**OULIPO**

Oulipo, *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, is a very dynamic and even flamboyant group of writers, poets and mathematicians who strive to elaborate new constraints in order to explore and enhance the potentiality of language. The term “*ouvroir*” refers to ancient workshops where women did needlework. Oulipo was born in 1960, thanks to the merging of two complementary minds, that of François Le Lionnais, a mathematician and renowned chess specialist, and Raymond Queneau, a famed novelist and poet published by Gallimard. A group of ten brains of similar nature formed, and laid out their principles immediately: no leader, no dogma, no excommunication (as had sometimes occurred before with groups such as the surrealists), and one meeting per month. New recruits can only be co-opted, i.e. unanimously invited to join the group, and if an individual ever applied, he or she would be definitely and irrevocably rejected (it has happened). These principles have worked so far. The group is now over 30 strong, does public readings, facilitates writing workshops, and participates in many other public events, including radio programs on France-Culture. One of the key factors of their unequalled longevity is precisely Oulipo is not an avant-garde assigned to topple previous domineering currents. Although based in Paris, they are becoming more and more international, with a twin *Oplepo* (1990- ) in Italy and more and more non-French members. So what do those “rats who themselves build the maze from which they set out to escape” (according to their self-proclaimed definition) do?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Initially, they divided their activities into two branches: “Anoulipism,” which is the analytical part of language, mostly literary and poetical, and “Synthoulipism,” the creative part of Oulipo. One can only imagine the daunting task that lay ahead of them right from the start. However, how joyful it was for Oulipians to exhume numerous “anticipatory plagiaries,” as they call them, i.e., for instance, works which omitted one letter (lipograms), poems from the late Middle Ages which rhymed on a 6 cycle permutation (sestinas), and so forth. Those initial discoveries would impart meaningful direction to their own works.

Perhaps the most astonishing Oulipian creation is the founding one by Queneau: *One Thousand Billion Poems* (Gallimard, 1960). With a base of a mere ten classical sonnets all rhyming similarly line by line, by combining them all, you can effectively produce 1014 sonnets, which, so Queneau calculated, would take some 200 million years to read! This is by far the longest (n)ever written work, potential in essence and by definition.

The arch principal goal of Oulipo was established by Queneau right from the beginning: “to furnish writers with new ‘structures,’ of mathematical nature, or better still invent new artificial or mechanical procedures contributing to literary activity.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, Oulipians are not so much interested in creating new works or chefs-d’oeuvre (but they have) as in exploring the potentiality of language using combinatory and algorithmic patterns.

There is no room here to list all their constraints, much less published works. However, it is worth noting that the most celebrated Oulipians, other than the two founding members, are Georges Perec (1936-1982), Jacques Roubaud (born 1932) and Jacques Jouet (born 1947). Other icons include Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Italo Calvino (1923-1985).

Between 1960 and 1980, Oulipo was hardly known by the general reading public. Things changed when they decided to open up their previously secret proceedings, and started offering workshops and eventually gave public readings of their works and investigations. Those are now known as “*les jeudis de l’Oulipo*” (“*Oulipo’s Thursdays*”). They fill the Auditorium of the Bibliothèque nationale de France with bemused spectators one Thursday per month, excluding summer vacations. One can only surmise that humor is not absent from their creations. It is remarkable that, unlike previous literary groups, they have managed to remain serene, modest, disinterested, generous and very cheerful.

Right from inception, Le Lionnais devised the concept of Ou-X-po, where X can be any other sensible variable, such as music, cooking, mystery novels, tragicomedy and so forth. The two most notorious Ou-X-pos today are *Oupeinpo*, *Ouvroir de peinture potentielle*, created in 1980, and *Oubapo*, *Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle*, born in 1992.

Members of Oulipo do not write exclusively Oulipian works, nor do they all agree on everything, but they all speak with one voice when it comes to explaining what they are, do and aim at. They are like an elective family: once Oulipian, always Oulipian. The dead members are still casting their shadows, only to be excused from regular meetings because of death. Some members are heavily political, others hardly at all, some are known tricksters, and some are dead serious. But no one ever quits (in fact you can’t). Oulipians are not interested in public success or glory, and they do not care much about critics’ regular misconceptions of their works. They jokingly measure their age one by centuries. Now that they are in their sixth millennium of existence, one can only bet that they are here to stay.

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**Books by Oulipo (not translated):**

*Oulipo : La Littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, coll. « Idées »,1973.

*Atlas de littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, Folio « Essais », 1981.

*Anthologie de l’Oulipo*, Gallimard, coll. « Poésie », 2009.

As of 1974, Oulipo started publishing separate fascicles each under the label of *La Bibliothèque oulipienne*. They have now well over 200 numbers, and counting.

**Notable publications in English:**

*Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature,* Ed. Warren Motte, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, revised edition: Normal, Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.

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Perec, Georges and the Oulipo, *Winter Journeys*, London, Atlas Press, 2013.

Becker, Daniel Levin, *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2012.

1. See *Oulipo Compendium*, p. 41. Although not very recent, this is a magnificent book to peruse in order to get acquainted with Oulipo (in English). See also Oulipo’s official website: www.oulipo.net. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Raymond Queneau, *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*, Gallimard, coll. « Idées », 1965, p. 321 (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)