

FORMULES

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OULIPO@50 - L'OULIPO A 50 ANS

ENTREES EN MATIERE(S)

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PRÉAMBULE

« Oulipo@50 - L'Oulipo à 50 ans »*



* *Ce volume de Formules 16 (2012) est un recueil édité des communications proposées dans le cadre du Colloque « Oulipo@50 - L'Oulipo à 50 ans » qui s'est tenu du 5 au 8 octobre 2011 sur le campus de la State University of New York (Buffalo). Cette manifestation a été possible grâce aux généreuses subventions des Services Culturels de la République Française, de la Délégation Générale du Québec à New York, de l'AIEQ, et sur le campus de l'université, des subventions et services de l'Office of the Vice-Provost for International Education, du Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, du Canadian-American Studies Committee, et de la Melodia E. Jones Chair. Ce colloque n'aurait pas été possible également sans l'aide locale des étudiants de M.A. et de Ph.D. de l'université qui ont été présents pour tous les aspects logistiques et intellectuels de l'organisation du colloque.*

Nos remerciements vont également aux éditeurs de la revue Formules, Christelle Reggiani, Christophe Reig et Hermes Salceda, qui ont bien voulu accepter la publication de ces actes dans leur revue.

Une version visuelle de ces contributions est consultable sur le e-zine de la revue Formules à l'adresse : www.ieeff.org/TESTUBE.HTML.

On trouvera également une version podcast téléchargeable sur la page de chaque communication : <http://vimeo.com/user10120706/methodigital-1>.

En parallèle au colloque, une exposition sur l'Oulipo a été organisée au Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum (septembre – octobre 2011), dont le catalogue en ligne est consultable à l'adresse suivante: www.ouliipo50-theexhibit.com.

À cinquante ans, l'Oulipo manifeste une capacité inattendue à fédérer plusieurs générations d'écrivains. En effet, l'une des caractéristiques principales de ce groupe constitué est de substituer une génération à une autre dans une épiphanie du (re)nouveau qui s'affirme comme tel¹. Que l'on reconnaisse trois ou quatre générations au sein de l'Oulipo (les « fondateurs », les « classiques », les « réinventeurs » et l'« avenir »), le dialogue intergénérationnel est certainement un aspect exceptionnel du groupe, qui colore à la fois son caractère fonctionnel (des générations dialoguent au sein d'un même ensemble) et son ethos plastique (le dialogue conduit à des discours esthétiques innovants qui valorisent l'expérimentation). Lors de la conception de cette célébration des cinquante ans de l'Oulipo, c'est ce défi aux idées reçues sur ce qu'est une « avant-garde » qui nous a retenu d'utiliser ce terme pour caractériser ce que nous voulions reconnaître comme mérites aux productions du groupe qui, depuis 1960, ont marqué notre contemporanéité.

Écrites par des spécialistes de l'Oulipo ou par des compagnons de route, toutes les études regroupées ici partagent la même curiosité envers les pratiques d'écritures innovantes. L'Oulipo n'en n'a pas le monopole, mais il a le privilège d'être impliqué dans toutes celles qui, aujourd'hui, comptent. Le phénomène est même si prévalent qu'une erreur commune consiste à considérer d'emblée qu'un auteur de textes expérimentaux est membre de l'Oulipo. L'adjectif « oulipien » en est presque arrivé à ce point de banalisation (ou de fortune) qu'il sert génériquement à désigner un type d'écriture qui ose prendre des risques avec la forme : il est devenu un label, une « appellation non contrôlée ». Si Dada prenait des risques avec l'aporie, l'Oulipo prend constamment le risque du renouvellement. Même si dans « innovation » et « renouvellement », ce qui s'inscrit en creux est le concept du « neuf », le terme, en fait, paraît inapproprié à définir ce qui est au cœur de la démarche oulipienne : le nouveau n'existe pas. Si l'on accepte les principes fondateurs du groupe, il y a une dimension achronique ou transhistorique au cœur de l'entreprise oulipienne ; de ce point de vue tout à fait exceptionnel, on ne peut se replier sur des étiquettes qui retiendraient le préfixe « pré- » ou « post- ». L'Oulipo se situe dans un continuum de la création esthétique ; qui plus est, l'ambition de Le Lionnais, avec l'invention du format « Ou-X-Po », visait à l'universel du savoir.

La composition du groupe, avec des membres venus d'horizons littéraires et scientifiques, avec des membres actifs appartenant à des générations différentes, est organiquement représentative de son identité épistémologique telle qu'elle a été voulue par ses fondateurs. Son fonctionnement, précisément défini, doit être rappelé également, puisqu'il constitue l'une des raisons majeures de cette longévité exceptionnelle : si, comme les avant-gardes, l'Oulipo a pu parfois s'exprimer par le biais de Manifestes, ou avoir comme elles un projet communautaire qui dépasse les frontières disciplinaires et géographiques, à la différence des avant-gardes, il a mis en place une *praxis* durable (les statuts, les réunions mensuelles, les comptes rendus...), et un dispositif collectif construit autour d'un certain nombre de règles explicites (le Président est élu, les membres sont cooptés à l'unanimité), qui a garanti la permanence d'une certaine démocratie et par là, d'une continuité intergénérationnelle.

Ainsi la « réinvention », action non-dirigée d'un temps vertical dégagé de toute continuité, est-elle souverainement inscrite dans l'anolipisme. Jamais à court de courage,

l'Oulipo a eu la témérité d'inventer deux principes opératoires qui permettent à la nouveauté de se passer de l'entame dramatique de la fondation et de l'agonie crépusculaire de l'abandon. Le « canada-dry » – dont il sera question à plusieurs reprises dans ce volume – ainsi que le « plagiat par anticipation » servent à déjouer le piège d'une simple avant-garde instituée dans la mystique *créationniste* des ruptures épistémologiques. Comme ils aiment à le répéter, un oulipien n'est pas un « fondateur », c'est un « pondateur ». Laisser supposer qu'il existe des plagiaires par anticipation désengage les pratiques oulipiennes de ce qu'une recherche exclusive de la « contemporanéité » scriptible pourrait avoir de simple phénomène de « mode ». Le cas du « canada-dry » est une manière furtive de se dégager de la tyrannie du minimalisme des procédés artificiels ou mécaniques de la contrainte ou de la combinatoire (« ça a la couleur d'une contrainte, ça a le goût d'une contrainte, mais ça n'en est pas une ») ; une « inspiration » créative mais avec ou sans soutien ? Telle est la question pour ceux qui veulent poursuivre la réflexion. Toutefois, cela laisse à penser que dans certaines zones de l'Oulipo toute production scripturale ne se réduit pas à la présence (explicite ou non) de la contrainte, surtout si elle s'exprime en termes de configuration extérieure. Les amateurs de cinéma se souviennent que dans *Hôtel du Nord*, Arletty, jouant une prostituée un peu ronchon, explique à la bonne de l'hôtel que le rythme de ses racolages nocturnes est gouverné par celui de la fréquence des métros : les *Poèmes de métro* (justement !) de Jacques Jouet sont à ce titre exemplaires, car ils ravivent non sans une pointe d'humour le débat sur la contrainte au sein même de l'Oulipo (si elle est extérieure au texte, reste-t-elle une contrainte ?).

Puisque nous avons choisi de consacrer ce numéro de *Formules* à l'Oulipo, à l'occasion du cinquantenaire de sa fondation, et que, comme l'a dit son Président, Paul Fournel, lors du discours d'ouverture du colloque, l'Oulipo a maintenant « pignon sur rue », il y a très certainement dans cette entreprise la dimension inévitable d'un bilan. Quelle que soit donc la dimension « transhistorique » du groupe, notre travail critique, et par extension, le dialogue avec les oulipiens présents², ne peut pas se passer d'un examen dont l'histoire serait absente. C'est ce que font clairement ressortir les deux tables rondes, ici retranscrites intégralement, car si elles n'ont pas été pensées dans une logique strictement consécutive, elles n'en exhibent pas moins pour autant une cohérence interdépendante remarquable. Ainsi les germes de la seconde (l'Oulipo et sa critique) se trouvent déjà dans les débats suscités par la première (généalogies oulipiennes), comme si le besoin d'en découdre avec une certaine idée, voire idéologie, de la critique oulipienne devenait impérieux.

N'oublions pas non plus qu'au mélange des générations qui marque la composition du groupe correspond, au miroir, le mélange des générations de son lectorat critique. S'il y a « pignon sur rue », ce que nous prenons comme une admission de la présence communale du groupe sur la scène de l'écriture contemporaine, il y a, pour l'Oulipo, une période plus confidentielle, durant laquelle si la critique commençait à s'intéresser à Queneau, à Perec, ou même, encore, à Roubaud, elle n'avait qu'une vague notion de leur consanguinité discursive. À l'image de ces échéances générationnelles, on reconnaîtra dans les essais qui occupent ce volume des préférences et des prédilections qui ne sont pas sans influencer, encore aujourd'hui, notre perception de l'Oulipo comme « ensemble » consacré à l'exploration universelle de nos géographies plastiques.

Le lecteur ne sera sans doute pas surpris de voir Perec consacré à nouveau dans sa place confortable d'écrivain le plus mentionné ou cité dans les articles de ce numéro dédié au cinquantenaire de l'Oulipo. Il garde donc son statut d'« oulipien d'exception » dans les propres mots d'Anne F. Garréta à la table ronde sur l'Oulipo et sa critique. Peut-on accorder une valeur scientifique à un repérage de « cote de popularité » parmi les oulipiens dans un tel recueil ? Nous le croyons pour au moins deux raisons : d'une part, l'événement du colloque a permis de regrouper ici pas moins de 26 contributions auxquelles il faut joindre les deux tables rondes ayant fait intervenir à chaque fois trois membres différents de l'Oulipo : nous étions assurément en présence d'une large représentation de la critique oulipienne actuelle ; d'autre part, il s'avère que le résultat de ce palmarès sur les fréquences onomastiques n'a pas de rapport direct avec la présence ou l'absence d'oulipiens au colloque de Buffalo.

Ainsi, derrière Perec dont le nom apparaît plus de 350 fois se trouvent mentionnés, on s'y attendait, Queneau et Roubaud, quelque 300 fois chacun (chiffres arrondis). La surprise vient en quatrième place, car elle assoit l'écrivain en question comme l'un de ceux qui comptent réellement de plus en plus à l'Oulipo. Il s'agit de Jacques Jouet, dont le nom est cité largement plus d'une centaine de fois, et qui est singulièrement mis à l'honneur dans la présentation de Warren Motte, qui l'intègre à l'incontournable podium Roubaud, Queneau et Perec. Ces quatre oulipiens selon lui constituent à part entière cet « *exceptionalism* » qui motive le titre de son article. Warren Motte, peut-être à son insu, confirmait ce que de simples statistiques onomastiques permettent de vérifier en quelques minutes : vous avez devant vous les quatre grandes figures actuelles de l'Oulipo, du point de vue de la réception critique.

À titre indicatif, et pour clore cette brève analyse lexicale, les trois oulipiens les plus mentionnés après ce premier groupe sont François Le Lionnais, Paul Fournel et Marcel Bénabou, tous trois entre une cinquantaine et une centaine de fois. Et, curieusement, en dépit des générations et de deux absences excusées, Jacques Bens, Italo Calvino, Anne F. Garréta, Harry Mathews, Michèle Métail et Hervé le Tellier se situent à peu près aux mêmes fréquences citationnelles, soit de l'ordre de la quarantaine de mentions. Apparemment donc, la critique se joue de la contemporanéité de l'écrivain à l'étude, ce qui abonde dans le sens d'une partie du propos de la table ronde sur les généalogies oulipiennes : les cooptations ont peu à voir avec l'âge de l'impétrant ; un sang neuf vient en effet régulièrement alimenter cet organisme vivant qu'est l'Oulipo, pour assurer sa survie (et sa reproduction), mais cela n'implique pas que seulement de « jeunes » étoiles (montantes) soient plébiscitées par l'ensemble du groupe.

S'il ressort donc de ce volume une certaine dimension de bilan, comme nous le disions plus haut, cela ne saurait prétendre à synthétiser un demi-siècle de recherches, tâtonnements, hésitations, et bien sûr œuvres et chefs-d'œuvre qui sont désormais à l'actif d'une confrérie ne montrant assurément aucun signe d'affaiblissement, mais au contraire une vitalité sereine et une productivité foisonnante que bien d'autres groupes ayant jalonné le vingtième siècle pourraient leur envier. On notera, enfin, la variété d'origine des contributions (France, Espagne, Grande-Bretagne, Italie, États-Unis, Canada, Japon)³ qui est également un miroir de la diversité des langues et des cultures dans le groupe, ainsi que l'intérêt, toujours vif, porté à ses traductions. Cela explique en partie notre choix d'un volume bilingue, dans lequel on passe d'une langue à l'autre avec souplesse. Cette variété de langues et d'origines dit –

comme le disent aussi les nombreuses références à l'Oulipo chez des écrivains ou artistes étrangers – à quel point les frontières nationale et linguistique n'ont plus de raisons d'être pour ce « groupe-monde » entré de plain-pied, avec son siècle, dans la sphère bruisante de la *world literature*.

¹ Voir sur ces questions *Formes Poétiques Contemporaines*, « Postérité(s) des avant-gardes », 7, 2010. [<http://www.ieeff.org/fpc7prefacewebdigit.pdf>].

² Marcel Bénabou, Frédéric Forte, Paul Fournel, Anne F. Garréta, Jacques Jouet et Hervé le Tellier. Qu'ils soient remerciés ici, une fois encore, d'avoir bien voulu se prêter à ce dialogue rapproché avec leurs lecteurs, oulipiens d'écoute.

³ La réception médiatique internationale de ce colloque signale également l'écho reçu par le projet d'écriture oulipien. Les statistiques du site internet de visualisation des communications attestent d'un intérêt global. Depuis la mise en ligne du site, le 25 janvier 2012, les 1414 internautes intéressés (à date) viennent et reviennent en effet des pays suivants (dans l'ordre décroissant des visites) : France, Etats-Unis, Canada, Espagne, Taiwan, Allemagne, Belgique, Italie, Australie, Japon, Angleterre, Chine, Turquie, Argentine, Danemark, Russie, Suisse, Ukraine, Mexique, Luxembourg, Suède, Colombie, Hollande, Maroc, Portugal. Cet intérêt atteste de la « mobilité » de l'Oulipo. A ce propos, il n'est pas déplacé d'indiquer que l'idée de réalisation du colloque « oulipo@50 » est le résultat de l'échec d'un projet similaire antérieur portant justement sur la diffusion globale des idées discursives de l'Oulipo. En 2002, Anne F. Garréta et Jean-Jacques Thomas, alors collègues à Duke University, décident d'organiser en mai 2003, au Centre EDUCO (Duke, Cornell, Emory), à Paris, un court colloque d'une journée intitulé « Oulipomobile » et regroupant des interventions portant sur la mobilité géographique des idées diffusées par le groupe. Une grève paralysa la France de janvier à juin 2003 et au jour prévu pour le colloque, une grève générale des transports parisiens *immobilisa* tout Paris. Le colloque n'eut pas lieu.

ENTREES

EN MATIERE(S)

Oulipo@50 North American International Colloquium on Oulipo, the last continental avant-garde

L'Oulipo à 50 ans



October 5-8 / 2011 / Buffalo, New York

All Events will take place at the Karpeles Regency 35 Fountain Plaza unless otherwise noted

With the participation of:
Marcel Benabou / Frédéric Forts / Camilla Bloomfield / Warren Motte
David Bellos / Jacques Jouet / Anne Garréta / Hermes Salceda
Hervé Le Tellier / Paul Fournel / Carrie Noland / Christophe Raig
Marc Lapprand / Christelle Reggiani / Shuishiro Shiotsuka

For the complete conference schedule and a list of event participants visit www.oilpo.org/oilpo50/program.html

A September-October exhibit 50 years of Oulipo will take place at the Karpeles Manuscript Museum, 453 Potter Avenue, Buffalo, NY

Paul Fournel
Président de l'Oulipo

Discours d'inauguration du colloque
« Oulipo@50 / L'Oulipo à 50 ans »

Chère oulipienne, chers oulipiens, chères amies, chers amis, chères cheuses, chers cheurs,

A l'instar des aciéries à coulée continue chères à Monsieur Lakshmi Mittal, l'Oulipo produit 24 heures sur 24. D'une certaine façon, nous sommes la continuation d'Aillanges et Hagondange par d'autres moyens, bien qu'il ne pèse sur nous aucune proche menace d'OPA.

Imaginez : il est trois heures et demie du matin, Hervé Le Tellier se lève de sa table de travail, rue Lamarck, face à la maison des bonnes soeurs de la Butte, il se masse le bas du dos. Il est heureux, sa journée se termine, il vient d'envoyer ses papiers de verre au Monde électronique, il a satisfait sa contrainte quotidienne de production. Il peut aller se coucher. Au même instant, Jacques Roubaud, rue d'Amsterdam, glisse sous son robinet d'eau chaude, le bol dans lequel il a préalablement déposé une cuiller de l'immonde café soluble dont il fait son régal. L'écran de son ordinateur est déjà allumé et il est prêt à reprendre le cours de l'Ode à la ligne d'autobus 29 qu'il a décidé de finir pour de bon. Un petit signal de message, lui annonce qu'Anne Garréta qui se trouve être à Paris 15^e pour quelques jours, a, elle aussi, terminé sa journée et qu'elle va se coucher. Ensuite, lorsque Paris s'éveille et que les rumeurs de la ville enflent comme les besoins du peuple en Oulipo, je me mets au travail, puis Jouet (a-t-il jamais vraiment arrêté ?), puis Forte et Audin, tous les autres. Et c'est vers onze heures, à l'instant même où Marcel Bénabou lâche son premier clic, que l'Oulipo est en pleine capacité de production, en plein rendement. Nous sommes alors à fond.

Dans le cas d'un rarissime pépin dans la production nationale, nous pouvons immédiatement satisfaire la demande d'Oulipo grâce à nos filiales américaines à qui nous passons le relais : c'est d'abord Harry Mathews qui est sollicité, se trouvant à Key West dans le fuseau de l'Eastern Time, puis Anne Garréta qui a le don d'ubiquité et qui produit alors à Washington DC et enfin Daniel Levin Becker qui, en dernier recours, surgit du fuseau du Western Time et lance ses productions depuis San Francisco.

Imaginons un instant une inimaginable catastrophe : nos moyens de production tels qu'énumérés ci-dessus viennent à flancher, à se tarir, une crise massive entrave la production. C'est alors que nous sortons notre Joker : Bernard Cerquiglini qui survole une partie du monde que nous tairons pour d'évidentes raisons de sécurité, assis dans son fauteuil en classe Affaires et qui rédige d'une main appliquée une morale élémentaire en breton à la gloire de la langue française et à destination du peuple universitaire malgache.

Ainsi à l'instant T personne ne manque jamais d'Oulipo dans le monde. Ce qui est notre modeste contribution à l'industrie planétaire.

Il n'est donc pas étonnant, comme aime à le rappeler Marcel Bénabou qui tient les rênes de l'Histoire et de la Géographie dans le groupe, qu'à chaque heure du jour quelqu'un, quelque part dans le monde, parle de l'Oulipo. Selon une formule bien cuite, le soleil ne se couche jamais sur l'ouvrage et sur ses œuvres.

Il faut maintenant en venir à la question qui vous brûle les lèvres, je le vois bien. Je ne m'y déroberai pas et j'y réponds sans plus attendre : oui, il existe une entreprise humaine de taille internationale, de plus de cinquante ans d'âge, non cotée en Bourse et non soumise aux lois du sacro-saint Marché. L'Oulipo est le clinamen dans le système général du monde, l'impossible exception, la gaffe.

Cet invraisemblable statut ne le met pourtant pas à l'abri de la réalité économique. Qu'il me soit donc permis de clarifier ici quelques points.

Ayant atteint le bel âge de cinquante ans et une visibilité conséquente, il paraît évident à beaucoup que l'Oulipo a eu les moyens d'acheter à la fois le pignon et la rue. Il m'arrive donc de plus en plus souvent, en tant que Président de recevoir des demandes de subventions, des demandes d'aide, des urgences de soutien. Il semble évident à beaucoup que l'Oulipo peut participer sans peine à la restauration du Louvre, à la replantation des platanes le long du Canal du Midi, à l'achat d'un toutou de Jeff Koons, au financement de la prochaine superproduction de Robert Hossein au stade de France, « l'Oulipo et Dieu », ou au sauvetage pressé d'une génération entière de jeunes écrivains en mal de monnaie et que l'édition abandonne. Ces demandes sont flatteuses mais ne correspondent que marginalement à la réalité.

N'en déduisez pas pourtant que l'Oulipo vit à l'écart de l'économie. C'est même précisément celle-ci qui nous permet de tracer une impossible frontière entre des mondes que rien ne sépare. Qu'est-ce qui dans l'oulipien relève de l'oulipien ? Qu'est-ce qui en lui relève de l'Oulipo ? Où passe donc cette frontière imaginaire ? Certainement pas au milieu du champ de la création sur lequel l'oulipien est indivisible de l'Oulipo. Je tiens à rappeler à ceux qui l'ignoraient encore que la qualité d'oulipien ne se perd pas et que « oulipienne un jour, oulipienne toujours », sauf à se suicider devant huissier en précisant qu'on le fait dans le but exclusif de quitter l'ouvrage. Je tiens à rappeler aussi à ceux qui sont en première année d'oulipisme, que tout ce que font les oulipiens est oulipien. Cette motion récente que nous devons à Frédéric Forte me plonge encore dans des abîmes de joie.

Revenons à la monnaie : un oulipien qui travaille gagne le fruit de son travail. Un oulipien qui travaille au nom de l'Oulipo gagne le fruit de l'Oulipo. Voilà qui est théoriquement simple et pratiquement compliqué. Mais je dois reconnaître que nous faisons merveille avec cette frontière floue. Elle permet à l'Oulipo de percevoir pour son propre compte de tonitruants relevés de droits pour ses ouvrages collectifs qui peuvent représenter plusieurs dizaines d'euros d'un seul coup. Depuis que nous sommes entrés dans le monde de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme, depuis que nous écrivons sur les murs, sur les clous, sur les bancs, dans les rues, sur les arrêts de tramway (en toute légalité), il nous arrive d'être riches.

Etre riche en économie oulipienne, c'est voir la trésorière Valérie Beaudouin ouvrir un beau sourire lorsque nous passons très brièvement en fin de réunion à la rubrique « phynances ». En tant que Président et gardien du trésor, j'évalue la largeur du sourire et nous en restons là.

Je dois même avouer que l'Oulipo a eu, autrefois, une poignée de SICAV. Je m'en souviens, même si c'était avant ma présidence. Lorsqu'il l'a appris, Jacques Duchateau est tombé de sa chaise. Je me souviens aussi qu'à un moment de brève opulence, suivant la contrainte des « avions » de Michelle Grangaud, l'idée a été émise (je vous laisse deviner par qui) que nous pourrions commencer une cave après les SICAV. A cette seule évocation, Paul Braffort s'est étranglé. Ce furent projets en l'air et feux de paille. Désormais l'ouvroir roule sur des rails circulaires : la fortune qui provient de la vente des Bibliothèques oulipiennes (6 € pièce, une affaire) va à l'impression de nouveaux titres. Et la fortune qui provient des droits d'auteurs des ouvrages collectifs sert à aider tous ceux qui se proposent pour en composer d'autres. Nous réalisons donc à la perfection ce que nous sommes : à savoir une association selon la loi de 1901 à *but non lucratif*. L'Oulipo, depuis cinquante ans parvient à transformer intégralement le bon argent en mauvaise littérature, selon les mauvaises langues et le contraire selon les bonnes.

Pour finir d'édifier les chercheurs que vous êtes tous, je dois préciser que, s'ils ne paient pas de cotisation à l'ouvroir, les oulipiens paient le repas mensuel que l'une ou l'un d'entre nous confectionne. Le cours du repas oulipien sur la place de Paris s'établit, en cette période troublée, à hauteur de 15 €. Ce chiffre varie au cours des années car il est soumis, lui, à l'évolution du marché – même si c'est le marché du coin.

Tout cela pour vous expliquer brièvement pourquoi la cotation en Bourse de l'Oulipo serait délicate. Même une entrée discrète sur le second marché n'irait pas sans problème.

Vous avez donc raison d'être ici, car nous avons légitimement droit de penser que l'ouvroir a de très fortes chances de traverser la crise économique qui avance.

Pour ce qui concerne le fond des choses – venons-y – ce que l'on convient, entre nous spécialistes, de nommer littérature, je me garderais bien de vous voler un seul instant de parole, je ne suis qu'un producteur de textes et mes capacités d'analyse ont de proches limites. Je voudrais simplement vous supplier d'y aller mollo.

Je me souviens du jour où un extrait d'une des nouvelles de mon recueil *Les Grosses rêveuses* a été choisi pour être le sujet de l'épreuve de « dictée-questions » du Brevet élémentaire du premier cycle (BEPC). J'ai trouvé la dictée difficile, je l'avais déjà faite, mais les questions m'ont plongé dans un monde mystérieux de perplexité et d'angoisse. On sommait les élèves d'admirer mon style et de justifier cette admiration, passe encore. Mais surtout on leur soulignait ce que l'auteur avait voulu dire en le disant. Je me suis trouvé en désaccord fiévreux avec ces affirmations. Je n'avais clairement pas voulu dire cela, mais à démentir les maîtres j'exposais les candidats à la faillite, ce dont je ne voulais même pas entendre parler. Après tout, peut-être y avait-il parmi eux de futurs lecteurs (c'était à l'époque où le statut de lecteur se confondait avec celui d'acheteur de livres).

Alors, je vous en prie, travaillez, faites le devoir pour lequel vous êtes ici réunis, mais prenez-nous avec des pincettes et ne coupez pas notre élan. Nous n'avons que 50 ans et encore beaucoup à prouver 24 heures sur 24 et 365 jours par an pendant les 50 ans qui viennent.

Warren Motte
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Oulipian Exceptionalism

The Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle is fifty years old. Fifty years old! Fifty years! Having myself turned sixty just two days ago, amid much wailing and gnashing of teeth, I am in a good position to measure just how long fifty years is. Not to put too fine a point on it, it's a very long time. And it's even longer, of course, if you count each decade as a millennium, like the Oulipians do.¹ Over those fifty years, the Oulipo has turned its attention to a great many matters of weight, from the size of the menhirs at Carnac to the notion that the crisis in off-track betting could be explained by the fact that trainers read Baudelaire aloud to racehorses (Bens, *Oulipo 1960-1963* 56, 230). What may be even more astonishing than the group's longevity is its record of civility. No excommunications here, no witch hunts, no blood-drenched seppukus. Indeed, its rules provide that nobody, once elected, can quit the Oulipo—and even after their death, its members are not excused from the group. From the original ten Oulipians, the group has grown to include thirty-seven people, and, thus reinforced, its activity continues unabated today, in the very same spirit of vigorous, collaborative interrogation that animated its beginnings.

Looking back upon the Oulipo, what emerges is the picture of a group that is utterly exceptional, and my purpose today is to parse that exceptionalism just a bit. I should mention that I have been a devoted reader of the Oulipo's work since the 1970s. But I have always read them from a very marginal position, whether flat-out on the plains of Nebraska or perched on the Eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains—in any case, a very long way from Paris (and indeed from a lot of other places one could name). Consequently, my own reading of them may itself be exceptional, a little quirky and idiosyncratic, and for that I apologize (I think). That being said, I would like to suggest a few areas in which the Oulipo seems particularly exceptional with regard to other groups, or schools, or movements, or tendencies, or currents, or what have you. I shall invoke five exceptions, one for each decade (or millennium, as you wish). These are highly personal choices, to be sure. Any serious reader of the Oulipo might well choose five very different ones. And any Oulipian, most certainly, would have a far more precise idea of what

constitutes the group's exceptionalism. In my defense, I should remark that each of the exceptions I intend to note is present, *potentially* at least, in the Oulipo's First Manifesto. Moreover, every one of these five exceptions seems to me, well, perfectly exceptional.

In its meeting of April 17, 1961, the group came up with a definition that has since withstood the test of time: "Oulipians: Rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape."² In that pleasantly wry manner, they cast one of the foundational principles of their project, that of working through deliberately conceived and freely accepted systems of constraint. Now, in any discussion of constraint, two considerations quickly emerge. On the one hand, *any* piece of writing involves a set of baseline constraints, because the medium of writing, language, is bound by norms, some more rigid than others, some more supple. Moreover, other considerations, such as genre, may impose certain protocols upon a writer. What interests me here, though, is the notion of systematic artifice, as expressed in a carefully elaborated and voluntarily imposed set of writing rules. On the other hand, as Marcel Bénabou puts it, "Constraint, as everyone knows, often has a bad press. All those who esteem the highest value in literature to be sincerity, emotion, realism, or authenticity mistrust it as a strange and dangerous whim" ("Rule and Constraint" 40). Constraint is often conceived as a restrictive process, one that severely limits the field of possibilities available to a writer. Yet while it is undoubtedly true that the use of systematic artifice and writing rules in a literary text does make certain writerly gestures impossible, it may also provide for fresh and largely unsuspected possibilities, and for new sorts of mobility as well.

The members of the Oulipo approach the notion theoretically from a variety of angles. Jacques Roubaud argues that "constraint is a principle, not a means," characterizing it as "an axiom of a text" ("Mathematics" 87, 89). Jacques Jouet suggests that "The constraint is the problem; the text is the solution. If you will, the constraint is the enunciation of an enigma, and the text is the answer—or rather one answer, for usually there are several possible ones" ("With" 4). For Marcel Bénabou, constraint eases the transition from language to writing ("Rule" 41). Georges Perec proposes an idea that may seem curious. Speaking of the lipogram, he says: "In this sense, the suppression of the letter, of the typographical sign, of the basic prop, is a purer, more objective, more decisive operation, something like constraint degree zero, after which everything becomes possible" ("History of the Lipogram" 107).

I recall reading that latter remark for the first time, long ago, and finding it counterintuitive and difficult to accept at face value. How can constraint *open* possibilities for the writer, rather than foreclose them, one after another? How can it exercise a liberating force, granted the obvious restriction that it imposes? Pondering that remark over the subsequent years, in the light of a many Oulipian works, I have seen those questions answered materially and incontrovertibly in a variety of ways. Though constrained texts may assume dizzyingly different shapes, one phenomenon that they seem to share is that constraint, paradoxically enough, provides them with a mobility that they might otherwise lack. In short, judiciously conceived and cannily deployed, constraint can make texts *move*.

To confirm that idea, one need look no farther than what has been called the seminal Oulipian work,³ Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes*. With its ten "master

sonnets" adumbrating one hundred trillion potential sonnets, the text is clearly not so much about *being* as it is about *becoming*. And if the work seized the Oulipian imagination so profoundly, it is undoubtedly because it puts the group's foundational principle, "potential literature," into action in such a sleek manner. What interests me most particularly about the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* is precisely the mobility that its constraint affords. The text is constantly moving and impossible to grasp. It is verbal, rather than nominal. One can take soundings in it here and there, but one can never traverse the landscape that it sketches. It escapes from us very largely, then, both ineluctably and definitively. And yet it *speaks* to us as it whizzes by. It has a great deal to say about literature and its uses, suggesting for instance that all literature is fundamentally combinatoric in character, and materially confirming, thus, insights by contemporary theorists such as Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, and Tzvetan Todorov. It argues that literature is playful in nature, a ludic dynamic wherein writer and reader find important points of articulation. It contends moreover that both writing and reading are deeply mobile activities—as anyone who has played with this text, shuffling verses from one configuration to another, will be forced to admit. It places literary form on stage and causes it to perform for us.

Finally, the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* is also an eloquent defense and illustration of writing under constraint. In his conversations with Georges Charbonnier, Queneau remarked that this text was undoubtedly the most daunting one he had undertaken: "I had written five or six of the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*, and was a bit loath to continue, actually I didn't have the courage to continue, the more it went along, the more difficult it was to do naturally" (1962: 116). Yet, once achieved, that exercise in *difficulté vaincue* puts difficulty itself into play, prompting it to speak overtly about process issues and the new possibilities that they place on offer. In close articulation, we are invited to retrace constraint along the axis of those process issues—indeed, such a gesture seems unavoidable—in the course of a reading that, *potentially* at least, will never end, a reading that constrains us, in turn, to be as wholly mobile as we possibly can.

The second brief for Oulipian exceptionalism that I intend to argue devolves upon the very figure of the exceptional, the *clinamen*. It is a fine example of a strong trope in the history of thought, one strong enough in any case to come back with a vengeance after lying in the weeds for nearly two millennia. One recalls that Epicurus found the determinism of Democritus's atomic theory intolerable, and that he chose to refute that model in its most crucial point, its linearity, suggesting that the atoms *swerve* as they fall. Lucretius's account of that gesture underscores the idea that the *clinamen atomorum* occurs "at uncertain times / and at uncertain points" (*The Nature of Things* II, 218-19), that very indeterminacy serving to provide a locus of freedom and some much-needed room for maneuver. Paul Braffort has remarked that the Oulipo became aware of the possibilities offered by the *clinamen* in the early 1970s, and that from then onward, its "essential role" within the group's work became progressively more apparent ("Un système formel" 108).

As it is in so many other instances, the case of Georges Perec is exemplary in this regard. A fervent devotee of highly constraining structures and uncompromising literary symmetry,

author of a 5000-character palindrome and a 300-page lipogrammatic novel, Perec gradually became convinced of the creative efficacy of the integration of a minimal element of indeterminacy into highly constrained literary structures. He told with relish the story of Chinese typographers who, after working for years to set an error-free text, would deliberately insert therein one typographical error.⁴ In his own work, however, the role of the clinamen is far less static; two examples will serve to illustrate that point.

Perec practiced extensively a venerable form known as the heterogram, a form in which each verse of a given poetic text is an anagram of every other verse within that text. After deploying that technique rigorously and unflinchingly in texts such as *Ulcérations* and *Alphabets*, Perec became convinced that those forms had to be made more malleable. He consequently introduced the clinamen into his heterograms, in the form of a variable letter in each verse. That is, each verse, rather than being strictly anagrammatic of every other verse in the poem, now includes a variable letter that is chosen "freely" in accordance with the poet's needs. Its role is analogous to that of the joker in certain card games, in that, from the moment it is introduced, a satisfactory result is more readily obtained. In each poem produced according to this new process, one can trace the path of the clinamen through the text, line by line, and its consequences are considerable: the language of the new form, when compared to the old, describes a radical swerve toward the normative, the texts engendered are more *readerly*, less *writerly*. Moreover, Perec's tactic is strikingly similar to that of Lucretius, in that his clinamen is clearly a locus of free will, and a substantial humanization of constraint.

The second example is furnished by Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi*, a novel whose formal organization testifies to the application of several structures of systematic artifice, principally mathematical in nature. The clinamen plays multiple roles in that text, and its method of intervention is far more dynamic still than in the previous example. Bernard Magné, who has studied *La Vie mode d'emploi* in some detail, cites three examples of the clinamen therein. First, while the formal organization of the novel provides lists of forty-two constitutive elements to be integrated into each of the chapters, Magné notes that two components of each list, entitled respectively "false" and "lack," function programmatically throughout the novel as clinamens; the former imposes the transformation of an element in each list, the latter the suppression of an element. Magné remarks that, by this strategy, "the dysfunction of the system is itself systematized" ("Le Puzzle, mode d'emploi" 83). The second example occurs in chapter 51 of the text, in a "compendium" of the various narratives included in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. The clinamen here is centered upon the notion of lack, and one of its manifestations occurs in a passage dealing with an *atomiste*, a self-designation on the metatextual level, insofar as the construct of the clinamen resulted from the atomic theory of Epicurus and Lucretius. The third clinamen noted by Magné is also characterized by a lack: although the formal organization of *La Vie mode d'emploi* would seem to call for one hundred chapters, there are only ninety-nine in the text; in fact, the sixty-sixth chapter is "missing." In an interview, Perec offered an explanation:

This chapter must disappear in order to break the symmetry, to introduce an error into the system, because when a system of constraints is established, there must

also be anticonstraint within it. The system of constraints—and this is important—must be destroyed. It must not be rigid, there must be some play in it, it must, as they say, "creak" a bit; it must not be completely coherent; there must be a clinamen—it's from Epicurean atomic theory: "The world functions because from the outset there is a lack of balance." According to Klee, "Genius is the error in the system"; perhaps I'm being too arrogant in saying that, but in Klee's work it is very important. ("Entretien" 70-71)

Perec's thinking on the subject of formal constraint takes, then, a marked swerve. From his initial belief in the value of maximal formal rigor as the guarantor of the text, he came to feel that the textual system must be intentionally flawed—and the flaw scrupulously cultivated, in turn, as a crucial locus of poetic creativity.

Furthermore, just as Oulipians sometimes imagine themselves as characters in a novel written by Raymond Queneau, are we readers not tempted to imagine the Oulipo as a clinamen in the pattern of literary history? What other group has lasted as long? Surely not Dada, nor Surrealism, nor Futurism, nor the Lettrists, nor the Situationists, to mention just a few. What other group disrupts received ideas about literature in such a bracing, tonic manner? What other intervenes in both the material world of letters and in our readerly imagination at such "uncertain times" and "uncertain points"?

The third manifestation of exceptionalism that I would like to point out is the way that Oulipian writing coaxes form and content into a conversation that serves to illuminate both of them. From the outset—and indeed well before that—Oulipians insist upon the first of those terms. Very early on in his career, Raymond Queneau was deeply convinced of the importance of literary form, and that conviction would in turn shape the aesthetics of the Oulipo in crucial ways. In an essay dating from 1937 entitled "Technique du roman," Queneau calls for a renovation of the novel, and puts forward an eloquent brief for literary form:

Rules disappear once they've outlived their usefulness. But forms go on eternally. There are forms that confer all the virtues of the Number onto the novel's subject; and so, born of the story's various aspects and of its very expression, connatural with its central idea, at once daughter and mother to all the elements it polarizes, a structure takes shape, transmitting to the work the last gleams of the Universal Light and the last echoes of the Harmony of Worlds. ("Technique of the Novel" 29)

In that same piece, Queneau deplores the fact that the novel is the most *lawless* (as Gide put it) of literary genres; and in doing so, he introduces his "flock of geese" image, which has since taken on a certain notoriety:

Poetry has long been a favorite stomping ground for rhetoricians and rule makers; the novel, on the other hand, has eluded every form of law for as long as it has

existed. Anyone can drive an indeterminate number of seemingly lifelike characters along before him, like a flock of geese, across an empty plain measuring some indeterminate number of pages or chapters. No matter what, the result will always be a novel. (26)

What he is calling for, in other terms, is a new kind of novel, one which would be as highly structured as a sonnet, say, or a triolet. It should be noted that Queneau's vision of literary form already had a strong mathematical dimension to it—and that curious injection of mathematics into a theory of literary form is a foundational principle for the Oulipo.

Clearly enough, the quest for literary form is the one central and non-negotiable clause in the Oulipo's charter. And it is that notion, more than any other, which has afforded direction, purpose, and vitality to the group's activity over the past fifty years. It should be noted however that form is commonly enlisted in the service of theme in their work (and indeed vice versa), and that such an effect is truly particular. Whether it be a case of Roubaud's borrowing the sestina form in his "Hortense" novels, or Italo Calvino borrowing Greimas's semiotic square in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, or the way that the idea of an ending colors Jacques Jouet's *Fins*, a text that is itself ever-ending, form always has something to say in Oulipian work.

To confirm that assertion, I would like to turn once again to Perec. *La Disparition*, the most patently Oulipian of his major works, is a text that wagers upon both literary and literal potential. It is difficult to imagine a piece of writing more highly shaped, yet that very shape is undeniably and superbly articulate. The disappearance of the E stages a thematics of absence, lack, and loss. The characters in the novel are very largely benighted; they stumble around the disappearance of the E, sensing it everywhere they turn, but unable to identify it. From the outset, they recognize the omnipresence of absence, accepting it as an ontological verity, yet they wallow in ignorance, not knowing *what* is lacking: "A unit is lacking. An omission, a blank, a void that nobody knows about, thinks about, that, flagrantly, nobody wants to know or think about. A missing ink" (*A Void* 13). The novel testifies to that absence continually, both within the fictional world it sketches and without. Clues to the mystery abound at every level: there is a hospital ward with twenty-six beds, but the fifth bed is unoccupied; a character comes upon an encyclopedia in twenty-six volumes, but the fifth volume is missing; and so forth. Similar lacunas color the structural organization of the novel. Chapters are numbered from one to twenty-six, but there is no fifth chapter. Parts are numbered from one to six, but the second is missing. And so forth.

Absence, lack, and loss are put to still other uses on yet another level of the novel, this time one that is far more covert. Conditioned as the reader is by *La Disparition* to accept the notion that the absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, he or she may be tempted to look for other kinds of absences here. It is in that sense, too, that a literal constraint enables the writing of existential constraint, allowing Perec to say certain important things that were otherwise unsayable for him at that point in his career. As counterintuitive as such a notion might seem, the idea that discursive freedom can be obtained through constraint animates every page of *La Disparition*; and in that dynamic form and theme are absolutely inseparable.

In a similar manner, the shape of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is extremely eloquent. The doubling of the narratives therein, one autobiographical, the other fictional, speaks to a broad duplicity of technique in that text. A curious oscillation effect is at work there, moreover, as the text shuttles between concealment and revelation, and between indecipherable aggregate and legible whole. The three points within parentheses that stand alone in the middle of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (W 85) are the very image of a suspensory condition that Perec describes. An ellipsis within parentheses: bracketed suspension, an eloquent figure of nullity. Perec's eloquence here escapes from language—but not from form. And that's the very *point*, of course: sometimes form itself must say what is practically unsayable, and the only reliable vehicle for a broken story may be a broken book.

The fourth Oulipian exception I would like to talk about hinges on the idea of exhaustion. There are, I believe, two ways of thinking about that idea in Oulipian practice. First, as what might be called *exhaustive exhaustion*, in the sense of a combinatoric structure that exhausts all of the permutational possibilities of a given set of integers. Such is the case of Perec's *Alphabets*, a series of 176 heterogrammatic poems. Each of the latter uses the ten most common letters of the French alphabet—A, E, I, L, N, O, R, S, T, and U—and the remaining 16 letters are used in eleven poems each. Each poem can be parsed as a structure of eleven lines, each containing eleven letters, and the collection as a whole is organized alphabetically, logically enough, with eleven poems with B as the variant letter followed by eleven poems in C, and so on to the end of the alphabet. What interests me most particularly is the exhaustive character of this text, the way that it pursues poetic possibility to the point of exhaustion, and the manner in which its smooth combinatoric masks what must have been a hellishly difficult linguistic challenge. *Alphabets* is exemplary of the Oulipo's will to push structures to extreme lengths, to the point where they render up their full potential. It is an obsessional impulse, I think (and I say that in high praise). In certain experiments—and most assuredly in *Alphabets*— the Oulipo pursues literary potential in the spirit that Ahab pursues the White Whale.

Jacques Jouet's "metro poems" might likewise be invoked as examples of *exhaustive exhaustion*. These are new poetic forms, felicitously urban ones, invented by Jouet himself, and intended to be practiced in the subway. Very briefly described, each of these poems chronicles a trip on the metro. Each line is composed between two stations, and transcribed while the train is stopped in a station; if the trip involves a change of subway lines, then a new stanza begins. Jouet's *Frise du métro parisien* can be taken as the apotheosis of the "metro poem." It is also, I feel, a sustained meditation on a certain idea of poetry—and of literature in general. In order to test the potential of the poetic form he had invented, Jouet imagined a trip on the Parisian metro wherein he would pass through every single station on the subway system at least once, with a minimum of reduplication. He called upon Pierre Rosenstiehl, a fellow-Oulipian and a professor of mathematics specializing in theory of labyrinths and graphs, in order to help him map out the most efficient itinerary. Jouet took his trip on April 18, 1996, beginning at 5:30 am and finishing at 9:00 pm. What resulted was *Frise du métro parisien*, a poem of 490 lines, distributed in 49 stanzas. Throughout his text, poetry turns back upon itself in a kind of reflexive gesture, examining its own traditions and conditions of possibility. Moreover, Jouet casts the poetic act

here as a *vital* activity taking place in the real world, bound by real-world constraints: this is a poet with a train to catch. He reflects, too, upon the notions of rhythm and time, and the way in which this poem written on the subway necessarily conflates those important poetic notions beyond any possibility of disintrication. For the compositional rhythm that he has imposed upon himself leaves him no time for anything but his composition: "I have no time to dream of anything other than the poem," he remarks (17); and the small integers of time in his trip from station to station impose a subterranean rhythm upon his poem. He writes to pass the time, surely—but also to feel time passing. And he writes in that most quotidian space of the cityscape, the place where one's time usually does not seem to signify, in an attempt to persuade us that even the most banal, everyday experience may be lived poetically. The long day he spent there must have been an exceptionally exhausting one for Jouet, following his sleek combinatoric to the exhaustion of the metro system. One of the remarks he offers as he goes around and around in the metro reveals what he is actually about in his poem; and it may be taken also as a singularly apposite formulation of his own literary enterprise from its beginnings to the present: "I simply want to work round" (25).

The other way of thinking about the idea of exhaustion in Oulipian practice is through what might be called *exhausting exhaustion*. In certain of their works, Oulipians pursue a notion relentlessly and indefatigably, worrying it without cease, like a dog with a bone, winking out its marrow little by little. Marcel Bénabou's *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* is a shining example of that sort. It is a deeply duplicitous, deliciously perverse text in which M. Bénabou attempts to explain why, though he was "born" to literature, he hasn't written any books. It's a book that is always beginning, built on hesitation, erasure, and a hallucinating series of false starts. Reading it, one feels as if one were walking in wet cement: it is as exhausting to read as it is irresistible. More than anything else, *Pourquoi* presents itself as a prolegomenon to another book, an ideal, virtual, and clearly impossible one that Bénabou would certainly write, if only he were able. His double conviction, that he in fact is a writer, and that nevertheless it is impossible for him to write the kind of books he was born to write, resounds throughout his work in cries of anguish. Both sides of that conviction are articulated in a textuality that resembles profession at certain moments, and confession at others. In the section of *Pourquoi* entitled "Farewell to the Reader," Bénabou describes his will to write as a kind of spiritual illness, one for which he is unlikely to find a cure, asking his reader to think about this book, and to reflect on a question that is clearly rhetorical in nature: "Is it not the story of an ever deferred meeting, of a frustrated love strewn with obstacles and crosspieces which is the victim of illusions and regrets? Of an unhappy and ultimately impossible love, that of its author for a certain idea of literature" (*Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* 107). There is wryness and self-parody at work in that question, and those will not be lost on the reader. Neither will the fact that Bénabou longs nonetheless for a perfect—and clearly impossible—reader, one who would be equal to the kind of impossible book he would most certainly write, if only he were able, a reader who would be utterly inexhaustible.

The other case of *exhausting exhaustion* that I would like to adduce is Jacques Roubaud's "*le grand incendie de Londres*" (and here I'm referring to the volume published in 2009,

collecting the six single volumes belonging to that project, previously published from 1989 to 2008). It is, to say the least, a very impressive piece of work. First by virtue of its length: it numbers 2010 densely-packed pages, excluding the (highly detailed) table of contents. Next by virtue of its weight: at something just shy of four pounds, its very heft gives one pause. But the most impressive thing about it is perhaps the fact that it was published at all, appearing as it does at a time when people are turning their backs upon books, and particularly upon big, weighty books—or so, at least, one hears. Roubaud's gesture, and that of his publisher, Le Seuil, has something bold and a more than a bit quixotic about it. How many people will be willing to take on a book such as this one? Clearly, this is not a book to be read between two stops on the metro; to the contrary, it is one that demands, on the face of it, a very considerable investment of readerly purpose. Just as its author puts himself to the test as a writer, this book puts us to the test as readers, calling upon us to rethink our readerly strategies and expectations. Simply stated, this book is one of the most deeply compelling literary projects of our time. It questions, it mystifies, and it gladdens. It irks and it soothes. It intrigues and it satisfies. It shines. It *exhausts*.

My final example of Oulipian exceptionalism hinges on the relationship of the playful and the earnest. It is an intriguing question—and a significantly vexed one—in the history of culture from antiquity to the present, animating—and at certain key points, distressing—the arguments of a great many thinkers. Most of the time, playfulness and earnestness are taken to designate dispositions of spirit that are mutually exclusive ones, defining the two poles of a spectrum of human behavior, two attitudes that may color our ways of being and doing, but which must never commingle. From its very beginnings, the Oulipo has consistently and materially refuted such a notion, arguing instead for a practice wherein the playful and the earnest intermingle in mutually productive ways. Certainly, they are not the only ones to take such a stance (other writers, from Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, and Diderot to Borges, Nabokov, Cortázar, and O'Dinn readily come to mind), but the insistency, the import, and the sheer breadth of their argument puts them in the first rank of those who might be called "ludic integrationists," people who believe that one may play very seriously indeed.

Jacques Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir*, a collection of poems that deal with the death of his wife, and with Roubaud's own process of mourning her, offers a particularly compelling example of that stance. Roubaud uses a variety of different poetic forms in that work, but each elegy is shaped in some fashion by the number nine. Numbers thus converse intimately with words in *Quelque chose noir*, and form clearly becomes thematized. Yet Roubaud's formal game is about as far removed as one can imagine from the sort of soul-less verbal pyrotechnics of which the Oulipo is often accused by those who seek easy pretexts to dismiss their work; and nobody, it seems to me, could fault Roubaud's seriousness of intent. To the contrary, it is a very solemn game that Roubaud is playing, a very deliberate and organized one which argues that meaning—in both experience and in poetry—becomes manifest only when we recognize its shape, and that play always *means* something. Let us revisit in this new perspective, very briefly, three texts that I have already invoked.

The *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* is a text where playfulness and earnestness cannot be disintricated, and where they collaborate in ways that are highly productive of meaning.

Moreover, that very collaboration is itself thematized in a sophisticated ludic manner. If that dynamic is so obviously exaggerated, it is perhaps because sometimes a set of issues can be apprehended more readily in such a fashion, especially when the process is carried to the verge of absurdity, performed a hundred trillion times over. As a test case for the reciprocal complementarity of play and earnestness, I regard the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes* as irreproachable and utterly convincing.

La Disparition is a game with one, very simple rule; but that game, when played as earnestly as Perec does, produces some astonishing results. More broadly speaking, play is central to the text, both in terms of its production and its reception. For *La Disparition* may be thought of as a puzzle, constructed as such through a series of maneuvers each intended to negotiate the fundamental constraint, and presented as such to the reader who must, as it were, turn its pieces this way and that in order to assemble a coherent picture. On that horizon of possibility, another consideration looms very large indeed for Perec: the notion that he might write a dramatically new kind of novel. He articulates that notion at the end of *La Disparition*, in impeccably fluent Disparitionese, for the benefit of any reader who by that point has failed to grasp his intent: "My ambition, as Author, my point, I would go so far as to say my fixation, my constant fixation, was primarily to concoct an artifact as original as it was illuminating, an artifact that would, or just possibly might, act as a stimulant on notions of construction, of narration, of plotting, of action, a stimulant, in a word, on fiction-writing today" (*A Void* 281). Perec's game is thus a very earnest one, on a variety of levels. It testifies, furthermore, to a feature of play that deserves to be taken very seriously indeed, the fact that an individual, playing freely, affirms himself free to play.

Frise du métro parisien, finally, is a very amusing text. It is mobile and delicately self-ironizing; it puts on offer a vision of poetry that toys with our notion of what a poem must be in unconventional, intriguing ways. It should be remarked, however, that Jouet himself—though he has practiced many different literary genres—is primarily a poet, and moreover a poet who takes poetry very seriously indeed. It is hardly surprising, then, that upon inspection a variety of earnest considerations may be seen to animate his text. First and foremost, there is the notion that daily life, in what is perhaps the most banal of its sites (at least in the urban version of the former), should be *played*. That game transforms quotidian experience through a kind of felicitous alchemy, affording it a purpose and an aesthetic potential that it otherwise seems to refuse most utterly; in short, it invests it with meaning. Furthermore, just like the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes* and *La Disparition*, *Frise du métro parisien* can be read as a manifesto, a declaration of principles for a certain kind of literature, one that exploits with bold ostentation the combinatorial nature of language, playing that dynamic out as performance; one that relies upon systematicity and rigorous but freely accepted rules; one that points toward the exhaustion of possibility, and, through the same gesture, toward the invigoration of potential. In literature of that sort, it seems to me, the game is a very serious one indeed; and as we attempt to come to terms with it, however provisionally, the distinction that we habitually draw between play and earnestness makes no sense at all.

It is only appropriate that Raymond Queneau should have the final word here—though

whether that word is final or liminal might be debated, granted that he enunciated it in 1937. As he calls for a reinvigorated and broadly modernized French, Queneau states, *jécripa pour anmiélé lmond* ("Écrit en 1937" 22). Though that infinitive may seem a bit obscure, the sense of Queneau's remark is clear: he doesn't write to bore people stiff. It is an admirable principle, one that has animated the Oulipo's work consistently over the last fifty years; it is a principle that promises many more good things to come in the *next* fifty years—and, I hope you'll agree, an exceptional one.

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¹ See Jacques Bens, *Oulipo 1960-1963* 7: "The OuLiPo customarily counts its decades as millennia. [. . .] Like the goddess-mothers of Antiquity, the OuLiPo embraces the totality of time, past, present, future, in a word, eternity." My translation, as elsewhere, unless otherwise noted.

² Bens, *Oulipo 1960-196*, 43. See also Jean Lescure, "Petite Histoire de l'Oulipo," 36.

³ See for instance Jacques Bens, who says of the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*: "One can state with little risk of error that they constitute the first work of *conscious* potential literature. Or rather: *concerted*" ("Queneau Oulipian," 66); and Jacques Roubaud: "The first properly Oulipian work *par excellence*, claimed as such by the Oulipo, is a work that exhibits *potentiality* in all its force: the *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* by Raymond Queneau. Its constraint is rather elementary, but its *potentiality* is spectacular" ("Perecquian OULIPO," 100-01).

⁴ Personal interview with Georges Perec, July 22, 1980.

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Perec and Translation

In the page of acknowledgments at the end of *Is That A Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, I list all the people who provided me with ideas, information, suggestions, and corrections. Among those names I include that of Georges Perec. Now it is no secret that I never met Georges Perec, and he certainly never knew me. What business did I have to put him into a list of colleagues and acquaintances, as if he were one of my friends? It must seem pretentious, or worse. But I did not include Perec to make myself seem better connected than I was or ever will be. I did so in order to thank Georges Perec for the immense service he rendered me, which was no less than this: he taught me how to write.

Whatever else Oulipo is or may be, it is a fantastic pedagogical tool. It teaches what writing is, in an indissoluble bond with the means to do it. I don't mean to refer only to its celebrated *Ateliers d'écriture*, nor to the now widespread practice in French schools of using Oulipian devices to amuse and instruct young people. What I mean is that Oulipo asks you and invites you to write, as part of the process and product of reading. If you happen to be a translator, and more specifically a translator of works with Oulipian features, Oulipo actually teaches you how to do it. *Writing A User's Manual* could be the title of every anthology of Oulipo. It would not be a bad name for Perec's masterpiece either.

However, there is a misunderstanding about translation in the Oulipian field that needs to be laid bare and cleared up. Some of Oulipo's most famous and fundamental procedures are frequently labeled or categorized as "translation devices": the designation goes back to the early years of Oulipo. But they are not, and I would like to explain why.

The standard example of a "translation device", exploited by commentators to such an extent that it has come to irritate many of the Oulipians themselves, is S+7. This method of transforming a poem or a text into another one that may be even better presents itself as a mechanical substitution: once you've specified the dictionary, laid

down the count, decided which part of speech is to be used in the S role, the procedure is supposed to involve zero discretion on the part of its practitioner. What it requires is a slave-like submission to the constraint, which by its own force (and with luck) leads you to exhilarating, mind-bending or utterly unforeseen results. That's the official story. We know it's not completely true, because Mathews among others has revealed that the best part of S+7 is the cheating. Queneau's *La Cimaise et la fraction*, to take the most famous example, must have involved a very flexible notion of "7" or else a concertina-style dictionary that no one has yet nailed down. However that may be, calling S+7 a translation procedure necessarily also says something about translation. What it says is hardly new, but in my view it is profoundly wrong. What is brought into play when you call S+7 a translation device is not the creative practice of translation, but precisely its opposite—that idea that translation is a mechanical substitution of the words of one language by matching terms in some other. It may be your Latin master who was responsible for giving you that kind of understanding of translation; but elementary language pedagogy (for which I have the utmost respect, having been a language teacher for more than forty years) uses *thème et version* for a specific purpose—as aids to language acquisition. In reality, word-substitution does not have anything to do with translation itself, or with writing.

Georges Perec taught me to write in a different sense, and he taught me through translation. Translation interested him greatly. Not only did he try his hand at it with two of Harry Mathews's novels, he also reflected on what kind of an enterprise it was. Let me quote his words on the subject, made in the last year of his life, on Australian radio, and in English:

Translating is to impose oneself to produce a text through a constraint which is represented by the original text. And for me, in a utopian way of thinking, there is no difference between languages. I would like to know a lot of languages, but unfortunately it takes too long to practice so I am just able to balbutiate in English. But it's very interesting to try to produce the same text when you start from a different one.¹

In the mid-1980s, when I set out to create a readable English companion-piece to *La Vie mode d'emploi*, that is how I understood my task too. I knew not a lot about Georges Perec. But with the help of many people in Paris and elsewhere, I quickly learned about some of the constraints involved and especially about the wonderful, dreadful, fearful Chapter 51 with its Great Compendium. I decided that I would not be able to translate it in the running order of the book, as if it was just another chapter. So I set up a special routine. I had to, and I'm very glad I did.

In the mornings, I translated prose. At lunchtime my typist came round to collect my handwritten pages—for those were days before PCs. She for her part delivered the

previous day's clean copy, and I spent the early afternoon correcting my mistakes, or at least some of them. Then I had tea. And between 5 and 7 every day for many weeks, I *prepared myself* to translate, and then did effectively translate, 179 lines of French of 60 characters each by 179 lines of English also of 60 characters each.²

To begin with, I thought I would never manage. But I had to. I had a contract and a schedule, but also, because I had already absorbed, rather hazily but increasingly profoundly, the real lesson of *La Vie mode d'emploi*—that nothing is completely impossible. I squared off a ream of lined paper into 60 blocks, and invented a training routine. I decided to write about anything at all, as long as I could fit into a line of 60 typographical characters (including spaces). I allowed myself to compose shopping lists, memos to colleagues and course descriptions in that special form. I wrote in pencil, and of course I kept rubbing things out. I began to learn a few tricks—contractions, punctuation marks, ampersands and apostrophes give you some flexibility with the number of characters in any English expression. Little by little, I got a feel for what could and could not be said in roughly 60 spaces, and given the malleability of written English, roughly was good enough, because there are usually ways of stretching or squeezing by a character or two.

My next task brought me closer to the real task. I sought to identify the 179 passages of Perec's novel to which the lines of the Compendium refer. That could have been a very time-consuming task, because Perec has Valène recall some anecdotes that are told in only half a sentence, and others that are much easier to find because they summarize a whole chapter or a character that by then I knew well. But my task was speeded up immensely by what was the very first doctoral dissertation to be completed in the UK (and probably anywhere in the world), by Michel Guillaume, for it contained a "map" of all the links from the Compendium to their sources in the other chapters. It then struck me that if I could write in 60-character lines, and if I knew the story that was being encapsulated in a given line of the Compendium, I did not actually need to translate it. I needed to invent my own capsule of the anecdote, then massage it into the required form, and then see if it could be massaged further into something closer to Perec's own version. The job I was doing every day between tea and the television news was beginning to seem like fun. I started believing I would get it done.

But then there was the acrostic itself, the "magic letters" that march solemnly down the page from right to left in three sequences of 60 lines—the last of the third set which would have begun with an E is of course missing, in the most understated and elegant self-reference imaginable. In what manner could I represent that in English? The French key letters, as you know, spell out AME, a word of three letters. There's no obvious English word of three letters with a meaning close to it. To translate it in itself I would have had to invent not 179 but 239 lines encapsulating stories told somewhere in the novel so that the four letters of SOUL could be made to walk the same walk.

I thought about it quite seriously. By now I was quite adept at writing 60-character lines. I could have done 60 more. But would that have been a translation? I think so, myself, now: but I didn't expect publishers or readers to grant me the right to expand Perec's strange poem, especially because I was not going to tell them—certainly not straight away—what justified the expansion. So you may call me a coward. But good sense also dictated the cowardice, for the kind of response that critics for the *TLS* would most likely have given a 239-line catalogue in lieu of Perec's 179 could have ditched not only my reputation but Perec's too. My intuition was well-founded: the *TLS* turned out to be harsh critic of my translation as a whole, without even guessing what had gone on in Chapter 51.

At this point, scratching my head, I set off for Saarbrücken to get to know Perec's German translator, Eugen Helmle. He was the only person to have translated *La Vie mode d'emploi* in Perec's lifetime, and as he was also a good friend of the writer, he had had privileged information for his work. In fact, Perec had annotated a copy of the novel for Helmle to use, pointing out various constraints that needed to be respected and others, as he wrote in the margin, that didn't matter at all for the German version. Eugen explained that Perec's method in composing the acrostic had been not to work through the lines one by one, but to write his 60-character capsules first, then shuffle them around until he could make the order produce the diagonal letter-order he wanted. That was a tactic I made my own on the spot: to move my own lines into any order if it helped to make the acrostic work. But that still didn't solve the problem of a 3-letter AME and a 4-letter soul. In German it's even worse—*Seele* has five letters. What had Helmle done?

He'd used the German word for "I", namely ICH. It's only got one letter in English—but in Latin, as in German, it has exactly three! What's more, that Latin word was used by a famous translator, James Strachey, to translate ICH in the works of Freud, and it had come to have the sense of "selfhood" in ordinary English speech. EGO it would be! I hopped on the train back to Sheffield with an immense feeling of relief, and renewed determination.

The friendship and collaboration Helmle offered me as a fellow translator has set the pattern of relationships between a great many translators of *La Vie mode d'emploi* into many languages. Over more than 25 years I have been in fruitful contact with Perec's Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Greek, Turkish and Hebrew translators, and only a few months ago I sat down in Tartu with Anti Saar, whose Estonian translation of *Life A User's Manual* is due to appear soon. Such camaraderie, which is exceedingly rare in the world of translators, who almost always work in isolation, is also an Oulipian gift. Oulipo invites cooperation, because it is in its very conception a cooperative enterprise. Those of us who only translate it are affected all just as much if not more than other readers by Oulipo's blithe and joyful disregard for individual ownership of literary skills. That is part of what I mean when I say that Perec taught me to write.

In the spring months of 1986 I learned to do something quite useless—to write in lines of 60 characters. With the help of practice, training, and a couple of key facts supplied by Helmlé, I was able to use that strange facility to produce a parallel poem in 179 lines that does well enough as a substitute for the Great Compendium of Chapter 51 of *La Vie mode d'emploi*.

Acquiring a useless mastery is very important to a writer: it's not the utility, it's the mastery that counts. I developed mental muscles I didn't know existed. I had been obliged by Georges Perec to improve my control of language by paying strict if simple attention to its elementary written units.

I haven't practiced the skill for a quarter of a century. Do I still have it? My first answer is to say that it doesn't matter at all, because what I gained from making myself "write like Perec" was a sense of my own power over words, and a greater daring to try other difficult things. I doubt whether I have it any more. But as I recast what was an oral presentation for publication in print, I can't quite leave the question open, for myself. So let me try to repeat one of those training exercises—make just a banal list of things that happen to be in my mind today— and see if *Bellos can still do it*:

What the Greeks meant by *varvaros* was nothing more than dumb
 The former professor coming back to Princeton for the soirée
 Labrador, alsatian, pekinese or terrier? I'll have a spaniel
 I can hear Ms Sirken playing her grand piano clear as a bell
 I wish that curvaceous blonde jogger would stop to say hello
 The actresses who played in the two main roles in *Les Bonnes*
 Bernard-Henri Lévy has a facial twitch I can only call a tic
 They've asked me to give a talk in a desert city called Doha
 The pizza we consumed this evening was cooked in a large pan
 The therapist who helps husband & wife resolve thorny issues
 Driving my girl-friend from the restaurant to a parking spot
 There's a long distance from conjugal dispute to decree nisi
 A barista working shifts in Small World Café wearing a shawl
 I'll have 4 ounces of herring in cream and a Portuguese roll
 I spend too long puzzle-solving, so as to beat my own record
 I've never had an X-box or tried to play games like Nintendo
 I've cycled over Alps and Fens, but never encountered a wadi
 I'm about to buy a bright red brand-new airconditioned Smart

Well, that proves it. A lesson learned is never lost!

It's more important than it seems. The skill that Perec obliged me to acquire now informs and underlies everything that I write, in lines of any length. I'm convinced that my experience is not unique: many other people have surely learned as much if not more

from working with Oulipo. That's why I hope nobody will take exception my thanking Georges Perec (and through him, Oulipo) as a major contributor to books that I now write for myself.

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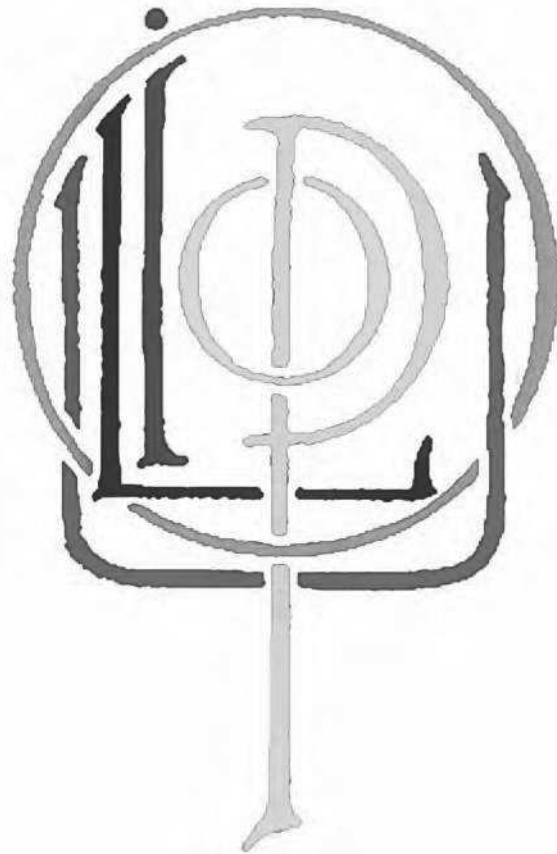
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¹ <http://www.franceculture.com/emission-les-passagers-de-la-nuit-vendredi-hors-serie-27-perec-in-english-what-a-man-2011-05-06.ht>. Dernier alinéa, le segment "Hörspiel". La citation recherchée commence à 2 min 03 sec, jusqu'à la fin (app. 20 secondes). (Consulted August 20, 2011).

² The writing exercises and preliminary drafts of the English translation of the *Compendium*, together with other manuscript and typescript sources for *Life A User's Manual*, can be consulted at the library of the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, Norfolk, UK. The drafts of my other translations of works by Georges Perec and others are at the Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana.

HISTOIRE(S)



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Family Vocation: Toward a Fictional Theory of Oulipian Influence

Résumé

Pendant cinquante ans l'Oulipo s'est présenté comme un groupe apolitique. A travers la production du groupe et de ses membres on peut toutefois reconnaître un ensemble d'impératifs moraux. Avec ce que l'on peut considérer comme la quatrième génération des écrivains de l'Oulipo, il semble cependant possible de percevoir une sorte de *crise de conscience* par rapport aux valeurs patrimoniales de littérature qui, jusqu'à présent, ont soutenu l'effort de littérature de l'Oulipo. Ne perçoit-on pas, dans le groupe, une tendance pour ses membres, à se considérer comme les personnages d'un roman oulipien? N'y a-t-il pas une place de plus en plus grande prise par l'autofiction et, d'un autre côté, par la mise en place de *Moments Oulipiens* ? Quel développement peut-on envisager pour ce nouveau roman familial en constante évolution ? Dans quelle mesure une expression à succès prononcée au colloque de Buffalo peut-elle nous aider à comprendre cette nouvelle dynamique du groupe?

Abstract

In addition to being consistently productive, consistently innovative in their approach to writing, to theorizing, and to disseminating experimental literature, for fifty years now the Oulipo has been consistently a-political. Or so we might come to believe were we to listen to the group's insistent refusal of ideology. And yet, beyond the fact that individual Oulipians have confirmed political lives, and beyond the implication of the cultural events in which the Oulipo has participated as a collective author, what is accrued in the accumulation of Oulipian works constitutes, within the Oulipo and among its readers, the fundamental basis of a living aesthetic, one in which what's recursively communicated via the forms themselves betrays and insistently confirms a now stable set of moral imperatives. The memorializing of literature, the re-canonizing of the overlooked geniuses, the montage of the everyday, of its structures of feeling, into fascinating narrative and lyrical forms, each of these gestures that so preoccupies enthusiastic readers of the Oulipo, contribute that modernist aesthetic. To some degree, as the fourth generation of Oulipians takes up and expands the array of tools developed by the group, could there be something like a *crise de conscience*, could this aesthetic be becoming a vocation? The theory that each Oulipian is a character in a 'roman oulipien', a novel written according to the Quenelian pole of constraints, generates, among other discussions, a flourish of self-portraits, a kind of familial oral tradition sustained, on the one hand, and more minimally, by the network of vignettes in *Moments Oulipiens*, and, on the other hand, more dauntingly, by the works themselves, by the variegated way they respond to the challenge of realizing—in a coherent fashion (?)—the exponential potentialities accessed through the evolving familial relationship among Oulipian constraints and Oulipian forms. If indeed there has been an evolution in the way Oulipians understand their own becoming as Oulipians—"après l'oulipien-rat, l'oulipien-taupe"—what group politics might we come to expect from this intentionally evolving novel? How might a key phrase about Buffalo itself help us understand the functions of these group dynamics?

Mots clés : oulipo, influence, Fictional Theory, roman oulipien, Moments Oulipiens, Perec, Roubaud, Jouet, Queval, Queneau, Le Lionnais, Levin Becker, Politics, Group Dynamics, à supposer, Buffalo.

“If I write their story, they will be my descendants.”
 — Georges Perec, *W, or The Memory of Childhood*,
 cited by Daniel Levin Becker, *Many Subtle Channels*.¹

While the Oulipo has enjoyed what seems like an accelerated popularity in North America over the past five to ten years, a popularity bolstered by a widening practice of constraint writing and conceptual composition, among certain quarters of contemporary vanguards there is one recursive criticism that seems never to tire, namely that the Oulipo as a group insistently refuses to align its research with an explicit ideological or political program. Christian Bök, for example, in a paper entitled “Oulipo and Its Unacknowledged Legislation” recognizes his indebtedness to the Oulipo—he is after all the author of the prize winning monovocalic novella *Eunoia* and thus, in principle at least, an Oulipo sympathizer. But his gratitude also betrays some misgivings that, even though the Oulipians have imagined exciting horizons for innovative literature, they have apparently preferred to concentrate their efforts on thinking about poetic forms rather than putting the conceptual force of their enterprise into the service of a social agenda. Here are the terms in which he expresses his misgivings:

Oulipo never deigns to make explicit its political attitudes, even though the conceptual foundation of *contrainte* (with all its liberatory intentions) might lend itself easily to political agitation—and this lacuna in the artistic practice of the group seems even more odd, when we consider that many of the earliest members of the group have participated in left-wing, militant activism, fighting for Resistance during WWII, and some of these poets have even survived internment as political prisoners. Oulipo at its inception almost resembles a cell of decommissioned revolutionists, yet the group has never published a political manifesto about literature (in the way that a writer like Breton—a wartime veteran—has done, for example, on behalf of Surrealism).²

To a certain degree, Bök’s complaint is rooted in the misconception that the Oulipo should behave militantly, like one of the historical avant-gardes, whereas, in fact, from the moment of its inception, the Oulipo was founded on the rejection of militancy and the refusal of the tyranny that political agendas infuse into group dynamics. Indeed, it has often been suggested that it is precisely this refusal of an explicit social agenda that has contributed to the group’s longevity and helped animate its consistent productivity, the focus being on research and friendship, on a common disposition toward passionate predilections, above all—some might argue (I among them) that these are noble enough social programs.

What is not surprising is that this very same criticism, decrying the lack of a militant group politic, is repeated by other writers and admitted admirers of the Oulipo who attended the *nOulipo* conference five years ago, each of them stating their disapproval of the Oulipo’s apparent disengagement in terms that reflect their own investment in writing for universal causes. In particular I am thinking of Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young’s “& and *foulipo*” performance and Rodrigo Toscano’s contribution, “De-Liberating Freedoms in Transit.”³

Politics being almost always a question of taking a position in reaction to circumstances, in relation to certain historical conditions, each of these critics follows their criticism with some exploration into questions of cultural identity, gendered positions that directly relate to social issues generative in their writings. The criticism of the former serves the display of the latter; this is all well and good.

I would also remark, in passing, that Bök is not altogether right about the Oulipo never making collective political statements, for on March 26, 1997, learning that one of their public readings would take place on the same day in the same town as a rally for the *Front National*, Jacques Jouet, Jacques Roubaud, Michelle Grangaud and Hervé Le Tellier made the following collective declaration:

Oulipians have not altogether lost their memory. They remember, in particular, that in 1943, because she was Jewish, Georges Perec's mother was deported and she disappeared in the hell of the extermination camps; that in 1944, because he was a resistance fighter, François Le Lionnais, founder of the group with Raymond Queneau, was deported to the Dora concentration camp; that Italo Calvino participated in the Italian Communist Resistance against Mussolini; that during the German occupation Noël Arnaud, its present President, founded the clandestine publishing house, La Main à Plume, which was the first to publish Eluard's poem "Liberté"; and that Baldur von Schriach, an obscure Nazi (pleonasm), when hearing the word culture, would take out his revolver.

Mathematicians, Oulipians remember also that the Nazis killed German mathematics. Writers, they still remember that the fascists burned books before burning people. Amateurs of games and labyrinths, they remember finally, that despite everything, there are fires with which it is better not to play.

This is the reason behind the presence of Oulipians in Strasbourg on the very day that a fascist and racist movement is congregating.⁴

This announcement reminds us that individual Oulipians, from the founding members to the present, are personally implicated in history, politics and ideology, and that what also unites Oulipians within and beyond their practices of writing under constraint is the commitment not to forget an inalienable rootedness in the group's collective history, and the personal histories of the group's members, how history intercedes therein. That instead of writing social or aesthetic manifestos the Oulipo should opt to pursue different strategies of cultural inscription ought not detract its admirers and imitators from considering the lasting, cumulative effects of the group (and, in the case of Strasbourg, "Troll de Tram (Le Tramway de Strasbourg)," presents a curious case in point.⁵)

It is in order to open a discussion at this intersection, where memory meets collective history, that I would like to cite another statement lifted from Bök's critique, this segment entitled "Oulipo and Unconscious Tyranny." Like other contemporary North American conceptualists, Bök takes a particular interest the Collège de 'Patapysique, though not solely on the basis of the pleasure of imaginary solutions to far fetched problems—his interest

remains seated in the anti-bourgeois, anti-philistine disorder ignited by Jarry's writings. In keeping with this spirit of poking fun, here's how he sketches out what's unacknowledged in the practice of Oulipian constraint: "Oulipo does not offer us a set of gimmicky formulae for ordering language into highly structured, but wholly unorthodox, genres of poetry, so much as Oulipo offers us an array of rules for exploring an array of rules" (*Analects* 160). Here Bök is grappling with the notion of liberty in writing under constraint, and more particularly in the way the axiomatic method applied to a system of constraints tends to ratify what he calls a "pataphysical constitution" or, put in a much more round about way, "a playful statute that governs the anarchy of poetics by legislating our methodology for legislating the methodology itself." (160)

What interests me in Bök's formulation, however incidental it may be in his article, is how it draws the legislative role of the axiomatic method toward 'pataphysical fancy—it is this playful aspect of his essay I would like to underline, and not the disappointment he falsely promulgates with regard to the Oulipian's social consciousness.⁶ That is, in the context of this conference and its proceedings, it is with the light heartedness of pursuing imaginary solutions that I'd like to consider some of the systematic and the figurative ways in which Oulipians recursively negotiate what it means to be an Oulipian.

Family Vocation

In "Compose, Condense, Constrain," a lecture he gave at the International Collège de Philosophie in 2005, Jacques Roubaud recast, as he has so many times, often with slight variations, the basic properties of Oulipian constraint. On that occasion, in keeping with his recursively revisionist tendencies, Roubaud underlines the critical importance of François Le Lionnais—whom he simply refers to as "the Inventor" in the opening movements of that talk—in the founding of the Oulipo, emphasizing his original ingenuity in setting the ground rules for Oulipian constraint. The praise, the revisionist strategies, serve, among other purposes, as pretext for Roubaud to draw what have by now become the standard properties of constraint further toward the larger picture, the pursuit of potentiality (see FIGURE 1, "Propriétés de la Qontrainte" and FIGURE 2, "Properties of ConstRaint").

Propriétés de la Qontrainte

i la Qontrainte est intentionnelle

Il ne s'agit donc pas des contraintes syntaxiques ou autres qu'impose le fait de composer dans une langue donnée.

ii La Qontrainte est arbitraire

Le caractère arbitraire de la contrainte, du fait même de son introduction intentionnelle, est accentué par rapport à la situation traditionnelle

Le rôle primordial du nombre et par extension de la mathématique dans la conception de l'INVENTEUR trouve là une des ses motivations principales: rien de plus arbitraire qu'une contrainte littéraire dont l'origine est de nature numérique et plus généralement mathématique.

iii La Qontrainte est explicite.

Ceci implique l'existence, obligatoire, d'un cahier des charges pour tout texte composé suivant une Qontrainte ou une famille de Qontraintes.

Bien sûr, une Qontrainte n'est pas forcément explicitée au lecteur. Mais elle est explicitable. Là encore, le rôle de la mathématique est décisif.

iv Le Qompositeur sous Qontrainte est un compositeur collectif.

v Les Qontraintes peuvent être des variations de Qontraintes précédentes.

En fait, elles sont le plus souvent variations de contraintes traditionnelles, ou variations de contraintes antérieures. Les Qontraintes entièrement originales sont très rares. Elles ont vocation à appartenir à une ou des familles de Qontraintes.

Là est une des raisons de l'intervention de la méthode axiomatique dans la conception de l'INVENTEUR.

vi Les Qontraintes peuvent être des mutations de Qontraintes précédentes.

La Qontrainte est volontiers mutation systématique, suivant des stratégies elles-mêmes soumises à Qontraintes.

vii La Qontrainte est volontiers surcharge, ou ornement d'autres Qontraintes.

La recherche d'ornements peut être soumise à des contraintes, à des Qontraintes.

viii La Qontrainte est volontiers négation de Qontraintes antérieures.

ix Une Qontrainte, ou famille de Qontraintes a vocation programmatique à donner naissance à une forme sous Qontrainte ou PHORME

x Les Qontraintes oulipiennes s'inscrivent sur une échelle de dureté La nature explicite, mathématisable des Qontraintes permet, beaucoup mieux que dans le cas des contraintes traditionnelles de définir une mesure de leur difficulté

xi-a - les Qontraintes font intervenir des unités de la langue

xi-b - les Qontraintes font intervenir les nombres (entiers surtout)

La mathématique en jeu est avant tout arithmétique et algèbre

xii La Qontrainte est visible

xiii Une Qontrainte mathématisée ne l'est pas trivialement

xiv La contrainte idéale satisfait au Principe de James (elle commande la totalité des éléments intervenant dans la composition du texte qui la respecte)

xv Une Qontrainte non lisible est en principe décryptable

@ 17 *L'invention du président le lionnais*

Je révèle le nom de l'INVENTEUR: François Le Lionnais, fondateur en 1960, assisté de Raymond Queneau et d'un certain nombre d'autres, de l'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, l'OULIPO.

—Jacques Roubaud, "Composer, Condenser, Contraindre,"
19 avril 2005, Collège International de Philosophie.

[FIGURE 1]

Properties of ConstRaint

i ConstRaint is intentional.

Syntax and other constraints involved in composing in a given language are therefore not included.

ii ConstRaint is arbitrary.

Due to its intentionality, the arbitrary character of constraint is highlighted in relation to the traditional situation.

According to the INVENTOR's conception, this is where the primordial importance of numbers and mathematics reveals one of its principal motivations: there is nothing more arbitrary than a literary constraint whose origin is numeric by nature, or more generally mathematic.

iii ConstRaint is explicit.

This implies the obligatory existence of a logbook (*cahiers des charges*) for all texts composed following a constRaint or a family of constRaints. Of course, a constRaint is not necessarily explained to the reader. But it can be rendered explicit. Here, again, the role of mathematics is decisive.

iv The composer who writes under constRaint is a collective composer.

v The constraints may be variations of previous constRaints.

In fact, more often than not they are variations of traditional constraints or previously existing constraints. Entirely original constRaints are very rare. They aspire to integrate into one or several families of constRaint.

Therein lies one reason for the use of the axiomatic method in the conception of the INVENTOR.

vi constRaints may be the transformation of previous constraints.

ConstRaint readily adopts systematic mutation, according to strategies that are themselves under constraint.

vii ConstRaint readily tends toward overabundance or ornament of other constRaints.

The quest for ornament may be pursued under constraint, subject to constRaints.

viii constRaint readily tends toward the negation of previous constRaints.

ix A constRaint or family of constRaints whose vocation is programmatic aspires to create a form under constRaint or a PHORM.

x Oulipian constRaints may be situated on a scale of difficulty.

The explicit, mathematizable nature of constRaints enables, far better than in traditional constraints, the definition and rating of their difficulty.

xi-a - ConstRaints make use of language, units of language.

xii-b - constRaints make use of numbers (mostly whole numbers).

The operative mathematics is mostly arithmetic and algebra.

xii ConstRaint is visible.

xiii A mathematized constRaint is not trivially so.

xiv An ideal constRaint satisfies the William James Principle (it applies to the totality of elements included in the composition of the constrained text).

xiv An illegible constRaint is decipherable, in principle.

I've just revealed the name of the INVENTOR: François Le Lionnais who, in 1960, with the help of Raymond Queneau and others, founded the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, the Workshop of Potential Literature, the OULIPO.

—Jacques Roubaud, "Compose, Condense, Constrain," *Poetics Today* 30.4 (2009) 644-45.

[FIGURE 2]

The fifth, ninth, and fourteenth property in this list are of particular interest for elaborating a set of formal (and moral?) imperatives that constitute a living aesthetic. In the fifth, variation in constraints establishes a necessary link to tradition, its memory and its elaboration. Plus, in the truly original constraint, however rare, there is already the drive to

belong to a “family of constraints,” where the word “family” is used in the same way Wittgenstein thought of *family resemblance* among various propositions, or proximity and interrelation between phrases that take place in certain types of language games (indeed, we might also think of new forms like new voices, in that they exhibit an innate drive to belong, their native impulse is to express their own *signes d'appartenances*). Thus, even at its birth, the completely original constraint has, in Roubaud’s creation myth, aspirations of belonging to a tradition, to take up residence in a history. Belonging to a family is de facto a new constraint’s *vocation*, its calling in the world: “Entirely original constraints are very rare. They aspire to integrate into one or several *families of constraint*.”

In the ninth axiom, Roubaud develops a precarious distinction between constraint and form, where the fanciful spelling of Phorm (PHORM) demarcates a work’s peculiar belonging to the field of potential literature. Here again, the vocabulary is anthropomorphic and steeped in procreative moral imperatives (remnants, however undesirable, from Wittgenstein’s coinage of family relations among language games)⁷: “A constraint or family of constraints whose vocation is programmatic aspires to create a *form under constraint* or a PHORM.”

This distinction in rank between a mere constraint and a living form—a distinction that recalls Queneau’s quip about how *les formes sont éternelles*—is further developed elsewhere in Roubaud’s active revisions of Oulipians taxonomy. I am referring to the 2004 essay “Perecquian OULIPO” where Roubaud single-handedly posits the relative importance, in the historical development of Oulipian potentiality, of three types of Oulipian creations, the *ouvrage* (a simple work), the *œuvre* (a master work), and the *chef-d’œuvre*, only the latter of which, he claims, can significantly change the way the game of potential literature is played—and he gives the example of Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi* as a significant game changer.⁸

I mention that taxonomy here because, as a committed reader of the Oulipo, and, as someone who has studied both Roubaud’s *projet* and its fictional shadow, ‘*le grand incendie de Londres*’, what seems apparent to me is that the fourteen properties of constraint offered to the Collège de Philosophie could be extended to thinking about families of constraint, and maybe even an entire body of constrained literature: “An ideal constraint satisfies the William James Principle (it applies to the totality of elements included in the composition of the constrained text).” In fact, what I want to suggest in glossing these properties of constraint is that insofar as it lends itself to a speculative practice, the axiomatic method already serves as something like a highly evolutive unified field theory for Oulipian aesthetics, and that in Roubaud’s version of Le Lionnais’ messianic visions, the vocation of Oulipian potentiality tends toward a dynamic ideal of unity and complexity, always evolving toward greater and greater inclusion. Le Lionnais’ aspiration for an extended family of Oulipo to participate in an all-inclusive Institute of Universal Potentiality is, in other words, imaginable as an ambitious, if not megalomaniacal, extension of these same properties of constraint into all fields.

More pragmatically speaking, we can also think about vocations in families of constraint in very concrete terms. The sonnet is, of course, the classic example of a strongly individuated form, one that has fulfilled its calling to eternity (having been in practice from the 13th to the present centuries), it’s calling to ubiquity (practiced in many languages all over

the globe), one that has enjoyed great complexity, variety, and, with the help of the Oulipo, montage into spectacular synthetic works. The *morale élémentaire*, invented by Raymond Queneau, is, as I have attempted to show elsewhere, a young paradigmatic Oulipian PHORM.⁹ It has been practiced by most Oulipian writers. It has sustained variation in Frédéric Forte's *Petite morale élémentaire portative*, and enjoyed complication by other constraints. Daniel Levin Becker, in his undergraduate thesis, and in his forthcoming book, *Many Subtle Channels*, has also carefully demonstrated how the family of tales known as the Hugo Vernier cycle contributes to a collective becoming. With old forms, as well as new ones, Roubaud reminds us, "speculating about a constraint's potentiality involves discerning the extent to which it is apt to trigger variations and mutations; the extent to which it will naturally and productively participate in families of constraints; and, finally, the extent to which it might evolve over the course of time" (*Perecquian* 108).

There are by now, fifty years deep into the enterprise of Oulipian potentiality, certain forms that have enjoyed greater individuation than others at the hands of Oulipian authors and their readership. The lipogram, the heterogram, the anagram, for example, all come to mind as poetic forms that have bonded into close knit families, so to speak, forms that have something like a programmatic existence in the group—all of them, incidentally, graphed onto the smaller atoms of language, the letter. It is in relationship to that shared program, at times collaborative, at times competitive, that Jacques Jouet rethinks constraint as an enigma to which there can be numerous possible responses. He has, for example, been talking about rewriting Perec's *La Disparition*, but differently, finding another solution to the riddle of a full-length lipogrammatic mystery novel. In his case, engaging with the general program of constraint depends on an oppositional stance. "I require a very strong conflictual situation to find the energy to begin a project. It can take place in the form itself, or on a more theoretical level, but it's gotta rumble, or else it's got no energy."¹⁰

In one of his first contributions to the group, for example, searching for a way in, trying to compose a work that would justify his appointment to the group, Jouet goes looking for something that Perec hadn't thought of trying, something that would have escaped him. Finding in Roubaud's notes the idea that it would be impossible to define the S + 7 method in a text written in the S + 7 method, Jouet goes to work and solves the enigma, later stating that while he was working on that text he wanted, "without any modesty whatsoever, to make Perec's ashes spin their urn."¹¹ If there is some agonistic character to Jouet's engagement with constraint, he does not adopt vis-à-vis the group's founder's a position of disciple: "If I can speak of a [literary] master, I would say that my master is the Oulipo, a collective Magister to which each of us brings his own mastery. But I do not speak of masters" (*RQ* 65).

Roubaud, on the other hand, has recursively figured the question of influence in an altogether different fashion, proposing in 1986 a hypothesis that has since become something like axiomatic for the way Oulipians tell stories about their belonging to the *famille quenouillard* (as Jouet affectionately put it in his book *Raymond Queneau, Qui êtes-vous?*)—or, as Jean Queval referred to this oddball group of researchers, "the knighthood of the heteroclites."

[T]he Oulipo is an unwritten novel by Raymond Queneau. It is a novel according to the Quenellian pole of the Oulipo, written according to invisible constraints. It actualizes, in an original form, the union of Wittgensteinian *language games* and *forms of life*. I am, thus, a character in a novel by Queneau; which, come to think of it, is the source of a rather bizarre effect.¹²

The theory that each Oulipian is a character in a ‘roman oulipien’, a novel written according to the Quenellian pole of constraints, where the organizing principles must remain invisible, generates, among other discussions, a flourish of self-portraits, a kind of family oral tradition sustained, on the one hand, by the network of vignettes called *moments oulipiens*, and, on the other hand, more concretely, by the works themselves, by the variegated way the works respond to earlier works (whether strictly Oulipian or not) and by the way they contribute, whether as *ouvrage*, *œuvre* or *chef-d’œuvre* (Roubaldian distinctions that are not, to my knowledge, widely accepted by the rest of the Oulipo), to the literary branch of the Institute of Universal Potentiality.

From a theoretical point of view, Roubaud’s epiphany and its subsequent elaboration within the Oulipo collective prompt productive speculative thinking about the group’s maturation processes. In the extent to which this *fictional theory* generously participates in the various techniques the Oulipo deploys to recount its own history (it’s founding, it’s evolution, the cooptation of new members, etc.)—and its array of means for telling its history is indeed vast, and richly contributed to by its readers, its translators, its growing readership—this ‘multi-novel’ has the greatest potential to propose imaginary solutions to some of the thorniest enigmatic questions that arise around, for example, the mystery of one’s induction into the “knighthood,” one’s adoption by the *famille*, or—and I think this alternative is of particular interest for the rest of us, the Oulipo’s extended audience—the real reason for one’s self-selection as a committed reader, an imitator, and even a detractor of the Oulipo. What’s a stake in these solutions, we might imagine, is nothing less than the imaginary fiction of one’s providential destiny, the stories that confirm, or give grounding to one’s vocational calling in relationship to Oulipian potential (via constraint, and beyond it).

The relationship between these theoretical fictions and what might be referred to as “the real,” has, within the universe of Oulipian texts, a set of long standing antecedents. Indeed, the fiction to which Roubaud awakens in 1986, his being a character in a narrative conceived (and mysteriously orchestrated) by Queneau and Le Lionnais, entertains the same relationship to the actual history of the Oulipo as recounted events in *Odile* do to real life events in Raymond Queneau’s biography: they are forms of auto-fictional fabulation (and the degree of their departure from the truth would be a thorny question indeed). Similarly, recasting the history of the group from an autofictional point of view is analogous to the shadow narrative that ‘*le grand incendie de Londres*’ presents about Roubaud’s *projet* (in its original version, the former was supposed to tell the story, the biography of the coming into being of the latter). Or, to cite another example (plenty abound), that slippery imaginary/real relationship is also what’s most critical in the relationship between certain events in Jouet’s *République du roman* and ‘corresponding’ facts of personal, social, and political histories