

The Quinary—Permuting Meaning with Generative Poetry

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Abstract

This work is a simple exercise in algorithmic poetry. A generative poetry structure, **the quinary**, is devised and implemented. Simple lines and images are ordered randomly within a fixed structure of five groups of five lines (four lines and an image, actually). There's a boy, a girl, aspects of weather and living nature, and random images. Each time the poem is read the lines and images reorder in a random permutation. Meaning slips ever so slightly as haiku meets Hollywood in an Oulipian playground.

Oulipo

This work follows from the ideas of the French group Oulipo, *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature), an interdisciplinary group started in 1960 and interested in experimental literature and algorithmic process. Raymond Queneau, a founding member, stated their purpose clearly, “What is the objective of our work? To propose new ‘structures’ to writers, mathematical in nature, or to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures that will contribute to literary activity: props for inspiration as it were, or rather, in a way, aids for creativity [1].”

Queneau himself is known as the author of one of Oulipo's seminal works, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, a set of ten sonnets each with the same rhyming scheme and grammatical structure [2]. The poems were printed on cards, with lines cut in strips. This permitted any and all of the 14 sonnet lines from the 10 poems to be freely combined with each other, while each line keeps its place in the overall structure of the sonnet. This allows for 10^{14} different poems! It is estimated that, reading 24 hours a day, it would take 200,000,000 years to read them all.

Generative Poetry

Queneau's poem is an example of generative poetry, where poetic text is data that is organized by some algorithmic process. This process lends itself well to computing, and plenty of examples have appeared over the Internet. One example of note, an inspiration for this project, is *Snaps* by Dirk Hine [3]. *Snaps* combines several short lines of poetry with a large collection of photographs. The user clicks a word and it leads to a new photo and lines. This unfolds as long as the “reader” chooses to participate in the work. The words and images are selected at random and will repeat.

The work *Snaps* exists online as a Javascript program, and it is possible to read and explore the code as freely as one can explore the work itself. This raises questions in regards to digital poetry. Can the code be read as a literary work too? Can an algorithm itself have an aesthetic or artistic/poetic value [4]?

The Quinary

The quinary was created as an experiment in poetry and programming. It is an invented structure (as are all poetic structures). In contrast to the model of *Snaps*, it was decided to fix and close the form, and to focus on permutation rather than combination as the controlling process. Rules were specified as follows:

- 1) The quinary is defined as a structure of five short poems, each of five lines (or perhaps a combination of text and image, where the image might be substituted for a line).
- 2) Each line has a general focus, subject or action (in the example the lines include: action of a male, action of a female, an index of organic nature, an index of weather, and a photograph with aspects of nature and man-made objects, but no people).
- 3) Random permutations of the lines occur, while keeping one of each focus in each poem. (Once a line or image is selected it may not be repeated.)

In this first instance of a quinary, two literary formulas are followed, freely varied, and mixed.[5] First is the cliché Hollywood narrative—boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. The second is the Japanese haiku—two objective descriptions of moments in nature combine to create a Zen-like gestalt. The photographic image provides a link to “new media” and post-modern visual culture. In the spirit of Oulipo, cultural content and mathematical process combine to engage, to experiment, and to play.



4.

he wiped the tear secretly
 cloudless thunder rumbles
 she pretended not to hear
 mud dauber buzzsaw

Figure 1: sample page from quinary #1.

References

- [1] Queneau, Raymond, “Potential Literature,” *Oulipo, A Primer of Potential Literature*, ed. Marren F. Motte, Jr. 1986, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln.
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- [3] Hines, Dirk, *Snaps*, Cauldron & Net, Vol. 3, 2001. March 15, 2009
 < http://www.studiocleo.com/cauldron/volume3/confluence/dirk_hine/snaps/snaps.html>
- [4] Kendall, Robert, “The E-ssence of Literature,” presented at *Visionary Landscapes*, Electronic Literature Conference, 2008, Vancouver, WA.
- [5] Evans, Brian, *quinary #1*, 2008, March 15, 2009 <<http://www.brianevans.net/quinary1>>