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Transatlantic Oulipo: Crossings and Crosscurrents

Résumé

Grâce aux traducteurs, aux critiques, et à l'expansion du groupe, la réputation internationale de l'Oulipo s'est transformée au fil des années : de cercle parisien plutôt confidentiel, le groupe a pris l'allure d'une avant-garde internationale. La potentialité translinguistique de la contrainte permet la prolifération de pratiques diverses qui, tout en s'inspirant de l'Oulipo, partent dans des sens divergents. Du côté nord-américain, les pratiques de l'Oulipo trouvent un écho auprès d'une tradition de poétiques « procédurales » (la méthode « diastique » de Jackson Mac Low, les procédures mésostiques de John Cage). Dans le sillage de la poésie « Language », nombre de poètes anglo-américains contemporains trouvent dans les contraintes oulipiennes de nouvelles possibilités d'invention formelle. En arrachant le projet oulipien à son contexte d'origine pour l'intégrer dans une catégorie élargie de poésie procédurale ou d'« écriture conceptuelle », on risque de méconnaître son rapport spécifique à la tradition littéraire. Le malentendu met en lumière les impasses d'une avant-garde nord-américaine prise dans une logique de nouveauté et de rupture. L'étude de certains poètes influencés par l'Oulipo (Christian Bök, Harryette Mullen) met pourtant en lumière, tant sur le plan politique que formel, une adaptation féconde des méthodes oulipiennes.

Abstract

Expansion, translation, and critical attention have contributed to the transformation of the Oulipo's status from private Parisian circle to what is now perceived as an international literary avant-garde group. The translinguistic extension and adaptation of Oulipian methods has generated a large field of Oulipo-inspired, yet ideologically and aesthetically divergent constraint-based practices. Focusing on the links between Oulipian constrained writing and North American experimental poetry, this paper examines transatlantic crossings that run in both directions. On the Oulipian side, prewar and postwar American modernism plays a crucial role in the work of Harry Mathews and Jacques Roubaud. On the American side, Oulipian methods strike a chord with existing poetic applications of numerical or linguistic procedures (Jackson Mac Low's diastics, John Cage's mesostics), while contemporary poets find in the use of constraints new directions for experiment in the wake of Language poetry. Decontextualizing accounts of conceptual or procedural writing sometimes obscure the specificity of the Oulipian project, revealing the assumptions and impasses of the North American poetic avant-garde. Nevertheless, Oulipo-influenced poets (Christian Bök, Harryette Mullen) invent original uses of Oulipian methods that take on fresh political meaning and reveal new formal possibilities for poetry in the twenty-first century.

Mots clés : Avant-garde , Christian Bök, écriture conceptuelle, Language Poetry, Harryette Mullen, Noulipo, poétiques procédurales, Jacques Roubaud.

Harry Mathews observes in a 1987 interview with John Ashbery that the Oulipo claims for itself a position that is « slightly suspect », in that its « very thoughtful » offer of new literary forms is never really taken up by others.¹ In the twenty-first century, this judgment can no longer be said to apply. Beyond the international fame of individual Oulipo members, one of the reasons for the group's fame is the fact that many of its mathematical, combinatorial, and linguistic constraints are eminently translatable or transferable across languages. Even forms that originate in particular literary traditions may be transformed into arbitrary and generalizable « axioms » that function as preconditions for writing. When transported into the North American context, Oulipian methods strike a chord with other forms of « procedural » writing, many of which derive from a tradition of aleatory poetics that diverges in certain important respects from the Oulipo's own practices. This set of affinities and differences provides the backdrop for the French group's influence on certain « post-Language » strains of North American poetry, which find in the use of constraints new directions for experiment.

Such linguistic and cultural transmissions are not exempt from the « misprisions » (to borrow Harold Bloom's term) that are the stuff of poetic influence. The aim of this essay is not to establish a wall of separation between the authentic poetics of the Paris-based Oulipo group and the imitations of its worldwide epigones; this would impose an artificial restriction on what Jan Baetens and Jean-Jacques Poucel have called « the transportability of constraint-based creativity. »² Nor is my goal primarily to define an « American Oulipo, »³ nor to take up the terms « Noulipo » or « Foulipo, » which dominated a conference on experimental writing held at CalArts, Los Angeles, in 2005.⁴ My concern lies rather in tracing those transformations of constraint that both vindicate the Oulipian concept of potentiality and reveal its divergent meanings in different contexts. Conceptual and cross-cultural misapprehensions bring to light some of the dilemmas and blind spots of the North American poetic (neo-)avant-garde at the beginning of the 21st century, while they are also symptomatic of a contemporary tendency to decontextualize various modes of procedural writing. However, attention to recent deployments of specific constraints (monovocalic writing,

« S+7 ») reveals the versatility of Oulipian methods that can be turned to original poetic and political purposes.

Paris and Beyond

In the fifty years of its existence, the Oulipo has expanded from a small, clandestine literary circle to an « international literary avant-garde group, » as it is described in the jacket blurb of the American poet Harryette Mullen's collection *Sleeping With the Dictionary* (2002).⁵ The adjectives « international » and « avant-garde » may give us pause. While the reception of the Oulipo in France and beyond has been marked by attempts to reintegrate it into the history of French avant-garde movements, particularly surrealism, Oulipians have strongly resisted such categorizations of their activity.⁶ Attempts to label and classify the group coincide with an opposite movement of proliferation, as the extension and adaptation of Oulipian methods has generated a large field of Oulipo-inspired, yet ideologically and aesthetically divergent practices. The latter, in turn, have their place in the extended field of constrained writing that has been made visible by the journal *Formules*, by the work of such critics as Marjorie Perloff and Jan Baetens, and by a number of recent special issues.⁷ The Oulipo group itself is now international in a number of senses. Most obviously, its membership has grown to include people writing primarily in languages other than French (Harry Mathews, Italo Calvino, Ian Monk, Oskar Pastior, Daniel Levin Becker...). Beyond the Oulipo proper, the group's literary influence is not limited to such direct descendents as the Italian OpLePo (Opificio di Letteratura Potenziale).⁸ Among « hyperconstructed » works, there is no clear line between what is Oulipian and what is not.⁹ Marjorie Perloff's question « How Oulipo is it? » (addressed to Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime*), could be applied to a wide range of literary and cultural productions.¹⁰ The programmatic dimension of Oulipian writing has been seen as the genealogical forerunner of « new media poetry, »¹¹ while the group's organization as a guild-like « working literary network » has been used as a model for rethinking the concept of « world literature » in the electronic age.¹²

Before venturing into the expanded space of international Oulipo, it is worth taking a glance back at the Oulipo's beginnings – to the creation of the Sélitex (*Séminaire de littérature expérimentale*) during the Cerisy conference dedicated to Queneau in September 1960 : *Une nouvelle défense et illustration de la langue française*. There is a certain irony in this point of origin : it is at the moment of greatest visibility for Queneau's incursions into « neo-French, » following on the heels of the popular success of *Zazie dans le métro* (1959),

that Queneau begins to distance himself from this linguistic project (« neo-French » is not abandoned as a practice, but as a theoretical issue it fades out of his interviews and articles after 1960 ; in a 1969 text Queneau acknowledges that the question now seems less important to him).¹³ The initial project of the *Sélitex*—soon to be the OLiPo then Oulipo—might thus be seen as Queneau’s turn to a form of experimentalism and to a reflection on literary potentiality that are oriented toward translinguistic and transcultural connections.¹⁴ The minutes of the group’s early meeting show openness to what François Le Lionnais calls the « international works of potential literature » (« travaux internationaux de LiPo »).¹⁵ We find discussion of foreign writers ranging from Smollet and Shakespeare (Bens 34, 84), to the contemporary German writer Ludwig Harig. Harig, in addition to being Queneau’s translator, is associated with the Stuttgart group of experimental literature led by the philosopher and writer Max Bense, which in turn had connections with European and Brazilian concrete poetry.¹⁶ The founding Oulipians make a number of references to the Stuttgart group (Bens 111–12, 272), as well as to an unnamed « Belgian group » (provoking some anti-Belgian comments from Latis). Queneau remarks that foreign writers might be permitted to participate in the group’s activities... if they happen to be passing through Paris (Bens 112). The emerging tension between the international ambitions of the Oulipo and the sociology of the literary circle is not only a matter of language barriers, but of the ethos that governs the group—its sense of its project as a convivial collective enterprise.

The years 1960–1963 thus confront us with a paradox. On the one hand the ten founding members of the group form a very Parisian literary circle (what Christophe Reig calls a « communauté littéraire restreinte »¹⁷), as evidenced by the addresses listed in the minutes of the group’s first meeting (November 25, 1960). In the first few years, ventures into international territory are limited to the inclusion of the « foreign correspondents » André Blavier, Ross Chambers, Stanley Chapman, and Marcel Duchamp. Despite this first extension of the Oulipo network (to Belgium, Australia, Britain, and the US), it is only in the 1970s that we see a true expansion of the group to include foreign writers as full members. On the other hand, Queneau states in a 1963 letter to Gaston and Claude Gallimard that the Oulipian project has few affinities with French literary circles, but has been warmly welcomed in scientific milieux and abroad (cited in Bens 284). Yet the Oulipo, wary of being identified with surrealism, increasingly distances itself from other forms of experimental writing—specifically the so-called « aleatory poetry » explored by the Stuttgart school, but also the latter’s connections to an international movement of concrete poetry.¹⁸ The group’s shift in emphasis from the experimental to the potential produces a gap, as does its preference

for the combinatoric over the stochastic.¹⁹ At stake in these distinctions, as I have argued elsewhere, is the development of a poetics that rejects both psychological automatism and the exaltation of chance.²⁰ The insistence on « anti-chance » masks the deep connections and affinities that link the Oulipo to a larger international field of experimental writing. The ambiguity is perhaps exemplified by the long-distance, non-participatory membership of Marcel Duchamp; famous for his enigmatic independence, he stands simultaneously for the Oulipo's connection to and separation from the international avant-garde.²¹

Atlantic Crossings

While potential literature knows no national boundaries, its geography is complex. The recent transatlantic impact of the Oulipo is in many respects a re-crossing of a distance already traversed. The most obvious example is Harry Mathews's connection to the New York poets; to the constellation Ashbery–Mathews–Kenneth Koch–James Schuyler we may add the eccentric tutelary figure of Raymond Roussel. Jacques Roubaud's international associations are well known, in the light of his contribution to the multilingual chain-poem *Renga* (with Octavio Paz, Edoardo Sanguineti, and Charles Tomlinson), and his writings on topics ranging from ancient Japanese poetry to the Brazilian concrete poetry of Haroldo de Campos.²² However, his poetry is marked above all by a profound engagement with both prewar and postwar American modernism, from Gertrude Stein to « the New American Poetry » —the latter term, the title of Donald Allen's influential anthology of innovative poetry from 1945–1960, includes the Black Mountain Poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School, and the Objectivists. Marjorie Perloff has explored the relation of Louis Zukofsky's numerical constraints to Roubaud's concerns and to the work of the Oulipo more generally.²³ However, Roubaud's connections with American poetry go much further. From his contributions to the journal *Change* (in particular the issues on the New Wilderness Foundation [no. 36, 1978] and « L'espace Amérique » [no. 41, 1981]), to his work with Michel Deguy on the bilingual anthology *Vingt poètes américains* (1980), the reading and translation of Anglo-American poetry plays a crucial role in Roubaud's reflection on the relation between free verse and metrical form, as well as between the visual and the spoken word.²⁴ The « reading program » of *Dors* (1981) has clear affinities with the « talk poems » of David Antin, while also drawing on the brief verse forms of both Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams.²⁵ *Dors* is preceded by *Dire la poésie*, a prose poem that refers not only to spoken poetry performance but also to American practices of rewriting, in particular Cage's

discovery of haikus in Thoreau's *Journal*, and Ronald Johnson's erasure-rewriting of *Paradise Lost* as *Radi Os* (1977):

Les raccourcissements les plus vraisemblables
 produisent l'équivalent instantané et oral des
haiku de John Cage arrachés au *Journal* de
 Thoreau ou des *Radi Os* que Ronald Johnson
 déchiffre fait apparaître par du blanc effaçant
 certaines lettres et sans autres modifications dans
Paradise lost titre qui précisément contient
Radi Os (Roubaud, *Dors* 21)

Here, Roubaud likens the spontaneous dimension of reading and speaking—the possible shortening of the text that results from the variable movement of the eye over the page and the process of vocalization—to forms of what Cage calls « writing through. » The blanks in Roubaud's own text function simultaneously as parts of a verbal score (marking a pause that theatricalizes the poem, for instance in « fait [...] apparaître »), as a reference to the poetics of erasure, and as the space of another possible erasure or opening in the text. Earlier in the text, Roubaud (characteristically) relates the possibility of unforeseen lengthening or insertions in spoken poetry to the resurgence of fragments of poetic memory.

In an interview with Serge Gavronsky published in 1994, Roubaud claims that aside from Zukofsky, American poetry no longer really concerns him.²⁶ Yet this assertion is somewhat contradicted by the « travel sonnets » of the 2004 collection *Churchill 40*, which map out an international space of personal and literary relations. These sonnets also stage a confrontation between the French and English languages. The following poem describes a poetry reading in New York:

*St Mark's on the Bowery. C'est tout près St Mark's
 Place. I remember (a sweet and sour remembrance). Louise.
 Ted sur son lit. Buvant des pepsis. Annabel me rappelle
 Une visite chez elle. Her name now is Annabel Lee.
 (Married Mr Lee. divorced. but kept the name. Of course.
 Discussed we had, then, composition by numbers. She still does, she says.
 34s ? 44s ? I mumble something about 31, 53, 37&73 Queneau numbers, etc.)
 Ted wrote to me after Alix's death. Then died: (too many pepsis).
 Was buried to the sound of guns (he had been a marine
 Ron (Padgett) told me. Ron is here tonight).
 I sit next to Jackson Mac Low. He writes*

Sans arrêt dans un cahier pendant les lectures:
Words he hears, or thinks of, listening, I think.
*I walk back.*²⁷

This linguistically hybrid, unconventional sonnet (with its variable line length and truncated final line) refers to New York School poets with whom Roubaud is on first-name terms (Ted [Berrigan], Ron [Padgett]); it also alludes, via the name Annabel Lee, to Edgar Allen Poe. The poet's laconic thoughts of memory and loss veer at times into a self-ironizing levity of tone; thus the nostalgic remembrance of the love affair with Louise is undercut by the culinary connotations of « sweet and sour, » while the emotional impact of the series of deaths (Alix then Ted) is partially blocked by the curt diagnosis « too many pepsis. » Yet irony disappears with the evocation (lines 11–13) of Mac Low in the process of listening, thinking and writing. The other forms of writing mentioned in the poem—composition by numbers, the letter of condolence—give way to Mac Low's receptive writing-listening practice. Semantic repetitions (« thinks [...] I think »; « hears [...] listening »), and syntactic ambiguity (is the subject of the verb « listening » Roubaud, or Mac Low?), as well as the oscillation between French and English, establish a link between the two poets (Roubaud and Mac Low) who are both engaged in transforming quotidian experience into poetic material.

Beyond Roubaud's personal connections and linguistic competence, these examples point to a more general affinity that is not always directly acknowledged by the Oulipo, but which seems self-evident to many Anglophone writers. As noted by the British poet Philip Terry (himself a borrower of various Oulipian methods²⁸), « the practice of poets over the last half century has often anticipated or echoed Oulipian ideas, as in the homophonic translations of Louis Zukofsky, the mesostics of John Cage, the procedural poems of Jackson Mac Low, and the mathematical patternings of a whole host of poetry from Tom Raworth to Ron Silliman. »²⁹ Silliman's *Tjanting* (1981), for instance, is a book of prose poems structured using the Fibonacci sequence. Unsurprisingly, the work of the Oulipo is then seen as an intervention within a larger field of « procedural poetics », defined by Marjorie Perloff in the following terms:

What has been called *constraint* or *procedurality* is not equivalent to the concept of rule in traditional metrics [...]. Rather, a procedural poetics, which can, incidentally, apply equally well to « prose » and « verse » [...] is primarily generative, the constraint determining, not what is already fixed as a property of the text, but how the writer will proceed with his composition. (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 139)

In similarly broad terms, Bernardo Schiavetta offers a general definition of constraint in terms of « non-normative systematicity. »³⁰ Nevertheless, the identification of constraint and procedurality requires additional nuance. On the one hand, Oulipian constraints are a subset of a broader category of poetic « procedures »; on the other hand, they often overlap with the category of « rule » (if we consider, for instance, the group's interest in poetic fixed forms).³¹ Other areas of divergence, however, are less important than they might at first seem. For instance, the Oulipian rejection of the aleatory does not suffice to establish a clear formal boundary between Oulipian « anti-chance » and the « chance operations » favored by American procedurality. As Perloff notes of John Cage's work, « *chance operations*, even though the phrase is Cage's own, is a highly misleading term for what actually happens in a mesostic text like *Roaratorio* »; Cage in fact uses chance only to create rules, generating elaborate systems that « must be understood as a form of discipline » (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 150). This is also true of Jackson MacLow's procedures, such as the diastic « reading through » method used to draw poetic material from a source text; the principle behind such « systematic-chance methods » is not the surrealist liberation of the unconscious but rather an ascetic practice of « nonintention. »³²

Noulipo and Beyond

This American tradition of procedural poetics produces a context that is generally receptive to Oulipian methods. English-language readers have increasingly had access to Oulipian writing since the publication of Warren Motte's Oulipo primer in 1986, followed in the 1990s by two more translated compilations, *Oulipo Laboratory* (1995) and the *Oulipo Compendium* (1998).³³ 2006 saw an anthology of Oulipian texts published in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*.³⁴ Works of Oulipo writers have been promoted by small publishing houses (David R. Godine for Perec, New Directions for Queneau), and nonprofit presses such as Dalkey Archive Press and Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop's Burning Deck Press (Le Tellier, Mathews, Jouet, Roubaud, Pastior). Online literary magazines have also contributed to the recent visibility of the group: two examples are the Oulipo issue of *The Drunken Boat* (8, 2006), curated by Jean-Jacques Poucel, and a special issue of *Ekleksographia* (« After Oulipo, » 3.5c, November 2010), edited by Philip Terry. The Oulipo's fiftieth anniversary was marked in the United States by such events as « Oulipo in New York » (April 2010) and the « Oulipo@50 » conference in Buffalo, New York (October 2011).

For contemporary American poets, Oulipian constraints offer an alternative both to what Roubaud calls « Vers international libre » (VIL) and to the traditional metrical forms favored by the American « New Formalists » (Dana Gioia, Timothy Steele, Frederick Feirstein). Constraints are close to the procedural experiments of some Language poetry (Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, David Melnick) while also authorizing, for the writers of the « post-Language » generation, a more playful—indeed accessible—approach to language.³⁵ The notion of potentiality also offers a link to the « conceptual writing » promoted by Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin, whose recent anthology deliberately displaces historical perspectives by straddling genres and cultural traditions. In Dworkin's words:

when read next to works from the Oulipo, a book usually considered part of the history of language poetry might look much more like part of the broad postwar international avant-garde than the coterie 1980s New York poetry scene; and [...] the insular history of the Oulipo, in turn, might be profitably diversified when considered in the light of other experiments, and so on.³⁶

In emphasizing the global over the local, the breadth of the international over the « insular » group or the « coterie » scene, Dworkin makes a decontextualizing move that is symptomatic of his own position within a particular context—that of twenty-first-century globalization and electronic communication. (It is no accident that Goldsmith and Dworkin's book has its origins online, in the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*.³⁷) The risk is that such an ostensibly « diversified » vision of literary creation in fact homogenizes the avant-garde; it amalgamates different traditions under the broad banner of the conceptual, the procedural, or the experimental. It carries an implicit narrative of avant-garde progress : Goldsmith, who is the founder of UbuWeb, writes of both literary and digital « revolution », emphasizing the new possibilities that are now available for accumulating information, sampling text, and recycling poetic materials.³⁸ Earlier conceptual writing, in this view, anticipates the world of the Internet.

What emerges from all these associations and juxtapositions is the transatlantic reception of the Oulipo as an avant-garde movement concerned with procedural experiments, and largely focused on what has been called « appropriative writing, » « uncreative writing, » or « unoriginal genius. »³⁹ What is obscured or overlooked is the Oulipo's specific place within French literature and its problematic relation to the avant-garde. The misunderstanding highlights the problematic assumptions that underlie the American avant-garde's self-

conception. Nowhere does this happen more clearly than at the « Noulipo » conference held at CalArts on 28–29 November 2005, at which the Oulipo is simultaneously celebrated and criticized on a number of fronts: for its taste for « conventional storytelling, » its interest in traditional forms, its apolitical stance, its supposed insularity as a « coterie, » and for its domination by male writers. With the exception of the latter point (which gained most attention due to Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young’s « Foulipo » performance piece⁴⁰), the charges hinge on an implicit set of avant-garde norms. The Canadian poet Christian Bök argues that the Oulipo is inattentive to the political implications of its own practices.⁴¹ The persistence of a binary opposition between « mainstream » and « avant-garde » poetry leads to a fundamental misapprehension of the Oulipo’s relation to literary tradition—specifically, a failure to understand the ways in which the Oulipo’s position links experimental novelty to a shared memory of literary forms (as articulated most clearly in the work of Jacques Roubaud).

American Oulipianism and its discontents thus bring to light some of the dilemmas that face the neo-avant-garde in the 21st century—and indeed, the problems inherent to avant-gardism itself: a tendency to subscribe to a narrative of historical rupture and to exalt the revolutionary power of formal innovation. A comparison of the European and American receptions of the Oulipo also reveals different discourses on modernity and postmodernism, and on poetry and fiction. Jan Baetens and Bernardo Schiavetta, in the foundational theoretical reflection of *Formules*, describe constrained writing as a continuation of the modernist project, as a way of overcoming the impasses of the avant-garde, and as an alternative to the facilities of much « postmodern » writing. In the American context, on the other hand, Oulipian fiction is often identified with the postmodern (Conte), while the poetic potential of constraints is taken up by the self-identified avant-garde. Nevertheless, when Charles Bernstein attempts to map a « cross-national network of affinities » in *99 Poets/1999*, he includes not Oulipians but rather Pierre Alferi, Olivier Cadiot, Emmanuel Hocquart, and Christian Prigent. He opts, in other words, for the more insistently transgressive tendencies associated with the *Revue de littérature générale or TXT*.⁴² Oulipo has a curious place, both central and marginal, in contemporary North American poetry and poetics.

Harryette Mullen and The Returns of S+7

These transatlantic crossed wires should not detract from the contemporary productivity of the « Oulipo factor » (Perloff, *Differentials* 205). Among North American

examples, perhaps the best-known example is *Eunoia* (2001), Christian Bök's series of monovocalic prose poems :

Relentless, the rebel peddles these theses, even when vexed peers deem the new precepts 'mere dreck.' The plebes resent newer verse; nevertheless, the rebel perseveres, never deterred, never dejected, heedless, even when hecklers heckle the vehement speeches. We feel perplexed whenever we see these excerpted sentences. We sneer when we detect the clever scheme — the emergent repetend: the letter E.⁴³

This selection from one of the « e » poems is also a humorous *art poétique*: the poet figures as the avant-garde rebel, while he lampoons (in rather accurate terms), those who deride constrained writing. Paying homage to the the Perec of *La Disparition* and *Les Revenentes*, Bök's book is an exuberant virtuoso performance that aspires to exhaustivity, as evidenced by the use of rare words and incursions into bilingualism. The individual sections are also governed by a thematic unity: we find characters: Hassan; Helen (of Troy); the first-person « I »; various groups for the letter « o » (*profs, Scots, showfolk, snobs, crooks, ostrogoths*); and finally, Ubu.

To conclude, I will turn to another idiosyncratic use of Oulipian methods. The American poet Harryette Mullen (b. 1953) does not define herself as an Oulipian; indeed, she insists on her distance from the group, on degrees of separation and indirection (Viegener and Wertheim 203). Despite this distance, Mullen's adaptation of certain procedures offers an exemplary illustration of the pervasive influence of Oulipo and the creative potential of formal constraints, demonstrating the possibility of integrating these constraints into a singular poetic and political vision. More generally, Mullen's work develops a poetics of displacement, of semantic slippages, close both to Gertrude Stein in her use of repetition, and to a number of other poets in her use of what Robert Desnos calls *langage cuit* (sayings, proverbs, fixed expressions that then undergo a variety of manipulations), including uncanny rewritings of advertising slogans and fairy tales.

The cover of Mullen's fifth poetry collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) explains that many poems were « inspired or influenced by the dictionary game called S+7 or N+7. » One of the earliest and best-known Oulipian constraints, first proposed by Jean Lescure during the Oulipo's fourth meeting (13 February 1961), S+7 is one of the most easily attacked. It is also one of the most productive,⁴⁴ and perhaps the one with the widest appeal—

it is not a difficult mathematical concept; it is not tied to a particular language or literary tradition. What matters in Mullen's poems is less the strict or mechanical adherence to the formula than the skillful manipulation of what we might call the « S+7 effect. » The reader senses the presence of a substitution, a slipping of language and meaning. Words become double; their two meanings coexisting in a virtual poetic space—words beneath words:

You are a ukulele beyond my microphone
 You are a Yukon beyond my Micronesia
 You are a union beyond my meiosis
 You are a unicycle beyond my migration
 You are a universe beyond my mitochondria
 You are a Eucharist beyond my Miles Davis
 You are a euphony beyond my myocardigram
 You are a unicorn beyond my Minotaur (Mullen, *Sleeping* 6)

These lines from the poem « Any Lit » combine phonic repetitions with a paradigmatic substitution of nouns. They produce, within a fixed syntactic structure, surprising juxtapositions that nevertheless generate semantic associations involving sound (*ukulele*, *microphone*, *euphony*, *Miles Davis*), geography (*Yukon*, *Micronesia*), biology (*meiosis*, *mitochondria*), or fantastic creatures (*unicorn*, *Minotaur*).

The poem « Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language » is the result of a very loose application of the S+7 procedure, via a minimal substitution:

Whereas, in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of bitter labor to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof:

Therefore, be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled

That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of bitter labor to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any bitter labor to come, or, having so come after the expiration of said ninety days, to remain within the United States. (Mullen, *Sleeping* 81)

Mullen reproduces part of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, simply replacing the two crucial words: « Chinese laborer » with « bitter labor. » The S+7 effect is mobilized to produce a

wry political and linguistic commentary. The substituted term refers simultaneously to the dehumanization of the worker (the individual « laborer » become abstract « labor ») and to the harshness of immigrant experience, while confronting past and present. Like the words of the dictionary, forms of xenophobia appear as interchangeable and extendable. The poem's subtitle, « waking up with Enrique Chagoya » (referring to a Mexican-born artist whose work presents collisions of past and present), suggests an emergence from the intoxicating pleasure of wordplay into the harsh reality of the world.

Mullen harnesses Oulipian methods in the service of a poetics that is experimental, humorous, engaged with social problems, and explicitly political—yet critical of the « identity politics » that both exclude and appropriate her as a « formally innovative black poet. »⁴⁵ These are examples of minimal, we might say minimalist adaptations of Oulipian methods, but they show the rich possibilities of a constraint so often decried for its « mechanical » aspects. Mullen is not precisely an Oulipian (or even a Noulipian), but what better demonstration of potential literature?

¹ Harry Mathews, Interview with John Ashbery, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (VII/3, 1987), p. 43.

² Jan Baetens and Jean-Jacques Poucel, « Introduction: The Challenge of Constraint, » *Poetics Today* (XXX/4, 2009), p. 614.

³ See Joseph M. Conte, « American Oulipo: Proceduralism in the Novels of Gilbert Sorrentino, Harry Mathews, and John Barth, » Chapter 4 of *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

⁴ *The Noulipian Analects*, Christine Wertheim and Matias Viegner, eds. (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2007).

⁵ Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

⁶ See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), p. 56; Noël Arnaud, « Gérard Genette et l'Oulipo, » Oulipo, *La Bibliothèque oulipienne*, vol. 5 (Mayenne: Le Castor Astral, 2000), 7–22.

⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Jan Baetens, *L'Éthique de la contrainte* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters,

1995), and *Romans à contraintes* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). See also the two issues of *Poetics Today* devoted to constrained writing, edited by Jan Baetens and Jean-Jacques Poucel (XXX/4, 2009 and XXXI/1, 2010).

⁸ See <http://www.oplepo.it>.

⁹ I borrow the term « hyperconstruction » from Jan Baetens and Bernardo Schiavetta's editorial « Écrivains, encore un effort... pour être absolument modernes. » *Formules* (1, 1997–98), 9–24.

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 97.

¹¹ Adalaide Morris, « New Media Poetics: As We May Think/How to Write, » in *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss, eds. (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2006), 7, 24.

¹² Joseph Tabbi, « Electronic Literature as World Literature; or, The Universality of Writing under Constraint, » *Poetics Today* (XXXI/1, 2010), 17–50.

¹³ In a text for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1969, Queneau notes that « le néo-français » seems less important to him than at the time of *Le Chiendent* (1933). Queneau, « Errata », in *Le Voyage en Grèce* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 221–22.

¹⁴ On Queneau's and Le Lionnais's relative roles in the founding of the Oulipo, see Warren F. Motte, « Raymond Queneau and the Early Oulipo, » *French Forum* (XXXI/1, 2006), 41–54.

¹⁵ Jacques Bens, *Genèse de l'Oulipo: 1960-1963*, 2nd edition (Bordeaux: Le Castor astral, 2005), p. 111.

¹⁶ See *Muster Möglicher Welten: Eine Anthologie für Max Bense*, Elizabeth Walter and Ludwig Harig, eds. (Wiesbaden: Limes-Verl, 1970).

¹⁷ Christophe Reig, « Oulipo-litiques, » in *Poésie et politique au XXe siècle: colloque de Cerisy*, Henri Béhar and Pierre Taminiaux, eds. (Paris: Hermann, 2011), 69–84 (p. 70).

¹⁸ Some of these connections and distinctions are explored in *Oulipo-poétiques*, Peter Kuon, ed. (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999); see especially Kuon, « L'Oulipo et les avant-gardes » (15–30), and Andréas Puff-Trojan, « Poésie expérimentale française et allemande » (161–172).

¹⁹ In a 1964 talk, Queneau emphasizes the difference between potential literature and the Stuttgart School's « experimental » and « aleatory » literature. Queneau, « Littérature potentielle, » in *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 322.

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- ²⁰ Alison James, *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), Chapter 5.
- ²¹ On Duchamp and the Oulipo see Walter Henry (aka Paul Braffort), *Chu dans mer sale, ou la ruminaton polymorphe* (Paris: La Bibliothèque oulipienne no. 86, 1997), and Jacques Roubaud, *Duchamp l'oulipien* (Paris: La Bibliothèque oulipienne no. 131, 2003).
- ²² Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti, Charles Tomlinson. *Renga: poème* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). On the connections and differences between Oulipo and concretism see Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, 76–80.
- ²³ Marjorie Perloff, « Playing the Numbers: The French Reception of Louis Zukofsky, » *Verse* 22–23 (2006): 102–20.
- ²⁴ *Vingt poètes américains*, Roubaud and Deguy, eds. (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); Roubaud, *Traduire, journal* (Caen: Nous, 2000). The American poets translated by Roubaud include Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, Cid Corman, Jack Spicer, Paul Blackburn, Charles Olson, Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, Rosmarie Waldrop, Jackson Mac Low, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Reznikoff. On Roubaud and American free verse see Andrew Eastman, « La Modernité américaine dans la poésie française: Jacques Roubaud et le vers libre américain, » *Revue française d'études américaines* (80, 1999), 23–32.
- ²⁵ Jacques Roubaud, *Dors*, précède de *Dire la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 33–34.
- ²⁶ Serge Gavronsky, *Toward a New Poetics: Contemporary Writing in France: Interviews, with an Introduction and Translated Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 276.
- ²⁷ Jacques Roubaud, *Churchill 40 et autres sonnets de voyage, 2000–2003* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 13.
- ²⁸ Philip Terry, *Oulipoems* (Tokyo/Toronto: Ahadada Books, 2006) and *Oulipoems 2* (Tokyo/Toronto: Ahadada Books, 2009).
- ²⁹ Terry, « After Oulipo: An Introduction, » *Ekleksographia* 3.5c (2010), <http://ekleksographia.ahadadabooks.com/issuethree/authors/introduction.html>.
- ³⁰ Bernardo Schiavetta, « Toward a General Theory of Constraint, » *Electronic Book Review* (2000), <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/wuc/constraints>.
- ³¹ On the distinction between rule and constraint see Marcel Bénabou, « La Règle et la contrainte, » *Pratiques* (39, 1983), 101–106.
- ³² Jackson Mac Low, *Thing of Beauty: New and Selected Works*, Anne Tardos, ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), p. xxiii.

³³ *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, Warren F. Motte, ed. and trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); *Oulipo Laboratory: Texts from the Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, Harry Mathews, Iain White, and Warren F. Motte, trans. (London: Atlas, 1995); *Oulipo Compendium*, Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, eds. (London: Atlas Press, 1998).

³⁴ « The State of Constraint: New Work by Oulipo, » *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (22, 2006).

³⁵ On « post-Language » poetry see Perloff, « After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents, » *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

³⁶ Craig Dworkin, « The Fate of Echo, » in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. xxiii.

³⁷ <http://www.ubu.com/concept>. See also the « Ten Oulipian-inspired UbuWeb Resources » selected by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Andy Dancer (September 2009), which includes texts by Christian Bök, Caroline Bergvall, Claude Closky, Cheryl Donegan, Marcel Duchamp, Xavier Gautier, Kenneth Goldsmith, Helmut Herbst, Hollis Frampton, and Peter Manson (<http://www.ubu.com/resources/feature.html>).

³⁸ Goldsmith, « Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now? » (Dworkin and Goldsmith xix).

³⁹ Raphael Rubinstein, « Gathered, Not Made: A Brief History of Appropriative Writing, » *American Poetry Review* (1999) and <http://www.ubu.com/papers/rubinstein.html>; Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2; Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*.

⁴⁰ For a description see Bruna Mori, « Noulipo's Oulipoed Foulipo, » *Drunken Boat* (8, 2006), <http://www.drunkenboat.com/db8/oulipo/feature-oulipo/essays/mori/noulipo.html>.

⁴¹ Christian Bök, « UbuWeb and Intentional Freedom » (Viegener and Wertheim 222). On the politics of the Oulipo understood as an effort to place poetic language back into the public sphere, see Reig, « Oulipo-litiques ».

⁴² Charles Bernstein, *99 poets/1999: An International Poetics Symposium* (Duke University Press, Spring 1999), 1–2.

⁴³ Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001), p. 32.

⁴⁴ See Oulipo, « S+7, le retour, » *La Bibliothèque oulipienne*, vol. 4 (Paris: Le Castor Astral, 1997).

⁴⁵ Mullen, « Poetics and Identity, » in *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, eds. (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 27–31 (p. 27).