

Constrained poetry does not limit creativity

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Math and poetry go together like peanut butter and chocolate, at least according to **Patrick Bahls**, a faculty member in the math department at UNC Asheville and one of the organizers of the 2010 conference on constrained poetry at UNCA.

"People are terrified of these ideas separated from each other, but when they're put together, it really shows off the intimate relationship the two share with one another and allows for such great understanding, understanding poetry through math and math through poetry," Bahls said. "So much is revealed by the two disciplines when they're brought together."

Bahls worked with **Richard Chess**, a professor in the literature and language department at UNCA, to organize the conference. Chess acknowledged the 50th anniversary of the founding of Oulipo, which consisted of a gathering of French-speaking mathematicians and writers who created works using constrained writing techniques.

Examples of constrained writing techniques used in Oulipo include lipograms, which involve eliminating a letter or group of letters, anagrams and noun replacement. Oulipian works may be original creations or variations of preexisting texts.

Some writers still continue the founders' formulaic methods, such as poet **Lee Ann Brown**, who opened the evening before the conference with a presentation and readings.

"I just love the playfulness of language," Brown said. "I like to rewrite things that are already there, and the permission to replace, to cross-pollinate and play."

The concentration behind Oulipo,

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— **Brian Hart**

senior literature student

Brown said, is on the process rather than the product.

Many of Brown's poems are alterations of preexisting texts, like the Pledge of Allegiance. Her works and the creations of other Oulipo artists often involve applying formulas and constraints to poems, like selecting new nouns from dictionaries to replace original words or using anagrams.

Brian Hart, a senior at UNCA, helped lead one of the conferences involving anagrams, or the rearrangement of the letters in words to create new words. This subject is also the topic for Hart's undergraduate research.

"There can arise an art out of the processes and some really good stuff," Hart said. "It's a way to kind of turn your conscious mind off trying to make sense of something and just letting the imagination be artificial to a certain extent and letting something else take over. With regular, traditional poetry, magic doesn't always happen either, and this is just another way of approaching a creative process."

Hart said people still express themselves through the choices they make as far as which poems and processes

to use.

Some question the extent to which personal art can be created when using automatic computer programs. During the opening presentation, **Luke Hankins**, editor of the **Asheville Poetry Review**, asked Brown about the artistic value of purely computer-generated works.

"It can be dangerous to go around prescribing what is and isn't art, but there are some criteria," Hankins said. "From my perspective, art is something that's made and created with intentionality, and there's an actual medium that the artist is manipulating. You lose intentionality if you use a computer program."

Only some Oulipo is created using computer programs, and each constraint varies.

Hankins said the methods still seem reactionary and limited as they produce philosophical or political statements rather than products stemming from the desire to create something beautiful and lasting.

"There seems to be a little bit of difference in terms of purpose between the artist who's writing haikus her whole life or a woman who's making

beautiful sculptures her whole life, versus someone who's just trying to come up with a system that reverses everything that comes before, that's a reaction to what's come before," Hankins said.

He said people who practice Oulipo likely have a different perspective and may experience new possibilities through formulas they would not have thought of before.

"I do write in traditional forms a lot, and I do think it's true that with meter and rhyme you end up surprising yourself. You end up saying things that you might not have if you weren't working with form," Hankins said. "Maybe that's true to an even greater degree with these more intense experiments."

Bahls, who often requires his math students to construct poetry as a mathematical process, said he thinks narrowing people's focus to a limited amount of words, phrases and possibilities can be freeing.

"In narrowing your focus, it's almost like a microscope, because you're not looking at anything else but what's underneath the glass at that particular instant," Bahls said. "You have the keenest, clearest perception as to what it is you're looking at, and so all of a sudden it's few words that are taking on such rich possibilities and dramatic new relationships between one another that you wouldn't have seen before. The potential of these poems is incredibly heightened when that's all you're allowed to have."

The conference included workshops and talks dealing with everything from generative art to lipograms to the history of the use of poetry in mathematics.

Participants also shared some of their own Oulipian works as they learned how math and poetry can go hand-in-hand.

Show

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According to Conerty, Matt Williams will join both bands on the violin and Melissa Hyman will join Now You See Them on the cello.

"We'll be having a cello and violin sit in with us for our set too. So, that's exciting for people who know our music," Conerty said.

Conerty said the band has been touring more, which has brought them

closer together.

They have also started to incorporate new instruments.

"We've got some new instruments, like a keyboard and a high-hat, which have expanded the sound. We've been trying to write in different styles of music than we're used to, and we've been playing with a lot more musicians, which has also changed things

for the better," he said.

According to Conerty, Holy Ghost Tent Revival influenced their music and performance style.

"They've influenced us in a big way, and I've said openly that we've taken aspects of their live show and songwriting style and applied it to our band, and they've said the same thing about us. So it's nice to have two bands

that are constantly inspiring each other share the stage whenever they can," Conerty said.

Now You See Them will take the stage with Holy Ghost Tent Revival on Dec. 17 at the Grey Eagle. The 8 p.m. show is 18 and older and is \$10 at the door.