Materialidades da Literatura
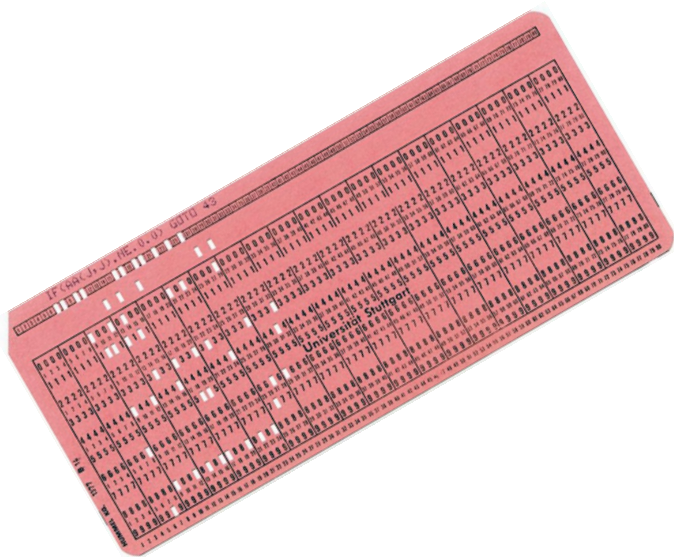
Amusements Électroniques

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ABSTRACT

An 1842 compendium of literary curiosities assembled by bibliophile Gabriel Peignot presents a collection of works and rules for their composition that has interesting correlations with electronic, computational, and digital productions of poetic works. Because these works were written under constraint, their rule-bound approach has an algorithmic character that can be compared with the compositional tactics used in computational work. This paper analyzes Peignot's collection in terms slightly different from those on which he organized his compendium. Rather than sort the works in a typology of formal properties, this paper presents a typology of production methods and compositional techniques. Though not all electronic approaches are anticipated by the works collected in Peignot's remarkable work, the range and variety of these methods, many of which reach into antiquity, establishes a long lineage for conventions of rule-based poetic composition.

KEYWORDS

composition; algorithmic techniques; electronic poetry; macaronic verse; combinatorics.

RESUMO

Um compêndio de curiosidades literárias de 1842, compilado pelo bibliófilo Gabriel Peignot, apresenta uma coleção de obras e regras para a sua composição que possui correlações interessantes com produções eletrónicas, computacionais e digitais de obras poéticas. Como esses trabalhos foram escritos sob constrangimento, a sua abordagem baseada em regras possui um caráter algorítmico que pode ser comparado com as táticas de composição usadas na produção computacional. Este artigo analisa a coleção de Peignot em termos ligeiramente diferentes daqueles com que ele organizou o seu compêndio. Em vez de classificar as obras de acordo com uma tipologia de propriedades formais, este artigo apresenta uma tipologia de métodos de produção e técnicas de composição. Embora nem todas as abordagens eletrónicas sejam antecipadas pelos trabalhos coligidos na obra notável de Peignot, o alcance e a variedade desses métodos, muitos dos quais têm origem na Antiguidade, estabelecem uma longa linhagem para as convenções de composição poética baseada em regras.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

composição; técnicas algorítmicas; poesia eletrónica; verso macarrónico; combinatória.

In 1842, Gabriel Peignot published the second edition of his *Amusements Philologiques*, a compendium of poetic curiosities, "singularities" and selections of miscellaneous information (Peignot, 1842: 280-81).[1] The two hundred pages of the volume that deal with poetry contain examples of works composed under various constraints—metrical, graphical, conceptual, and lexical. Peignot organized his presentation of poetic experiments according to terms that describe their formal structures. However, these finished formats can also be abstracted and analyzed according to their compositional strategies. Many of these categories map onto current conceptual and digital writing practices, some of which are explicitly algorithmic. Poetry, after all, is rule-bound in ways that prose is not, and in the early 19th century, as Peignot's collection makes clear, the sources and models of verse production in western culture were classical. Peignot knew, and assumed his readers would too, the entire canon of Greek and Latin verse. Poetry was still governed by the exigencies of this tradition in ways it is not today. No matter how deviant their format, Peignot's collection of poetic inventions registers against this background, which also provides a certain amount of his source material. Before looking at Peignot's typology of experimentation, a note on larger context of the book and its scope is in order. The volume is more than 500 pages, and much of it is taken up with "Variétés," or discussions of highly specific information in an eclectic range of domains. So, a long list of the "Strange weaknesses of famous men" informs us that Erasmus got a fever from smelling fish, Tycho Brahe trembled at the sight of a fox, and a king of Poland could not bear to see an apple (Peignot, 1842: 280-81). Peculiar coincidences of various and amusing numbers reveal the average height of men in France and the square footage of the surface of their bodies (Peignot, 1842: 305-6). A list of terms describes modes of taking measure—of time, the weight of the air, the force of winds, and amount of alcohol in any liquid (Peignot, 1842: 455-475). Many of the lists include information taken from the traditions of heraldry or botany—the symbolism of flowers, colors, and motifs, or the properties of jewels and flowers. One remarkable section suggests that of 872,000 marriages, 1362 result in women leaving their husbands, 2361 in husbands fleeing their wives, 191,023 in couple living unhappily under the same roof, 162,320 couples hiding their mutual dislike under politeness, 510,132 living together in marked indifference, 1102 reputed to be happy but not really, 135 happy in contrast to others, and 9 genuinely happy couples (Peignot, 1842: 289). Peignot supplies the distance between Paris and capitals in the rest of the world,

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1 The first edition was published in 1824. The second edition was augmented with new contributions.

the dates of reigns of Kings of France, and the relative value and production of gold and silver in various cultures and countries. In other words, Peignot's book is a combination of almanac and commonplace book, with much information and many bits and pieces whose authority and veracity must largely be taken on faith, but whose appeal to interest is quite high. The section on poetry, informed by various bibliographical sources, is also a compendium of miscellaneous information culled from a considerable variety of sources. The operative term in his title, *amusements*, drives the composition of the work and its orientation to the reader.

Peignot presents the thirty-two categories of his typology of poetic invention alphabetically. These he follows with about two dozen examples of unique experiments or "singularités"—one-off instances of epigraphs and riddles and other selections that do not fit anywhere into the scheme of named types. His typology is interesting on several levels. He borrows from an established nomenclature. He is not inventing new terms, merely collecting them from existing sources. His work is descriptive, rather than analytic, and though he points out the features that characterize each form, and the rules that govern their composition, he does not elaborate any higher-level groupings of technique. Because he organizes his discussion alphabetically, by category, the examples are not unified by their approach. Formats determined by metrical constraints are scattered among the examples, for instance, as are those determined by the number of syllables, placement of letters, structure of lines. The examples are equally useful for the student of poetry and the practitioner, but the anthology is clearly meant to amuse, rather than instruct. Peignot is careful not to take most of the works too seriously, appreciative though he is of the obstacles that have to be overcome in their production.

Rather than move through each of Peignot's categories in turn (Acrostiches, Amphibologiques, etc.), it makes sense to group them into clusters of similar strategies. Of the thirty-two types, nine are governed by rhyme patterns or meter structures: **End-rhymes, internal rhymes, repetitions** (**echo verse** in which a rhyme is repeated for extra emphasis), **double rhymes** (repetition for emphasis at the end of a line), or **end** and **beginning** rhymes repeating in successive lines. Most of Peignot's examples are taken from Latin and some from French sources. The **monorhyme** uses a single sound-ending for each verse, no matter how long the poem. Of the rhyme formats, the hardest to achieve is the **French metric**, which requires a classical meter be imitated in the French language (Peignot, 1842: 141). Here, as in other passages, Peignot calls attention to the ways his Latin sources take advantage of features of that language that cannot be replicated in French.

His second largest category contains those formats determined by constrained arrangement or re-arrangement of word order. Each of the five examples is particularly challenging given the rules of French syntax. The rearrangements of words govern the **anacyclic** (in which the words can be read backwards or forwards), **correlative** (in which placement is significant), **enchained** (words

are reworked into variant parts of speech and repeated)**,** and **protean** verse (in which the words are rearranged in successive lines), as well as works of **rapport** (where words are interspersed in such a way as to align across verses, a combination of word choice and graphical arrangement). To these, two forms that are governed by word number, the **monosyllabic** (composed entirely of single syllable words) and the **declining** verse (in which each line is shorter than the last by a syllable).

A cluster of four categories depends on order and placement. These include letter rearrangement, in **anagrams** (letters can be read forward or backward for alternate sense)**, tautograms** (comprised entirely of words beginning with the same letter), **contrapetterie** (spoonerisms), and works that eliminate a single letter, **lipograms**. To this, **acrostics** could be added, since their structure depends upon placement of letters. The other graphical form, a general category, is designed by the term **rhopalic**, and contains shaped and figured verse with sources referenced into antiquity.

Another category consists of works that flirt with double-meanings, puns, and other innuendoes: **amphibological** (double entendre)**, equivocal** (ambiguous)**, parodic** (imitative) and **burlesque** (humorous to vulgar) verse. A rare and truly eccentric form, the **chronographic**, embeds the letters of Roman numerals in its text in such a way that the sums tallied from their presence adds up to a significant date. Given the number of V's, M's, I's, Cs, Ds and X's involved, the vocabulary is limited and the tendency towards Latinization inevitable. The categories of **broken verses** and **prose** are structured so that they can be split in half, their two sides separated, and the independent sections still function; these have to be composed very carefully on the page in order to work effectively. Finally, Peignot mentions works of pastiche: the **macaronic verse**, in which individual words are taken from other languages and the **centon**, in which entire passages are appropriated to create a new text.

Some of the compositional strategies in Peignot's inventory lend themselves to digital production more readily than others. For instance, the selection of rhymes could be managed algorithmically, if reductively, by matching word endings such as "-ing" or "-ous" or "-ed" or "-ism" and so on. Generating a list of words likely to rhyme and then composing from a pick list is the kind of activity that can be–and has been–automated. The task of counting syllables, and perhaps, even reworking word order, might also be managed automatically. Most dictionaries contain a pronunciation guide that scans words into accented and unaccented syllables that can be put in the service of metrical patterns. The creation of puns, double-entendres, parodies, and burlesques in which either semantic values or tone have to be matched is too nuanced for most mechanistic production. Ambiguity, after all, is not an algorithmic strong point. Formal structures, rather than semantic complexity, lend themselves to automatic processes.

More interesting than the question of whether Peignot's inventory of techniques can be imitated by algorithmic means is whether the analysis of the specific principles and techniques yields a list of approaches that are comparable to those of current digital work. So rather than imagine an algorithmic way to imitate a form, the problem is to abstract a set of procedures from his inventory and see what they can produce. Peignot does not think about his typology on these terms, but the principles of production that can be abstracted from his study include: **combinatorics** (letters or words)**, numerics** (counting letters, words, syllables), **selection** (rhyme lists, word lists), **appropriation** (pastiche), **parody** (stylistic imitation), **graphical fit** (place-specific values or constraints), **semantics** (puns, word-play), and **sequence** (word order, letter order, position). Rather than emphasize a typology of forms, this list is comprised of a typology of operations. Each of these is a function that can be performed, and used to generate a text. The parallels with computational writing practices are evident in at least half of these examples—those that depend on matching, counting, sorting rather than semantic complexity.

What were Peignot's sources and how did he find the terms and specimens for his compendium? His examples are culled from Greek and Latin works, including a collection of epigrams first compiled in 1290 by a Byzantine grammarian. For this *Anthology,* Maximus Planudes had drawn on other compilations and sources in a chain of bibliographical transmission, such as the 10th century collection of Constantine Cephalus (whom Peignot does not mention) (Peck, 1897: 83). [2] Peignot was well-aware of other major historical figures, Simmias of Rhodes or Rabanus Maurus, both of whom were sources for oft-cited shaped works, though his immediate reference for figured verse was an article that had appeared in the November 1806 issue of the *Journal de l'Empire.* The tradition of poetic curiosities was also tracked in one of Peignot's major sources, the *Bigarrures* (*Variégations*) assembled by Étienne Tabourot, a Renaissance poet. First published in 1572, *Bigarrures* was reissued in 1588 with a longer title that identifies its content as a discussion of "all sorts of Follies." Given the Renaissance scholarly attention to the re-editing of the classical corpus, particularly during the first century of print publications, this would have been a good period for surveying—and classifying–the landscape of Greek and Latin verse for these curiosities. The elaborate constructions of constrained work allowed for encoded meanings, but also, provided entertainment and diversion to persons of letters. Peignot is often quick to characterize the works in his typology as "bagatelles" or games, frivolities, or, sometimes, worse—wastes of time that could have been better spent—even as he appreciates the effort involved. A later English anthol-

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2 The entry for "Anthology," *Harper's Dictionary*, Volume 1, p.83, mentions that the first known Greek anthology was the "Garland" assembled by Meleager of Gadara around 60 BCE. Peignot mentions an Anthologie from about 38 CE, but I cannot find any trace of it. Harper's notes that Planudes' compendium was the only one known in the early Renaissance, until the 1606 discovery of a copy of Cephalus in a library in Heidelberg. The first Latin anthology was created by Joseph Scaliger and published in Leyden in 1573. Much more could be said, and work done, on the textual transmission of these poetic curiosities.

ogizer, James Appleton Morgan, assembling his *Macaronic Poetry* (1872), described these practices as "verbal calisthenics" that were "utterly useless" but not "utterly worthless" (Morgan, 1872,: ix).[3] These and other sources referenced in Peignot provide an insight into the transmission history of poetic curiosities.

A few of the more remarkable many examples cited by Peignot deserve individual attention. One is a zig-zag acrostic assembled by Raphael Bluteau, titled *labyrinthus pöeticus,* on account of the complex interlocking pattern of its initial letters.
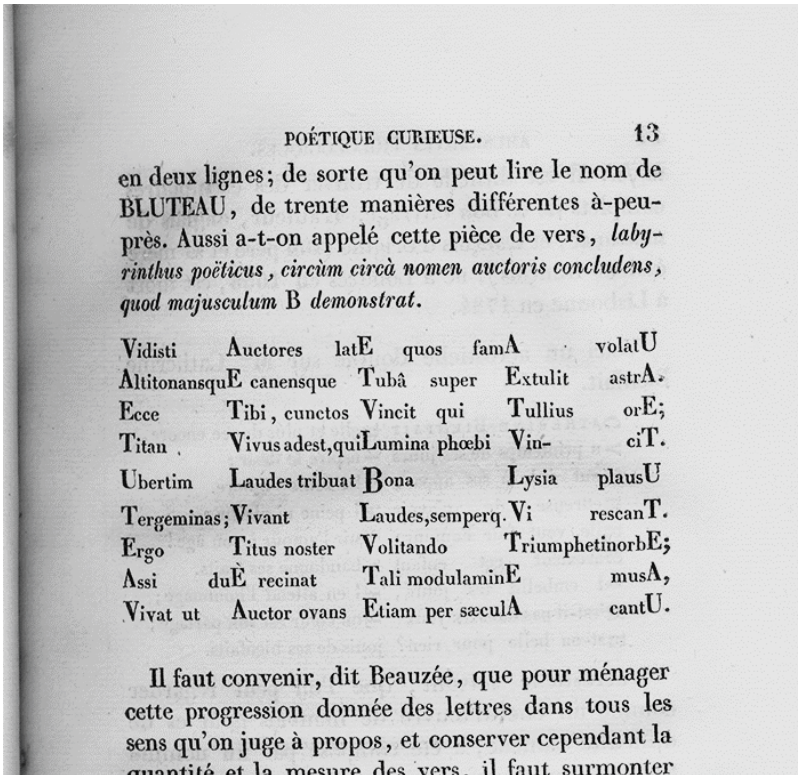
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en deux lignes ; de sorte qu'on peut lire le nom de BLUTEAU , de trente manières différentes à-peu-près. Aussi a-t-on appelé cette pièce de vers , *laby-rinthus poëticus , circùm circà nomen auctoris concludens, quod majusculum* B *demonstrat.*

Vidisti	Auctores	latE	quos	famA		volatU
Altitonansque E	canensque	Tubâ	super	Extulit		astrA.
Ecce	Tibi , cunctos	Vincit qui		Tullius		orE;
Titan .	Vivus adest,qui	Lumina phœbi	Vin-			ciT.
Ubertim	Laudes tribuat	Bona		Lysia		plausU
Tergeminas;	Vivant	Laudes,semperq.	Vi		rescanT.
Ergo	Titus noster	Volitando		TriumphetinorbE;	
Assi	duÈ recinat	Tali modulaminE			musA,
Vivat ut	Auctor ovans	Etiam per sæculA			cantU.

Il faut convenir, dit Beauzée, que pour ménager cette progression donnée des lettres dans tous les sens qu'on juge à propos, et conserver cependant la quantité et la mesure des vers, il faut surmonter

Figure 1. Raphael Bluteau's *labyrinthus pöeticus*. Note the stair-stepping combinatorics possibilities centered on the majuscule "B" in the middle of the acrostic. Peignot, *Amusements*, p. 13.

Bluteau's acrostic spells the author's name in multiple directions, with the majuscule "B" centered in the grid of words. Peignot says of this piece, "[...] to manage this progression of letters and preserve their multiple senses as well as the measure of the verse, required overcoming many high-level difficulties; but also, many sacrifices had to be made!" He termed the text "disgusting and hyperbolic in its use of platitudes" –not quite praise, even as he noted the technical achievement (Peignot, 1842: 13). If Bluteau's work is striking in its complexity,

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3 Cf. Disraeli, 1881.

other texts are impressive for their sustained activity. In 1666, Lope de Vega published a series of five (short) novels, for instance, each lacking a single vowel. The 17th-century author, Leti (Gregorio, most likely), gave a lecture titled, "De R bandita"—which completely lacked the letter R—for an audience at the Academy of Humorists in Rome (Peignot, 1842: 118). (Gregorio is distinguished by the fact that his entire corpus was listed in the Index Prohibitorum). One long lipogrammatic work consisted of twenty-four quatrains, each leaving out a letter of the alphabet in turn (W was not included) (Peignot, 1842: 121-123). Leo Pacentius's magnificent *Pugna Porcorum,* first published in 1523 under the pseudonym Publius Porcius, is a ten page tautogram. Composed entirely of words beginning with "p" it makes comedic sense, but its Latin text is almost impossible to translate. The text was very popular, and illustrated editions have appeared across the centuries. Another striking conceptual work from among Peignot's many gems is Héron de Villefoss's *Essais sur l'Histoire de la Revolution Française (Essay on the History of the French Revolution).* Printed in Paris in 1803, the work consists entirely of extracts from classical authors. The form is called a *centon*, and the term borrowed from a Greek word used to designate a garment made entirely from scraps. Cleverly pastiched, it recounts the events of the Revolution in words and passages from Cicero, Tacitus, Pliny, Seutonius, Sallust etc. Villefoss carefully cites each fragment, giving the Latin original and context, and then translates it into French. The result is convincing and the account of events uncanny. But perhaps the more striking aspect of the work is the thorough knowledge of these ancient texts on which it depends.

Why is Peignot's anthology of interest now, and to a community of scholars and practitioners of electronic poetry? The tradition of language play links the objects of his inquiry to the practices with which we are engaged. Compositional techniques are bound by rules which are more or less explicit. That poetry certainly is and was composed in conformance with strict guidelines for meter and rhyme, verse structure, and so on, is not a revelation. Calling attention to the rules of anomalous verse—Peignot's "curiosities"—emphasizes an often overlooked dimension familiar practices, that is, the rules by which they are governed. That conceptual and formally constrained work was produced from classical antiquity to the present is more interesting in its particulars—those specific works—than in the mere fact. But an equally striking feature of this book is Peignot's erudition. He was steeped in the knowledge of the histories of poetic practice, familiar with the classical anthologies, medieval compendia, Renaissance publications in which the tradition was transmitted. The rules of that game–of bibliographical erudition–are as intriguing as any of the rules within the game for production–of specific works. What looks esoteric to a 21st century eye, Peignot could situate as a matter of course. He knew where to look for the "amusements" and how to read them in relation to the broader history and bibliography of poetry and poetics. That commitment, and depth of engagement, is what speaks across the centuries.

Ultimately, many of the examples in Peignot's collection remain quite stunning, and it is as amusing to engage with them as it is to contemplate the continuities of these traditions and inventions as they change over time. The mechanical means of stone inscription made alignment of letters a physical act, and handwriting from antiquity to medieval times gave graphical fluidity to the organization of the poem on the page. Letterpress, photomechanical composition, and other production techniques offered their own possibilities for thinking about poetic practice from within their constraints. But conceptual strategies are also part of the toolkit of production, and the operations of poetic practice are not locked into the means or media in which they appear. Elaborating the specific operations in Peignot's anthology provides one way to see how the making of poetic works follows conceptual rules of production in ways that, though they become modified in digital media, still build on precepts and principles with a long tradition.

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