for Kafka

Lynne Tillman: “ ‘K’ for Kafka. Especially because of *Tlooth*.”

Harry Mathews: “Not *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*? I had an epigraph from Kafka at the beginning.”

– Lynne Tillman, “Harry Mathews,” *BOMB* 26/Winter 1989

The title as well as the epigraph lead directly to Franz Kafka. While the former uses a word coined in “The Odradek,” an eponymous short piece originally titled “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” – “The Cares of a Family Man,” the latter is an altered quotation of the second part of Kafka’s aphorism number 95,² taken from 1946’s Willa and Edwin Muir’s translation of “Reflections of Sin, Pain, Hope and the True Way” included in *The Great Wall of China and Other Pieces* which reads:

Some people assume that in addition to the great original betrayal a small particular betrayal has been contrived in every case exclusively for them, that, in other words, when a love drama is being performed on the stage the leading actress has not only a pretended smile for her

¹Christopher Bök, “Unacknowledged Legislation,” *Avant-Post (The Avant-Garde Under “Post-” Conditions)* ed. Louis Armand (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 183–4.

²In fact, the German edition and the 2006 English reprinted version published by Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group lists the aphorism under the number 99. Both the versions, however, state “Das heißt zu weit gehen,” “That is going too far.”

lover, but also a special crafty smile for one particular spectator at the back of the gallery. That is going too far.

However, Mathews' quotation states "This is going too far."³ The appearance of the proximal demonstrative "this" instead of its distal counterpart "that," unlike in Modern German where demonstratives are generally distance-neutral, suggests a greater closeness of the objects in question as a result of a two-way distinction made in English. In light of Mathews' *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare*, especially the entry number 20, "this" also functions as antonym of "that." Moreover, it naturally introduces "quotation with adaptation," based on substitution, as a prominent oulipian device.

The definition of "Odradek" is as obscure as its origin. German or Slavonic, neither lexicon would provide an "intelligent meaning of the word."⁴ His/its significance is further investigated in Kevin Nolan's article "Getting Past Odradek" published in *Contemporary Poetics*. Nolan argues against self-descriptiveness of Odradek's name implying that "right from the start all literal recognition is compromised by the uncertainty of interpretation."⁵

Nevertheless, in the context of Mathews' novel, the Kafka's description of Odradek as a wooden spool, complementary reemerging in the text as "reel"⁶ and "bobbin,"⁷ links him/it to "the most exclusive club in Florida," secret Knighthood of the Spindle. The occurrence of "reel" instead of "real" in

³Harry Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* (Normal, IL, USA: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999) 1.

⁴Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) 427.

⁵Kevin Nolan, "Getting Past Odradek," *Contemporary Poetics* ed. Louis Armand (Evanston, IL, USA: Northwestern University Press, 2007) 43.

⁶Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 51.

⁷Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 66.

Twang’s writing: “I’m his reel friend.”⁸ substantiates Mathews’ “language games in Wittgenstein’s acception”⁹ in addition to revealing that spools are associated with fabrication of silk (that Twang not only searches for but also wears). Apart from the title, absent from the novel itself, there is yet another direct Odradek connection, supposedly quoted with adaptation in the form of “sunk in to the hold of the Odradek Stadion.”¹⁰

Treating Kafka’s work as an allegory to Mathews’ mind gets past the initial epigraph and the usage of Odradek. As a future member of Oulipo, Mathews naturally opts for writing under constraint. If stated, the form of *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* could be again perfectly described by Kafka and his definition of letter writing potential, in Mathews’ hands, would be exhausted in its entirety.

3.2 In the Form of a Letter

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced – from a purely theoretical point of view – a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one’s own phantom, which evolves underneath one’s own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness.

– Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, Prague, End of March 1922

⁸Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 51.

⁹Mathews and Brotchie 43.

¹⁰Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 190. (The signification of the title is going to be discussed in the successive chapter.)

By definition, epistolary genre as a form enables authors to present an ordered series of documents mimicking real life. Besides playfully balancing between history and fiction and the degree of realism derived thereafter, epistolary novel provides a means to exclude an omniscient narrator while demonstrating distinct viewpoints. Seemingly incomplex genre thus allows for a refined experimentation ranging from dramatic changes of perspectives to investigation of the dangers resulting from insufficient security measures taken either by characters or postal service.

Janet Gurkin Altman argues that although epistolarity as a genre is diversified, it still shares some of the basic characteristics, namely in form of “similar literary structures and intriguingly persistent patterns”¹¹ which she later identifies as “recurring thematic relations, character types, narrative events, and organization.”¹² This in turn is related and comparable to Vladimir Propp’s systematic treatment of plot components in order to derive the classes of further irreducible narrative elements. In *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, Propp sees plot components mathematically as functions and variables, where functions are considered stable irrespective of the choice of variable, “dramatis personae,” fulfilling them. This evaluation of function as well as its definition proposed by Propp are, according to Altman, as the basic characteristics of the letter, responsible for “the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers.”¹³

Mathews’ third novel is epistolary. Taken literally, following one of the OED definitions, epistle, “a letter from an apostle,” may be also associated with Mrs. McCaltex, Zen messenger and advocate. True epistolarity of *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* is, however, due to the transatlantic exchange of letters between husband and wife communicating to locate a treasure trove.

¹¹Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982) 3–4.

¹²Altman 4.

¹³Altman 4.

The correspondence contains no letter openings, no addresses, no signing offs. These absent and often formally required elements of letter layout are contrasted with the dates and numerals indicated at the top of each letter. Even though the latter can stand for nothing more but an organisational device, the novel is already divided into seven uneven parts.

The first available letter – by Zachary starts with three dots “. . .,”¹⁴ the last one, written by Twang, seems to be unfinished – “Alone, I cannot carry this burden of joy, and doubt”¹⁵ while the supposedly inscribed dates overlap. Since letter I contains no date, the first piece of temporal information concerning the actual correspondence available to readers is given in Twang’s response. Letter II and CIII, dated April 6 and April 13 respectively, map a period greater than one year and thus, speak against a circular reading that would parallel Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Interestingly enough, April 13 as a signifier can be associated with the precursor to the sinking of the Titanic which, on April 13, after covering miles in fine weather conditions, received ice warnings and “shortly before midnight on April 14, [. . .] collided with an iceberg; [. . .] causing the ship to sink at 2:20 AM April 15.”¹⁶ Extending the methaphor of days and months at the expense of years, the time of the first reception of Zachary’s letter corresponds with Titanic’s preparations to sail.

Further surveying the narrative potential and dramatic effects of epistolarity, Mathews chooses Twang to report some of her findings just as she accessed them in the archives – through translated letters. Zachary precisely recounts the events evolving around the secret Knighthood, especially Dexter Hodge, using a confusing citation technique¹⁷ – Zachary indicates the beginning of

¹⁴Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 3.

¹⁵Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 192.

¹⁶“Titanic,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1994–2003, 18 Aug. 2010 <http://www.britannica.com/titanic/01_01.html>.

¹⁷An instance of this, formally written “*An entire paragraph.*”, is to be found e.g. in Letter XV, page 34–5.

the quote but fails to announce where it ends. Hence, in addition to not entirely uncommon indirect speech, the novel features *letters within letters* to play with shifting perspective, offering a possibility of seeing the story from yet another viewpoint and/or continuously adding to the complexity of the overall interpretation.

In fact, the situation gets even more complex when one realises that Twang is not an authorised reader of the letters and the fragments that she studies. The same way, her and Zachary's readers do intervene, for the McCaltex personal correspondence is meant to be private. By application of Propp's terms, all variables – participants in the communication: Zachary, Twang, and the third party (characters or (Mathews') readers) share the same roles of both the reader and writer, ideally thought of as the addressed and addressee.

This approach generates a multitude of questions going far beyond the scope of the encoder/decoder opposition, be it a target individual or unintended audience. Mathews' reader is left to cope with the issues of recursive embeddedness of the original letter writing paradigm. Availability of either unprotected or poorly stored information, complete or fragmented is also encountered by Zachary who describes a copy of a letter in translation. Not only "it says nothing of the treasure's location [...], the opening (of the letter) is lost."¹⁸

Treating *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* as *roman oulipien*, a label sometimes applied even to the texts of non oulipian authors, reveals that the literary constraints which, according to the rules, are to be present in the text written under them, are clearly formulated. Zachary's first letter misses the opening, Twang's letters are partially based on translations from Italian or Pannamese, her fictitious mother tongue. Both husband and wife seem to be occasionally reluctant to indicate dates at the top of their letters allowing for extensive ambiguity of combinatorial approach to possible letter ordering.

¹⁸Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 22.

3.3 In Order of Time

There is a great deal that has been written and still remains to be said about the chronicle as a type of narrative, but at least two extreme views can be rejected. First, chronicle is not always default arrangement for events in the narrative. [...] Second, it is not reasonable to think that the chronicle is always absent from interesting or even avant-garde form of narrative. For instance in Harry Mathews's first three novels [...], chronological order predominates, although these novels are far from conventional.¹⁹

In his paper "Ordering Events in Interactive Fiction Narratives," Montfort deals with divers variations in temporal relationships that he tries to represent in a formal language. To succeed in proposing an interactive system which would generate non-chronological narratives, Montfort needs to reassess chronicle as a type of narrative. His findings point out that the definition provided by OED, "a detailed and continuous register of events in order of time; [...] esp. one in which the facts are narrated without philosophic treatment, or any attempt at literary style," no longer applies to modern interactive fiction, early Harry Mathews inclusive.

Interactivity of *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* lies in epistolary nature of the McCaltex communication. In an ideally modelled exchange of letters, one letter refers to the preceding, generating a set of the following rules: Letter $n + 1$ is written only after letter n was received and read. Letter $n + 1$ reacts to letter n to confirm the delivery of letter n . Letter $n + 1$ thus

¹⁹Nick Montfort, "Ordering Events in Interactive Fiction Narratives," *AAAI Digital Library - Fall Symposium Series Papers*, 18 Aug. 2010 <<http://www.aaai.org/Papers/Symposia/Fall/2007/FS-07-05/FS07-05-016.pdf>> 89.

functions as a time stamp, a proof that the letter $n + 1$ could not have been written any sooner than letter n . If both the reader and writer follow the above protocol, and narrate their events in order in which they occur, it is still hard to establish a reliable timeline, especially when events occurring simultaneously are not related to each other.

The frequency of letter writing in *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* ranges from a letter a day to maximum of a letter a week and is greater than the frequency of a first-class international delivery. Anyway, at least two pairs of letters are written on the very same day, namely letters LXXXVIII, LXXXIX (March 8) and XCII, XCIII (March 14). Although divided by Miami – Italy time zone offset of +5 hours (for Florence/Rome), Zachary’s letters are listed first, following those by Twang written earlier that month. As a result, letter ordering in the novel is set to represent a seemingly chronological account of a joined search for treasure undertaken separately at two or more locations even if that meant intervening in the original organisation. In Montfort’s words, “this ordering, as natural as it may seem, has been called ‘more hypothetical than real.’ ”²⁰ This simulated space established by alternation of letters which seldom refer to the previous is indexed by Roman numerals.²¹

The Roman number system was chosen instead of its Hindu-Arabic counterpart. Standing for “still known today and used for special purposes,”²² Roman number system follows a much greater set of axioms, especially when compared to Arabic numerals. Following elementary constraints, dictating the form of the output, “each Roman numeral is repeated as often as necessary, to give the required total with the larger numerals appearing before the

²⁰Montfort 89.

²¹Oulipian experimentation led to the invention of (*traditional*) *chronogram*, a method obeying a simple rule: all letters that can be read as Roman numerals are added together. The total usually corresponds to a year of the Common Era and may bear significance in this respect.

²²Clapham and Nicholson 323.

smaller, except that if a smaller precedes a larger its value is subtracted.”²³ Subtraction is governed by additional rules: only one numeral can be subtracted, this subtrahend must be both powers of ten (I, X, C) and at maximum ten times smaller than minuend.

Therefore, Roman numerals, besides their geographical origin, signify once largely spread but today less familiar or even foreign system.²⁴ A degree of modern colonisation in *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* is inherent since Zachary learns about Pan-Nam, history of Florence, and the Knights of the Spindle while Twang decodes the patterns and paradigms produced by Western civilisation, also writing about her home country and the influence of Italian monks. Alone and together, they face the unknown that they cannot control.

Equally, the letters can be numbered by neither of them, not during the correspondence. Otherwise, McCaltex would know that there is a letter missing and Twang would not need to refer back to one of her letters by citing the date inscribed at the top. Seen through the lens of the third party, the established epistolary protocol favourably allows to write a letter on the very same day making interpretation complex enough to ensure that any other means of communication, for instance, Florence/Miami visit or even long-distance call, fails.

²³Clapham and Nicholson 323–4.

²⁴Arabic number system was introduced to Europe in the twelfth century, also promoted by figure of Fibonacci. Widely known from fifteen century onwards, the acceptance of Roman numerals accelerated with the invention of printing press.

3.4 COMMUNICATED

Conveniently Omitted Mail Messages Under Newly Implemented Codes And Transmission Error Definitions

Fragmentation and incompleteness of the epistles may signify an already signalled presence of unwarranted manipulation with data proved by Twang's "twig of smelly rosemary"²⁵ test:

I know, since the middle november, the letters to you are be open. So I control in the letter of 21 dec. There was in it, no rosemary! But the opener think, it falls out, and he put in one.²⁶

As Twang explains later in the only undelivered letter, "your thank you ensure my knowledge."²⁷ In this light, the role of reader/writer third party participant acquires an editorial function. Therefore, the letters are subject to censorship, deletion and insertion equally applicable to structure and content.

The acquisition of power over a communication channel grants a privilege to filter the messages or deliver those undated in a desired order which, quoted by Montfort, is "one of the most fundamental characteristics of any story."²⁸ Twang takes notice of the unauthorised reading of her letters in November. It is, however, difficult to determine when the letters were opened for the first time as well as state whether the monitoring ceases if it does. Structurally, an unavailable opening, in form of three dots or letter without a date, stands for an unintercepted, unmanaged, deleted or withhold opening.

²⁵Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 124.

²⁶Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 129.

²⁷Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 130.

²⁸Montfort 89.

On one hand, the written account includes the transcription of Zachary's unsuccessful long-distance telephone call, printed as letter LXXII, and the letter addressed to Raymond De Roover. On the other hand, Twang's letter to her father is omitted. As far as content is concerned, the collected data whose authenticity is hence unquestionable may be supplied later in order to confuse one or both participants as suggested in the previous section.

The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium, analysed as a record of the McCaltex communication fallen in the hands of a third party, is determined by temporal sequence given by Twang and Zachary, if available. The original incoming order of reception can differ from the outgoing because of the insertion of undated, possibly withheld or imitated letters. It is probable that before September 10, some of Zachary's letters were typed.

Describing his newly delivered typewriter, "equipped with fully integrated circuits and pigskin keys,"²⁹ Zachary ponders the progress of technology alluding to both the intruder on his communication and business and Turing's *imitation game*³⁰ where "the machine so rapid that inscription precedes thought"³¹ is asked a series of questions. To answer successfully means to produce answers that can be mistaken for human. Complex computer's task of proving the existence of artificial intelligence is reduced to generating a typewritten message that would mimic Zachary's style. Ultimately, if there was room for *imitation game* played by the editor persona, Zachary aborts it arguing for return to handwritten epistolary intimacy: "I changed to the seriousness of ink to address you. Deep sentiments flow more readily from a pen than from the most responsive keyboard."³² As a consequence, the third party only restricts to processing incoming messages and their attachments,

²⁹Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 84.

³⁰See Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* LIX.236 (1950) 433-460.

³¹Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 84.

³²Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 84.

notably cheques, and fast reintroduction of the read letters into the postal network/system.

Twang's writing parallels editorial activity, namely in "indexing" the series of her letters with English-Pannamese lexicon correspondences intended to teach Zachary her mother tongue. This continuous reiteration of Pan expressions culminates in letter C, written exclusively in these Mathews' invented terms. To understand, the reader persona needs to look up all the translations given beforehand. Whereas for Zachary, this association of meaning with succession/order, already stressed by Montfort, should provide additional items of information, by the Temple initiation rules, "one look back ruins everything"³³ that has been staged.

Approaching the novel, looking back helps to uncover the mystery as well as understand what happened. In the language of Roman numerals indexing the letters and their Hindu-Arabic translation, the integer 103, indicated at the top of the ultimate letter, points to page 103.³⁴ Reading letter LI of November 6, page 103 portrays Zachary reporting Mr. Hood who takes his time to describe Twang's life in Italy:

There's a lady in a sari digging old papers with a spade. I met her once in Rome. A handsome fellow is helping her. I know him too. As a matter of fact, he works for me. Take a gander.³⁵

Additionally, the novel explicitly mentions the integer 301, Twang's suggestion as to where her findings can be inserted in the framework of his book.

³³Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 60.

³⁴On first publication (in *The Paris Review*), Twang's last letter CIII ranged from 73–80; 1999 Dalkey Archive edition prints letter CIII on the pages 185–192. Thus, both the letters CIII are of the same length and 1999 page 103, mirrored in 1972 version, should be reducible to 103.

³⁵Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 103.

The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium generates a concatenation of letters where the last letter successively decodes the contents of the previous ones. This property, represented numerically, translates as the concatenation of 103 down to 1, 103102101 . . . 54321, that is divisible by 103.³⁶

3.5 Speaking Zachary, Twang & Pannamese; Learning Mathews

In the course of Twang’s correspondence with Zachary, she supplies Pannamese terms whose signification is to be learnt. Following the substitution principle, the Pan word is usually written instead of its English opposite so that the meaning is deducible from its context if undelivered otherwise. By repetition of the procedure, Twang ultimately succeeds to furnish a codebook containing disjoint strings paired with their meanings. Paralleling the use of Navajo or Basque during the WWII, she then writes to her husband:

7 Pok Lai

C

Piu Lemu! lemö vin maï üüax pristwi. Theu mau neng, wey tharaï du-
vaï. Wuc Lao stheu atran, ticbaï maï slop, naï: theu sheenö laï nob
lucru nam aïndap. (eels)³⁷

The above message is unintelligible to anyone who does not either speak Pannamese or is unfamiliar with the majority of previously shipped codewords. In “Codeworld,” Alan Sondheim views codework and codewriting as “a dis-

³⁶The complete proof can be found in Appendix A.

³⁷Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 182.

turbance, a sign of things to come, both extension and breakdown.”³⁸ By breaking down the structure and looking up the meaning of the individual units, one obtains:

7 Not Mud

C

Dear Beloved! love body now vomits the demon. We are beautiful things, alas forever farewell. As all Laotians think, run-from/confront now misery, thus: we shall endure eating eels in mud.³⁹

Zachary’s immediate response, letter CI, operates on the same principle. In other words, it is based on the arbitrariness of signs. Again, a sign is chosen arbitrarily, then it is coined and thus made meaningful for members of a particular society, this time for the Knights of the Spindle. “As the plot evolves,” states Mathews, “the husband falls into the hands of con artists [...], in the end he is convinced that his wife is working with them against him. In frequenting these criminals, he has gradually picked up their jargon, and in his last letter he denounces her in terms drawn entirely from that jargon.”⁴⁰

While not speaking in “exotic slang,”⁴¹ Zachary, the librarian, tends to favour the usage of alternative, often obsolete and rather uncommonly used vocabulary. In other words, his special poetic language is unrepresentative of any random sample from educated American population. The complexity of Zachary’s language and the problems encountered by George Perec, French

³⁸Alan Sondheim, “Codeworld,” *Contemporary Poetics* ed. Louis Armand (Evanston, IL, USA: Northwestern University Press, 2007) 287.

³⁹Translated by Adam D. Jameson, “A Pan/English Dictionary,” *Literature*, 18 Aug. 2010 <<http://www.adjameson.com/lit/pan.html>>. For the translation of individual words, see Appendix B.

⁴⁰Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* 59.

⁴¹Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* 59.

translator of *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, are stressed in “Fearful Symmetries” featured in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays*.

The potentiality of language explored by Zachary at the level of words is also demonstrated by Twang, at the level of graphemes and phonemes. The more distinct expressions for addressing the same she generates (appel, apple), the harder human/machine processing of her texts gets. In other words, misspellings, an oulipian means of artistic creativity, have impact on entropy. Mathematically speaking, there is a high degree of indeterminacy, high information entropy,⁴² naturally resulting from artificially enlarged cardinality of the original probability space – the number of words in the English language lexicon. The analyses of Zachary’s and Twang’s language showed that they are governed by similar rules allowing for minor but important deviations. Both their approaches are secure but still hard to be deciphered even by the other. Hence, their “dashed hopes and frustrations.”⁴³

⁴²For the definition of information entropy, see Claude Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” *Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (July–October, 1948).

⁴³Advertised at the back cover of the 1999 Dalkey Archive edition.

Chapter 4

The Sinking of [...] Odradek [...], Grace Odradek

Oulipo Compendium already lists Mathews' third novel, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, among his oulipian works, contrary to the previous two. The epistolary novel explores how communication works in language, recently reprinted by Dalkey Archive in 1999, coming out in French translation (*Le Naufrage du Stade Odradek*) by Georges Perec, another Oulipo member, in 1981, previously included together with his two earlier novels under the title *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium and Other Novels* (1975), originally published in *The Paris Review*, No. 51-4, in 1971-2. Going back to 1972, three sections have already appeared in preceding issues, the fourth installment finishes off the book. There is no index.

4.1 There WAS no Index

First, by convention, novels do not necessarily require indices. Second, by OED definition, book index is “an alphabetical list of the names, subjects, etc. occurring in it, with indication of the places in which they occur.” The index to *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, processed according to definition

given by OED, fails to locate majority of its entries. Given that, the index should be treated as a later addition, a sign of Mathews' "Oulipisation."

The study of the index reveals that the listed items can be divided into four large classes: *People*, *Animals*, *Places* and *Else*. The index provided in the novel then works on a second-order basis: divided into classes, it generates entries that fulfill the role of classes themselves. For instance, "dog" refers back to the whole class of dogs encountered: "our dog,"¹ "greyhounds,"² "spaniel,"³ "hounds,"⁴ and "Mr. Dharmabody"⁵ whose "animal membership" is apparent but his "dog identity" is never alluded to in the text. Animals, "visible and objective symbols of [...] inner life,"⁶ are listed because of their symbolism and popularity with the Temple.

In general, *Places* are listed to prevent confusion arising from collisions of the names for different locations – "Florence (Italy)." A subgroup of these illustrates the morphology of adjectives, which, unlike nouns, are not listed in the index – "Algerian," "Alpine," "Balinese." *Else* contains concepts, such as "Zen," "baseball," "structuralism," "mathematics," or items, namely "apple," "clippings." All the entries have a minor or major role to play in terms of interpretation.

As far as the occurrence of humans is concerned, the category of *People* is subdivided into *real* and *fictitious*. Whereas the former references authors of the quotations altered and incorporated in the text, the latter includes characters and links all the forms of possible linguistic substitution, primarily pronouns (personal, possessive) and nouns ("farthar,"⁷ father) to the names,

¹Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 18.

²Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 146.

³Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 27.

⁴Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 50.

⁵Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 98, 100, 136.

⁶Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 34.

⁷Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 22.

listed in full. It also features a self-reference embodied in “Spender, Stephen, 196.”⁸ Therefore, the index to *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* extends rather than limits. This is how a number of Twang’s misspellings are corrected, her father is linked with his name, Dexter Hodge and Miles Hoods’ whereabouts are traced and Grace’s surname is revealed for the very first time.

4.2 TSOTOSignification

The word “Odradek” is mentioned exactly three times – in the title (“The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium”), in the text (“The Sinking of the Odradek Stadion”⁹) and in the index (“Odradek, Grace”¹⁰). The fate of Kafka’s Odradek is questionable, so is the signification of Odradek in the title.¹¹ According to OED, the meaning of “to sink” does not yield more insight, arguing for both survival, “to lose sight of (an object on the horizon) by sailing away,” and decline, “to become submerged in water; to go under or to the bottom.” The third term is no less problematic.

With respect to the duality “Stadium/Stadion,” simply standing for Twang’s Italian translation of the word, or a different ship with respect to Zachary’s “perception of their near sameness – they are not the same, but almost the

⁸Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 196.

⁹Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 190.

¹⁰Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 196.

¹¹In the light of Oulipian potentiality and methods, the following can be generated – an acronym: TSOTOS, a “near” palindrome: SOTOS, preparatory stage of Mathews’ algorithm, abbreviated: SOS, permutation: The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium, The Sinking of the Stadium Odradek, The Odradek of the Sinking Stadium, The Odradek of the Stadium Sinking, The Stadium of the Odradek Sinking, The Stadium of the Sinking Odradek, deletion: The inking of the Odradek Stadium, substitution: The Sinking of the Grace Stadium, subtle insight: The Sinking of the Odradek Stage, slightly negated: A Rising from a Well-Defined Reality . . .

same,”¹² also referring to the chests and the mistake of substituting balls for crows. In letter CIII, Twang writes: “Yet the matter was concluded, and at noon the chest was already sunk in to the hold of the *Odradek Stadion*.”¹³ If Stadion is of “near sameness,” may Odradek as well mean Atra-Dek, translated from Pannamese as Think-In(?)

¹²Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 70.

¹³Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 190.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis set out to deal with Mathews' relationship to the avant-garde collective Oulipo and the collective's project of formal experimentation. Mathews' "potential literature" was treated comparatively, through analysis of structures and relations found in various branches of mathematics, ranging from combinatorics, the study of finite or countable discrete structures, to geometry and topology, concerned with spatial properties, from classical to modern, from theory to application. His growing "Oulipisation" is traceable even in Mathews' pre-Oulipian era, undoubtedly exhibiting characteristics of writing under constraints chiefly summarised in arbitrary protocol, approved grammar, censored content, repented message – all explicitly or implicitly available in *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*.

In his third novel, Mathews revisits formulaic epistolary genre combined with stereotypical chronicle to fully exploit their forgotten and undiscovered potential, demonstrating the gains, appropriating the problematics and surpassing the limitations of the form. Departing from wordplay, his literary techniques and linguistic inventiveness, going beyond the scope of paronomasia and hypercorrection, enabled him to substitute a natural language for nearly any sign system. In this light, he positions his readers in the place

of a third party intruder on both business communication and communicative business of a married couple. Although granted special access, these editorial dramatis personae are facing a complex ever-changing branching network supposedly leading to the meaning. Enhanced by entropy of Twang, protected by codewords of Pannamese and Zachary, the fractal-like system outputs in Mathews: “The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium” to further quote with(out) adaptation, “some secrets you don’t give away.”¹

¹Mathews and Brotchie 44.

Appendix A

Divisibility Proof

The aim of this section is to show that the concatenation of the integers $103, \dots, 1$ ($103102101100 \dots 54321$) is divisible by 103.² Function *Range* constructs lists: *Range*[i_{min}] thus generates the list $\{1, \dots, i_{min}\}$.

```
In[1]:= Range[103]
```

```
Out[1]= 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20,
21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41,
42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62,
63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83,
84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103
```

To produce a list with an inverted order of its members, the variant of *Range*, *Range*[i_{min}, i_{max}, d_i] can be used as it starts from i_{min} , and successively adds increments of d_i until the result is greater than i_{max} .

```
In[2]:= Range[103,1,-1]
```

²The presented calculations are made in *Mathematica*, a computational software program used in scientific, engineering, and mathematical fields and other areas of technical computing, developed by Wolfram Research.

```
Out[2]= 103, 102, 101, 100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95, 94, 93, 92, 91, 90, 89, 88,
87, 86, 85, 84, 83, 82, 81, 80, 79, 78, 77, 76, 75, 74, 73, 72, 71, 70, 69, 68, 67,
66, 65, 64, 63, 62, 61, 60, 59, 58, 57, 56, 55, 54, 53, 52, 51, 50, 49, 48, 47, 46,
45, 44, 43, 42, 41, 40, 39, 38, 37, 36, 35, 34, 33, 32, 31, 30, 29, 28, 27, 26, 25,
24, 23, 22, 21, 20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
```

The first approach: *ToString*[*expression*] giving a string corresponding to the printed form of *expression* in *OutputForm*, a two-dimensional representation of *expression* using only keyboard characters, is “mapped” by */@* to the previously obtained result and joined together by *StringJoin*. These operations produce “string” as data type and therefore the output needs to be converted back from “string” to “expression” – integers by function *ToExpression*. The concatenation of integers 103, . . . , 1 of further mathematically processable type “expression” is obtained.

```
In[3]:= ToExpression[StringJoin[ToString/@Range[103,1,-1]]]
```

```
Out[3]= 1031021011009998979695949392919089888786858483828180797
877767574737271706968676665646362616059585756555453525150494847464
544434241403938373635343332313029282726252423222120191817161514131
21110987654321
```

The above concatenation is divided by 103, an integer is outputted. Function *Mod*[*m*, *n*] gives the remainder on division of *m* by *n*.

```
In[4]:= ToExpression[StringJoin[ToString/@Range[103,1,-1]]]/103
```

```
Out[4]= 1000991272825241727860145041669019309501804353231243493
085211237609001657251142393831420015591830831607236432184946453849
072266253790231430713925565352455614297332449730213778463263605952
632145511207
```

```
In[5]:= Mod[ToExpression[StringJoin[ToString/@Range[103,1,-1]],103]
```

```
Out[5]= 0
```

As the remainder on division of 103102101...4321 by 103 shows, the concatenation of the integers 103 down to 1 is divisible by 103.

The second approach: The second approach differs from the first one at the point of mapping of the function *StringJoin* for “/@,” is an alternative input form to *Map*.

```
In[6]:= ToExpression[StringJoin[Map[ToString,Range[103,1,-1]]]]
```

```
Out[6]= 1031021011009998979695949392919089888786858483828180797
877767574737271706968676665646362616059585756555453525150494847464
544434241403938373635343332313029282726252423222120191817161514131
21110987654321
```

```
In[7]:= ToExpression[StringJoin[Map[ToString,Range[103,1,-1]]]/103
```

```
Out[7]= 1000991272825241727860145041669019309501804353231243493
085211237609001657251142393831420015591830831607236432184946453849
072266253790231430713925565352455614297332449730213778463263605952
632145511207
```

```
In[8]:=Mod[ToExpression[StringJoin[Map[ToString,Range[103,1,-1]]],103]
```

```
Out[8]=0
```

To conclude, the results provided by the first and the second approach match.

Appendix B

About eight years ago, Adam D. Jameson, poet and novelist, compiled his “Pan/English Dictionary.”³ With intention to help the readers of Mathews’ third novel *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, he made it available online. Jameson’s rendering of Twang’s iterative linguistic sessions, introduced by “Slow, you may take-on my tongue, like I your,”⁴ reminiscent of *Exercices de style* by Queneau, presents Mathews’ creative power as seen below.

Dictionary: Pannamese/English

Pannamese	English
atra	think (pok atro: do not speak, but think)
atram	I think
bukhaï	kind of brush; tree
battazhum	prostitute, whore
dek	in (?)
dhum	stink
duvai	long farewell, death
ghanap	hour(s)
lai	mud
Lao	Laotian

³Adam D. Jameson, “A Pan/English Dictionary,” *Literature* 18 Aug. 2010 <<http://www.adjameson.com/lit/pan.html>>.

⁴Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* 92.

lemö, lemu	love
lemum	I love (nob-lemum: for that I love)
lucrem	I eat (nob lucrim: I ate)
lucri	eat (nob lucri: to eat)
lucrim	food
ma	Being, being
maï	now, for-this-moment; The Now
mau	to be (?)
me	to be (nob-me: for to be, become)
mem	be
mo	be [command]
naï	so, thus
nam	in, of
namma	royal shrine
Namma Ghäi	capital of Pan-Nam
neng	nose; Buddha's nose; beautiful thing (if body not mentioned)
nob	[qualifier: for, have]
Nob-ma	O Being (pok-ma: no being)
pheu	yours
phrap	sari-like outfit
pok	not [negative]
pop	over (?), on (?)
pristwe, -i, -ei	demon
sheenam	I endure, I bear (it)
sheenö	I shall bear
slop	misery
stheu	entire (?)
tharaï	without end, endless, forever
theu	us, we

ticbaï	running from, turning against; in the face of, in front of; confronted with
ticbaï lai	in flight of mud (Twang's village), confronted with mud (in the capital)
üin	idea
uüaxe	retch
uüax-m	I vomit; man; what man makes; to make
vin	cadaver, corpse
weï, wey	alas, sadness, woe; to laugh
wuc, wun	to be similar, like (?)

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Czech Résumé

1. Úvod

V první kapitole je vymezeno téma bakalářské práce, tedy literární sémiotika v raných pracích amerického spisovatele Harryho Mathese, speciálně *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare* a jeho třetího románu *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*. Úvod dále stručně seznamuje s francouzskou skupinou Oulipo, *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* neboli Dílnou potenciální literatury, jejími zakladateli, vznikem a základními principy, které deklarovala ve svém manifestu, a také s následujícími třemi kapitolami tvořícími jádro bakalářské práce.

2. Forma: restriktivní potencialita nebo potenciální restrikce?

Druhá kapitola rozebírá hlavní sémiotické principy včetně základní sémiologické terminologie (švýcarského lingvisty Ferdinanda de Saussure - označující (*signifiant*), označované (*signifié*), jazykový znak (*signe*) a amerického filozofa Charlese Sanderse Peirce - ikona (*icon*), index, symbol) a přístupů k dané problematice. Uváděná korespondence mezi metodami analýzy a analyzovaným materiálem je výsledkem propojení literární formy jako vstupu a výstupu. Kromě toho práce rozebírá některé z technik Oulipa, speciálně ty, které se vztahují k rané tvorbě Harryho Mathewse (anagram, lipogram, palindrom, přidání nebo odebrání písmena, variace, permutace, negace, metoda $W+7$, Möbiův pás). Tyto metody jsou navíc ilustrovány jak teoreticky, tak

experimentálně, převážně za pomoci *35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare*.

3. The Sinking of the Odradek X ; $X = A$: Stadium, B: Stadion?

4. The Sinking of [...] Odradek [...], Grace Odradek

Kapitoly třetí a čtvrtá se zabývají Mathewsovým románem *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* napsaným před vstupem do Dílny potenciální literatury. K charakteristickým aspektům románu (román v dopisech, psaný chronologicky, jazykem definovaným početnými předem určenými literárními omezeními) se přistupuje na základě Mathewsem přijatých principů formálního experimentování, a tedy jsou analyzované a přehodnocované matematicky. Následně je pozornost obrácena na literární vlivy jiných autorů, které jsou hodnoceny v rámci citací s obměnou. Čtvrtá kapitola se rovněž věnuje interpretaci názvu, kde se také pokouší o aplikaci dosud zkoumaných metod.

5. Závěr

V závěru jsou shrnuty výsledky postavené na komparativní analýze vztahů a struktur nalezených mezi Mathewsovou tvorbou a různými oblastmi matematiky. Lze říci, že i raná tvorba Harryho Mathewse vykazuje znaky psaní pomocí literárních omezení definovaných předem s využitím jazykového potenciálu uplatněného například v jazykových hrách, které jsou ale touto literární praxí překonány.

Bakalářská práce dále obsahuje bibliografii a appendix rozdělený na dvě části — důkaz dělitelnosti konkatenace 103102101...54321 číslem 103 pomocí softwaru *Mathematica* a slovník jazyka vytvořeného Harrym Mathewsem pro potřeby románu *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*.