Notes on Alejandro Zambra, *Multiple Choice*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

What Happens When Constrained Writing Doesn’t Follow Its Constraints?

Constrained writing, including Oulipo, depends in part on its constraints, or at least it advertises itself as depending on them. In the clearest cases, the constraint is simple and known to the reader, as in the Oulipean lipogram. In other instances, the constraints are multiple or private, and they lead the reader to puzzle over the text, deducing its departures from some normative path.

Since so much experimental writing is constrained in some way, it's interesting to ask what happens when the writing fails to follow its own rules. Alejandro Zambra's "Multiple Choice" is a good example. In a note at the end of the novel, Zambra says he modeled it on the Chilean Academic Verbal Aptitude Test for 1993, which was clearly modeled on North American scholastic aptitude tests from the 1950s onward. In translation, the book presents itself as a reasonable facsimile of the SAT I took years ago.

The novel starts with a half-title page:

"I. Excluded Term
In exercises 1 through 24, mark the answer that corresponds to the word whose meaning has no relation to either the heading or the other words listed."

The next page begins:

"1. MULTIPLE
A) manifold
B) numerous
C) untold
D) five
E) two"

Except for the playful similarity of D) and E), this question is fairly standard. I began, for fun, with a pencil, marking my text as I went. (The final page of the novel is the answer sheet, with the open circles meant to be filled in with those soft pencils they used to distribute.)

The first sign that there won’t always be right answers is on p. 5:

"8. BEAR
A) endure
B) tolerate
C) abide
D) panda"
E) kangaroo"

This is, I thought, too obvious a marker that the novel won't be answerable, because it plays too simple-mindedly on the two meanings of "bear." On the next page there is this:

"10. COPY
A) cut
B) paste
C) cut
D) paste
E) undo"

This has a correct answer, by the test's logic, but the first four choices make it obvious that something else is at stake. Since this is a novel, I conclude Zambra wants readers to assume that he is introducing a metanarrative here: the narrator's voice will appear in this novel in the form of playful interventions within the aptitude test form itself. This strategy develops for several pages.

But soon another kind of question appears:

"16. PROTECT
A) care for
B) cover for
C) dote on
D) watch over
E) book after."

Again there is a correct answer (B), but it points in a different direction: it feels like "Multiple Choice" is going to have a plot, and it's going to turn on betrayal, care, or fidelity.

Let me call the first kind of metanarrative question, the one in question #10, "Playing with texts" (PWT). This second sort of question could be called "Playing with plots" (PWP). A third sort of question seems to speak for the narrator's mood:

"21. SPARE
A) time
B) room
C) change
D) tire
E) life."

Let me call this one "Playing with existentialism" (PWE). There are questions of this sort throughout, which use surprise choices to convey a sense of existential randomness or general blackness. Part one of the book's five parts ends with several more PWP questions, in which loyalty and fidelity are again at stake.

A reader can use these three kinds of questions to go most of the way through the book. Here is one more example, from Part two, where you're supposed to pick the best order of the sentences:

"27. A CHILD
1. You dream that you lose a child.
2. You wake up.
3. You cry.
4. You lose a child.
5. You cry.
A) 1-2-4-3-5
B) 1-2-3-5-4
C) 2-3-4-5-1
D) 3-4-5-1-2
E) 4-5-3-1-2”

There is no reason to work at this one as a test-taker has to, because it is an example of PWP and PWE. Once questions like this begin to appear, readers like me who were trying to see how far they’d get pretending they were students may put their pencils down. Questions like these are signs to the reader that they don’t need to think like students. But what, exactly, does the achievement-test form contribute once a reader stops searching for optimal answers?

The book’s title suggests that readers should think of life’s multiple choices, but only a small percentage of the questions in the book actually lead to branching narratives. Perhaps, then, it matters that the novel is a test, because several stories in the book -- the stories get longer as the book goes on -- have to do with cheating. But I think cheating is only a convenient theme, not the book’s central concern, which is more like regret and reconciliation. What, then, is contributed by questions that do not ask to be read as questions? Let me call questions like the one I just quoted "No reason to play" (NRP). They become the predominant sort of question, and it reaches the point where the final ten or twenty questions in the book are just pastiches of actual achievement test sorts of questions, and add very little to what is already apparent in the texts themselves.

In short -- and I am abbreviating an entire book full of my notes -- PWT becomes PWE and PWP as readers begin to care more about nascent plots and narrator’s concerns than with the test, and finally the test form itself becomes a superficial style, because there’s No reason to play, NRP. About halfway through, I noticed that it seemed Zambra was dividing his time between thinking up entertaining new forms of questions and answers (PWT) and hinting at the narrator’s life. The two purposes divided: the constrained writing began to be a constraint, or at least an irrelevance, to the author’s interest in constructing stories about his narrator’s life. The jokes got more obvious, there were more uninteresting choices, and even some false notes (as when the "fucking voice faker" suddenly appears, p. 52).

The novel doesn’t fail because it fails to follow its constraints. (It does follow them, all the way to the last page.) It fails because the narrator, and by implication the author, becomes interested in things that do not require the constraints. And as I watch the implied author’s attention divide in that way, between the increasingly superficial game of the test and the increasingly compelling stories of the narrator’s failures, I find myself losing interest in the book, because the glue between those is what makes constrained writing work -- at least in this case.