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| Ouvroir de literature potentielle (Oulipo) [Workshop of potential literature] |
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| Oulipo, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle [Workshop of potential literature]is a dynamic and even flamboyant group of writers, poets, and mathematicians who strive to elaborate new constraints, which they employ in order to explore and enhance the potentiality of language. Oulipo was born in 1960 thanks to the union of two complementary minds: that of François Le Lionnais (1901-1984), a mathematician and renowned chess specialist, and that of Raymond Queneau (1903-1976), a famed novelist and poet. The group, now over 30 strong, gives public readings, facilitates writing workshops, and participates in many other public events, including radio programs on France-Culture. One of the key factors of the group’s unequalled longevity is precisely that Oulipo is not an avant-garde assigned to topple previous domineering currents. The most celebrated Oulipians, other than the two founding members, are Georges Perec (1936-1982), Jacques Roubaud (1932--) and Jacques Jouet (1947--). Other icons include Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Italo Calvino (1923-1985). |
| Oulipo, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle [Workshop of potential literature]is a dynamic and even flamboyant group of writers, poets, and mathematicians who strive to elaborate new constraints, which they employ in order to explore and enhance the potentiality of language. Oulipo was born in 1960 thanks to the union of two complementary minds: those of François Le Lionnais (1901-1984), a mathematician and renowned chess specialist, and Raymond Queneau (1903-1976), a famed novelist and poet. A group of ten members, all having similar inclinations, formed and laid out their principles immediately: they decided they would have no leader and no dogma; there would be no possibility of excommunication from the group (as had sometimes occurred with groups such as the surrealists); and they would hold one meeting each month. New recruits can only be co-opted (unanimously invited to join the group), and if an individual applies to be a member, he or she is definitely and irrevocably rejected. The group, now over 30 strong, gives public readings, facilitates writing workshops, and participates in many other public events, including radio programs on France-Culture. One of the key factors of the group’s unequalled longevity is precisely that Oulipo is not an avant-garde assigned to topple previous domineering currents. Although based in Paris, it is becoming more international, with a twin, Oplepo(1990--), in Italy, and more and more non-French members. So what do these ‘rats who themselves build the maze from which they set out to escape’ (Matthews and Brotchie 41), according to their self-proclaimed definition, do? Activities of Oulipo Initially, the members divided their activities into two branches: Anoulipism, which focuses on the analytical part of language, mostly literary and poetical formal characteristics, and Synthoulipism, the creative part of Oulipo, which includes developing new writing constraints. Oulipians joyfully exhumed numerous ‘anticipatory plagiaries’ — formally constrained historical works which, for example, omitted one letter (lipograms), or rhymed on a 6-cycle permutation (sestinas from the late middle ages), and so forth. Those initial discoveries would impart meaningful direction to the Oulipians’ own works.  Perhaps the most astonishing Oulipian creation is the founding one by Queneau: *One Thousand Billion Poems* (1960). After running through all possible recombinations of the lines from the poems in Queneau’s book (which was comprised of a mere ten classical sonnets all rhyming similarly line by line), the reader could effectively produce 1014 sonnets. According to Queneau’s calculations, it would take some 200 million years to read the poems. 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 of the group’s existence: ‘to furnish writers with new ‘structures,’ of mathematical nature, or better still invent new artificial or mechanical procedures contributing to literary activity’ (Queneau 321).[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, Oulipians are not interested so much in creating new works or chefs-d’oeuvre (although they have) as in exploring the potentiality of language using combinatory and algorithmic patterns. The most celebrated Oulipians, other than the two founding members, are Georges Perec (1936-1982), Jacques Roubaud (1932--) and Jacques Jouet (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. The group gained some repute when the members decided to open up their previously secret proceedings. In addition, they started offering workshops and eventually gave public readings of their works and investigations. These are now known as ‘les jeudis de l’Oulipo’ [‘Oulipo’s Thursdays’]. Oulipo events fill the auditorium of the Bibliothèque nationale de France with bemused spectators one Thursday each month, excluding summer vacations. It is remarkable that, unlike many previous literary groups, the Oulipians have managed to remain serene, modest, disinterested, generous and cheerful after so many years.  From its 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 [Workshop of potential painting], created in 1980, and Oubapo, Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle [Workshop of potential comic book art], born in 1992.  Members of Oulipo do not write exclusively Oulipian works, nor do they all agree on every principle; however, they speak with one voice when it comes to explaining what they are, what they do, and what their aim is. They operate like an elective family in the sense that once one becomes an Oulipian, one is always an Oulipian. Dead members continue to cast their shadows on Oulipo, only excused from regular meetings because of death. Some members are very political-minded, others hardly at all; some are known tricksters, while some have very serious personae. In spite of their differences, no member ever quits; in fact, they are not allowed to. 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 in centuries. Now that they are in their sixth millennium of existence, it is sure that they are here to stay. Books by Oulipo (untranslated) 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.  *Oulipo : La Littérature potentielle* (1973)  *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (1981)  *Anthologie de l’Oulipo* (2009) |
| Further reading:  *Atlas de littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, Folio « Essais », 1981.  *Anthologie de l’Oulipo*, Gallimard, coll. « Poésie », 2009.  (Becker)  (Mathews and Brotchie, Oulipo Compendium)  (Mathews and White, Oulipo Laboratory, Texts from Bibliothèque oulipienne)  (Motte)  (Oulipo)  (Perec)  (Queneau)  *Oulipo : La Littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, coll. « Idées »,1973. |

1. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)