GADSBY: WIKIP_DIA'S LOST LIPOGRAM

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Ernest Vincent Wright's novel *Gadsby* is legendary among constrained writing enthusiasts. When it was first published in 1939, it was the single longest work of English literature not to contain the letter "e". It is hardly surprising, then, that the book's many reviewers and commentators have sought to pay tribute to it with some modest lipogrammatry of their own. This article tells the story of one such tribute and the years-long battle it sparked on the world's largest and most popular online encyclopedia.

Ancient history

Some time in 1936 or 1937, a little-known author and public speaker by the name of Ernest Vincent Wright sat down at his typewriter, tied down its "e" type bar, and banged out *Gadsby*, a 50 000-word lipogrammatic novel [3]. He claimed to have been inspired by a four-stanza poem without the letter "e", which he must have encountered many years earlier, for as far back as 1930 he was already composing lengthy lipograms and publically challenging others to outdo him [2, 3]. Despite, or perhaps because of, his novel's unusual character, Wright had difficulty finding a publisher for it; he eventually released it through a vanity press in 1939. Wright died the same year, thus quashing any plans he may have had for publicizing the book [1]. Indeed, the published novel does not seem to have attracted any contemporary reviews, and until very recently copies and reprints have been extremely difficult to locate. A. Ross Eckler, Jr. called *Gadsby* "one of those books that many people have heard about but few have seen", and in 1988 devoted a *Word Ways* article to his search for a copy [1].

Despite the book's scarcity, it has remained in the public consciousness for the last 80-odd years, with references, allusions, and even full-length reviews appearing in newspapers, magazines, and books. The more playful of these even pay tribute to the novel by aping its lipogrammatic style. The earliest of these is probably a pre-publication critique by Walter B. Clausen, a state news editor for the Associated Press in California. Clausen's review, released on the AP wire and picked up by several newspapers in 1937, starts off by announcing that Clausen, like Wright, is tying down the "e" bar of his typewriter. The critique then continues for nearly 400 "e"-viscerated words. A more recent specimen can be found in the 6 August 2002 issue of *The Village Voice*; book review editor Ed Park kicks off his *Gadsby* retrospective with a very fluent-sounding lipogram (but unfortunately drops the constraint after just one paragraph). And of course, of the dozens of short user-submitted reviews of the book on Amazon.com, Goodreads, and other websites, a good many are themselves lipogrammatic.

Wikip_dia: The Lipogram Anyon_ can _dit

Lipogrammatists, it seems, are everywhere, and Wikipedia is no exception. The collaboratively edited online encyclopedia has maintained an article on *Gadsby* since 2003, and it wasn't long after its creation that certain editors got it into their heads to have a little fun with it. The game began on 11 October 2004, when an Australian mathematician going by the handle "Dysprosia" challenged editors to rewrite the article—then containing just 54 words of original content—as a lipogram. Her challenge was taken up the very same day by music student Kat Walsh. (Walsh would later go on to head the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organization which operates Wikipedia.) Walsh's initial and imperfect draft was quickly built upon by a succession of fellow lipogrammatists—most of whom, interestingly, identify themselves on their Wikipedia user pages as computer scientists. Rarely was any given revision of this incarnation of the article purely lipogrammatic, though this final one came close:

> *Gadsby* is a notorious book by a Californian author, Wright, circa 1939. It was Wright's fourth book.
>
> It is famous for consisting only of words not containing any of the fifth symbol among our linguistic symbols. Gadsby is thus a *lipogram*, or a display of constraint in writing. It is 50,100 words long. Wright informs us in Gadsby's introduction of having had to impair his own typing contraption to avoid slipups. *Gadsby* is an account of how its protagonist, John Gadsby, transforms his placid town of Branton Hills into a bustling city by tapping youth's vigor and capacity for original thought.
>
> Quoting from its initial paragraph, for a look into its mood:
>
>> If youth, throughout all history, had a champion to stand up for it; to show a doubting world that a child can think; and, possibly, do it practically; you wouldn't constantly run across folks today who claim that "a child don't know anything." A child's brain starts functioning at birth; and has, amongst its many infant convolutions, thousands of dormant atoms, into which God has put a mystic possibility for noticing an adult's act, and figuring out its purport.
>
> This abundant utilization of punctuation and disjoint air go on throughout Gadsby in Wright's fight to accomplish his lipogram. His luck didn't, though, grant him a look at his work in print; Wright would pass away at 66 on its day of publication.
>
> A similarly lipogrammatic book is *La Disparition* (1969) (which saw print in translation by Scottish author G. Adair as *A Void*).

The rewritten article was enthusiastically received on its associated discussion page. Many readers lauded the fact that they didn't even realize at first that the article itself was a lipogram. Some even joined in the fun by lipogrammatically expressing their support for it and pooh-poohing the minority of critics who branded the exercise as frivolous:

> I'm a fan of this approach. As a book that has utility strictly as a lipogram of significant

girth, our writing stands to gain from not using such glyphs as lack in *Gadsby*. This would work to show its particular quality.

—Zuiram

I support lipogrammaticity. Kudos to Zuiram, its champion. I know of no ban on "fun" nor any policy against it.

—Dpbsmith

The article was therefore maintained in a more or less lipogrammatic state. But the fun seemingly came to an end on 2 March 2006, when Edinburgh-based programmer Robin Johnson deliberately broke the lipogram. The previous year Johnson had playfully expressed reservations about the tribute ("I don't mind it, although it's probably not strictly in accord with WP policy.") and after tracking the article's progress for several months, he concluded that the constraint was impeding further expansion of the article. There was some grumbling about this at first from his fellow editors, but Johnson's arguments proved persuasive, and for the next two years the article developed free of any orthographical restrictions.

The Lipogram War of 2008

In July 2008, however, the page saw a drastic reversal in form: a Florida-based editor by the name of John J. Bulten suddenly and single-handedly expanded the text fivefold, in the process returning it to a pristine lipogrammatic state. (*Word Ways* readers blessed with an elephantine memory will recognize Bulten as the contributor of four articles to this very journal nearly a quarter century ago.) Bulten's changes were reverted within a few days, touching off an intensive, long-term edit war between pro- and anti-lipogrammatic factions. One side would deliberately introduce non-lipogrammatic text, only for the other side to immediately reword it to eliminate all use of the forbidden letter. The non-lipogrammatists would then dig back through the log of edits (helpfully preserved by the software which runs the encyclopedia) to undo the changes. Both sides presented increasingly fervent justifications for their edits in the article's change log and on its dedicated discussion page. Those against the lipogram argued that it compromised the article's readability and informativeness, and that the experiment was too whimsical for a serious encyclopedia. Those in favour of keeping the constraint countered that it made the article aptly illustrate the sort of writing in the novel, and that it did so without unduly compromising the text's accessibility.

The arguments and edit warring raged back and forth for many months—at one point it was even necessary for the site administrators to temporarily lock down the article from editing by both camps. Eventually it was conceded that parts of the lipogrammatic version of the article were unclear, or at least unidiomatic for the genre. Wikipedia, being an encyclopedia, imposes certain writing constraints of its own, foremost of which are the requirements to write in plain English, to follow a particular outline, and to provide accurate bibliographic citations for all claims. Whether the article's stylistic and structural constraints could be resolved with the lipogrammatic one became the locus of the dispute. The pro-lipogram faction was adamant that any awkwardness in phrasing could be fixed by collaboratively rewriting the text until it sounded more natural. They also noted that there was room for at least some deviation from the house style—after all, one of Wikipedia's five core principles is that rules should be bent whenever they interfere with the project's greater goals.

An example of the stylistic hurdles faced by the lipogrammatists was the structural template used by nearly all Wikipedia articles on novels. This template prescribes standard section headings, such as "Plot", "Reception", "See also", "References", and "External links". Needless to say, most of these could not be used as-is in the "e"-lipogram, and while some good substitutions were proposed, they did have the disadvantage of breaking consistency with other articles.

Had the stylistic problems been confined to the section headings, the article might have survived as a lipogram. However, much more strenuous objections were being raised to the lipogrammatic approach to bibliographic references. For example, one of the principal sources for the article was a 1986 anthology of *Word Ways* articles compiled by the journal's then-editor, Albert Ross Eckler, Jr. How could this book be accurately referenced when the name of its editor contains multiple instances of the proscribed letter? Various suggestions were advanced, including abbreviating the name to "Al Ross, Jr.", or using "FaRO", his National Puzzlers' League handle. There were similar problems, and similarly convoluted workarounds, for other cited authors, including Douglas Hofstadter, Walter Abish, and of course Ernest Vincent Wright himself. None of the workarounds placated the anti-lipogrammatic faction, who held the completeness and accuracy of the references to be sacrosanct.

By the autumn of 2008, the tide was turning against the lipogrammatists. In September, one of their most vocal opponents, an editor going by the name "Soap", summed up his frustration in a univocalic missive to Bulten:

> See, JB? We feel perplexed whenever we see these E-less sentences. We revere the letter E; we detest perverse letter schemes. Deleted letters repress the mere free speech we rebels need. We prefer free verse, where sense redeems senselessness. Ye rebels, beseech me; let September be E's revenge!

Within a couple months, a consensus had formed against the lipogram, and the article was soon rewritten in plain English. Bulten continued to contribute lipogrammatic updates to the article for about a year, though these were invariably rewritten by other editors into standard English. He stopped only in October 2010 after being hauled before the site's administrators and threatened with revocation of his editing privileges. To this day, however, the article still sees occasional attempts by other editors (usually new or anonymous users) to return it to lipogrammatic form. These essays are inevitably reverted by one of the hundred or so established editors who patrol the page. The following warning message now appears to all would-be lipogrammatists who attempt to edit the article:

> There is currently **no consensus** supporting the re-writing of this article as a lipogram. Wikipedia only supports articles which are accessibly written and in accordance with the recommended Manual of Style. Attempts to do otherwise **will** be reverted and the editors subject to administrator action or warnings.

Aftermath

Though the version of the article favoured by Bulten and his coauthors may have been justly and democratically rejected by the encyclopedia to which it was submitted in good faith, it seems a

shame that it should be forever consigned to the dustbin of logological history. Fortunately, the software which powers Wikipedia makes it possible to view any past revision of a given article, including Bulten's, and Wikipedia's liberal licensing terms permit its reproduction for posterity here. Below is a slightly abridged version; my only major cuts have been to the list of characters and to the references, which besides being quite lengthy contained a number of errors unconnected with their rephrasing in lipogrammatic style.

Gadsby: Champion of Youth is an intrawar account of Branton Hills (a fictional city), by Vin Wright. A story of about 50,000 words, it is possibly most famous of all Anglic-group lipograms, and probably most ambitious also.

Synopsis

Gadsby's protagonist, fiftyish John Gadsby, hands civic administration of his town to a local youth organization, and in so doing transforms Branton Hills from a stagnant municipality into a bustling, up-and-coming city. Thrust onward by youthful vigor, this organization campaigns for original civic construction, such as a city park, a public library, and a zoo, and Gadsby soon wins a mayoralty. To solicit donations for such public works, his organization must "work its linguistic ability and captivating tricks full blast".

> If youth, throughout all history, had a champion to stand up for it; to show a doubting world that a child can think; and, possibly, do it practically; you wouldn't constantly run across folks today who claim that "a child don't know anything." A child's brain starts functioning at birth; and has, amongst its many infant convolutions, thousands of dormant atoms, into which God has put a mystic possibility for noticing an adult's act, and figuring out its purport.
>
> *Gadsby*, first paragraph

An anonymous narrator, who continuously complains autologically about his own poor writing and circumlocution, is actually Wright, a Californian from Boston. This is shown by implication from his allusion to Wright's nonlipogrammatic introduction:

> (Now, naturally, in writing such a story as this, with its conditions as laid down in its Introduction, it is not surprising that an occasional "rough spot" in composition is found. So I trust that a critical public will hold constantly in mind that I am voluntarily avoiding words containing that symbol which is, by far, of most common inclusion in writing our Anglo-Saxon as it is, today. Many of our most common words cannot show; so I must adopt synonyms; and so twist a thought around as to say what I wish with as much clarity as I can.) So, now to go on with this odd contraption...
>
> *Gadsby*, part 2

Wright calls it a story of thrill, rollicking, courtship, patriotism, a stand against liquor, and amusing political aspirations in a small growing town. Its tacit chronology starts around aught-six, passing through First World War days and continuing up into Prohibition and Harding's administration.

Lipogrammatic quality

Gadsby is notorious as a lipogram: any composition which avoids a particular glyph throughout its manuscript. Writing lipograms is a form of artistic constraint that arbitrarily limits an author's vocabulary. A typical short lipogram is Carroll Bombaugh's "Bold Ostrogoths, of ghosts no horrow show. On London shop-fronts no hop-blossoms grow", which contains only consonants and "o"'s. *Gadsby*, by contrast, skips from "d" to "f" in its subvocabulary of around 4,000 valid words, thus omitting a symbol ubiquitous to Anglic-family idioms.

Notwithstanding this artistic constraint, Wright's narration is fully grammatical and lucid. His introduction holds that his primary difficulty was avoiding typical suffixation for past actions; ablauts, modal auxiliary forms, and a short list of participials accomplish that function in *Gadsby*. Scarcity of vocabulary also drastically limits discussion of quantity, and availability of pronouns and many common words; Wright dryly broods about his inability to count anything from six to thirty. *Word Ways*, a linguistics journal, said that Wright's vocabulary could contain fully half of W. Francis's Brown Corpus, a computational analysis that lists common words; a lipogram with tight constraints, by comparison, could allow only a sixth of such a list.

At upwards of fifty thousand words, Wright's book allows short forms of words on occasion, but, as its introduction points out, only if a full form is similarly lipogrammatic, such as with "Dr.", "P.S.", and "T.N.T." (trinitrotoluol). This standard holds for common contractions, including "ain't" (is not), "atta" (that a), and "dunno" (do not know); and for substandard forms by an Irishwoman ("shmokin'" for "smoking"), an Italian ("buncha" for "bunch of"), and a young vagrant ("brung" for "brought"). Wright's subvocabulary also contains such long words as "congratulations", "dissatisfaction", "hospitalization", "inconspicuosity", "orthographically", "philanthropists", "philosophically", and "straightforward". Wright turns famous sayings into lipogrammatic forms, such as "Music truly hath charms to calm a wild bosom", and "A charming thing is a joy always".

Composition and publication

Wright said his motivation for writing *Gadsby* was his noticing a four-stanza lipogram in print that had won significant acclamation (author now unknown), and his chafing balkily at claims that such a composition could not flow smoothly in styling and grammar. In initial drafts, Frank Morgan was originally cast as "Bob": "First 'Bob' was Wright's romantic swain, but a kibitzing companion said Bob was short for a word containing a

taboo symbol, so it is 'Frank' now, not Bob". Wright found it "particularly annoying" that "almost through a long paragraph you can find no words... and must go way back and start" from scratch, as if "stuck" in a hand of cards. Starting his manuscript in longhand, Wright brought it to fruition through manual typing—but "blacking", or tying down, a solitary typing bar with string, so as to forbid nonlipogrammatic words that "might slip in... and many did try to do so".

In fall of '30, Wright was living in vicinity of Tampa, Florida, and told a local columnist about his work so far in producing an initial lipogrammatic draft story. According to his own "yours truly" account, Wright had in hand at that point a long, grammatical, flowing story, without any abnormally short phrasing or implicit missing idioms; Wright did not wish to show his manuscript around, but had told his story aloud to a handful of fans, who found it without rival in its bulk and in its clarity of lipogrammatic composition. Wright was of opinion that his local *Indy*, a nightly journal, might want to sponsor a lipogram showdown by proposing a 250-dollar award ("if you think you can outdo... a man of 60"), thus jump-starting lipogrammatic construction and possibly inspiring thousands to try such a writing constraint. (In fact, only at that dollar amount was Wright willing to risk his own story, worrying vocally about "[losing] all control of it and it is worth fully that.") But *Indy* staff said "that it was hardly worth" fronting a high capital award for such a poor opportunity, and did not follow through on his proposal, anticipating a scarcity of rival contributions.

Wright, a past naval musician, put a final draft of *Gadsby: Champion of Youth* into writing starting in '36, during almost six months at a California military nursing facility, and took thirty months locating a publishing firm. Finally choosing vanity publication, Wright saw his manuscript into its first run of author drafts. Rumors of his dying within hours of his book's publication lack much support, as a print copy is known with an August inscription, two months prior to Wright's passing away.

Gadsby was Wright's fourth and final book. A majority of its original printing run was lost in a downtown printing-plant conflagration (also killing a companyman); a public library microform's proof copy informs most printings today. Accordingly, a first printing hardback can still command up to four thousand dollars.

Criticism and acclaim

Upon its publication, critics said, "It is amazingly smooth. No halting parts. A continuity of plot and almost classic clarity obtains", and, "On and on it flows. No shortcuts of words on phrasing is found, which in full would contain taboo symbols" (Walt Burton). But commonly, its plot was found "languorous" and its quality both "lofty ('It is an odd kink of humanity which cannot find any valuation in spots of natural glory') and rambunctious ('Books!! Pooh! Maps! BAH!!')" (Park). With authors awarding Jay Gatsby honors as most famous fictional individual, journalists jokingly brought up Wright's circumlocutory stylings. "Lipogram aficionados—folks who lash words and (alas!) brains so as to omit

particular symbols—did in fact gasp, saying, 'Hold that ringing communication tool for a bit! What about J. Gadsby?' " said a typical column (Park).

La Disparition is a similar Francophonic lipogram book (in translation as *A Void*, by Scottish author Gil Adair, and *A Vanishing*, by Ian Monk). Its original author saw Wright's book via Oulipo, a multinational wordplay organization. "Possibly in honour of Gadsby it was also 50,000 words". Oulipo's publication of this work "was taking a risk" of finishing up "with nothing [but] a *Gadsby*", that is, a book of no fascination to critics. As a nod to Wright, *La Disparation* contains an Oxford don and Auctor Honoris Causa known as "Lord Gadsby V. Wright", a "*grand anglais savant*" and tutor to protagonist Anton Voyl, or Vowl; a composition of Voyl's is actually a quotation from *Gadsby*. In addition to *La Disparition*, aspiring lipogrammatists still point to *Gadsby* as an inspiration today. A thick work by Basic Books, about Marot and linguistic music, contains significant parts of *Gadsby*, for illustration; its author, writing "occasionally lipogrammatically", also now has a thousand-word "autolipography", or lipogrammatic autobiography, put into publication by Stanford.

Wright's magnum opus is found in citations by David Kahn's classic history of cryptography, by 'pataphysicians such as Christian Bök, and by *Book of Lists*, a trivia standard. David Crystal, host of a BBC Radio 4 linguistics program, finds *Gadsby* comparing favorably to *Cat in a Hat* and calls it a "most ambitious work", painting a social portrait contrasting starkly with that of its famous inspirations, Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan.

Citations

- Walt Burton. "Fifty Thousand Words Minus". *Oshkosh Daily*.

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