**OULIPO**

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 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 union of two complementary minds, that 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 brains of similar inclinations 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 applies, he or she is definitely and irrevocably rejected (this has happened). 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 are becoming more and 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’ (according to their self-proclaimed definition) do?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Activities of Oulipo

Initially, the members 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. 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* (Gallimard, 1960). With a base of a mere ten classical sonnets all rhyming similarly line by line, by running through all possible recombinations, a reader could 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 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.

There is no room here to list all the constraints Oulipians have employed, much less their 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 the members decided to open up their previously secret proceedings. 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’). The events fill the auditorium of the Bibliothèque nationale de France with bemused spectators one Thursday per 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.

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 every principle, but they 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. Dead members are still casting their shadows, only 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. Yet no one ever quits (in fact, they 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 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)