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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 un personnage 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-taupo"—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?

***Mot 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*.<sup>1</sup>

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).<sup>2</sup>

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 it’s 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.

It 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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 LeTellier 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 La 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>)

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" (*Analecets* 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 increasingly 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 develop further what have by now become the standard properties of constraint 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.A (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 by 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)<sup>7</sup>: “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.<sup>8</sup>

I mention that taxonomy here because, as a committed reader of the Oulipo, and, as a 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 dispartion*, 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."<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 co-option 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 *Républic du roman* and ‘corresponding’ facts of personal, social, and political histories

(which necessarily need to be written in the plural when speaking of history in Jouet, as well as when speaking of personal history with regard to the Oulipo).

If, in *La Bibliothèque de Warburg*, for example, Roubaud openly imagines how this potential novel might be figured according to the axis of the Quenellian “pole” (where constraints remain invisible), he is careful to add that in the evolution of the notion of constraint within the Oulipo, how it is put into the service of pursuing literary potentiality, there are other “poles of influence,” namely the conceptual pole, represented by Le Lionnais, and the more zany pole (can we call it ‘pataphysical?’), represented by Jean Queval (a founding member, who proposed texts that announce their being written according to one constraint, but are written according to another one which remains unstated, and which is not, in final analysis, respected anyway—such non-verifiable models of constraint, for example the constraint called “Canada-dry,” may add new dimensions to thinking about families of constraint, and their vocations, but as limit-forms they are rejected from the official line of Oulipian constraint today, they are family outcasts).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more strikingly still, in “Perequian Oulipo” and “S’écrire sous la contrainte,” Roubaud claims that the fields of potentiality have been expanded by Perec, that he no longer illustrates the Oulipian author as “a rat who builds the labyrinth from which he propose escape,” but that “[i]n terms of Oulipian authors, Perec is the one who also tried to escape from the labyrinth built for him by Queneau and Le Lionnais” : “After the Oulipian-rat, the Oulipain-mole [...] the Oulipian author, henceforth, is a mole who chooses to emerge not in soft earth of the field but through the road paved over with constraints.”<sup>14</sup> In these recent revisions, Perec’s “pole” seems to be rising, and it might indeed seem like each and every Oulipian is potentially granted his own “pole of influence.”

Both Warren Motte and Jean-Jacques Thomas have commented productively on Roubaud’s re-appraisal of the Quenellian pole, the magnetism of which is strong, partially because so amply supported by Queneau’s writing, but also because Queneau personally hand picked many of the second generation Oulipians. If both articles differ in their analysis—Motte carefully pointing out that Queneau’s gaze never strayed from the object of the group’s quest, the Grail of potentiality; Thomas reading into Roubaud’s revisions the stirrings of a rebellion against constraint’s tyranny, an uprising unfolding under Quevalian persuasion—this difference is productive precisely in showing how the story of the Oulipo, its basic tenants, continues to evolve, and not only in the works of the Oulipians, but also within the broader collective of its readership.<sup>15</sup>

Officially, the *Moments Oulipiens*, published by Le Castor Astral in 2004, is the first volume realizing the Oulipo’s autofiction, the first to explicitly recount a number of remarkable personal experiences in the life of the group without obeying, at least initially, any pre-imposed regiment of formal constraint. However, the order in which are printed the contributions runs from the longest-standing to the most newly-appointed living Oulipian—from Roubaud to Garréta, at that time—an order that rigorously respects the principles of seniority and chronology, though not necessarily implying an established pecking order among the members of the group.

In fact, in its early articulations, the epiphany of Quenellian novel hypothesis is partly based on the apparent lack of reason for an Oulipian’s appearance, at the given time, in the

narrative of the Oulipo; that is, it is rooted in the kind of invisible constraint for which Queneau later became recognized, or—and this is the point—the lack of constraint Queneau decried in “Techniques du roman” (1937) twenty-three years prior to the group's foundation :

Anyone can march an undermined number of apparently real characters through of an undetermined number of pages or chapters, the way one drives a gaggle of geese through a long moor. The result, whatever else it is, will always be a novel.<sup>16</sup> (*BCL* 27)

Still, in the closing remarks to the *Moments Oulipiens*, a text entitled “Divagations poéthologiques,” addressed in part to Roubaud's gravity in questioning Queneau's influence Anne Garréta points out that if the autobiography of the Oulipo is being written with and against the “gaggle of geese” model of the novel, then its purportedly self-appointed author is no *deu abscondicus*, but remains present a character in the on-going narrative. And, Garréta further explains, as Queneau himself stated in his conversations with Ribemont-Dessaigne, there is always the free will of all the active characters: “one can make situations and characters in a novel rime the way you rime words” or, in the way that friends, members of the same herd, freely associate, if you will, develop family resemblances in pursuing the same vocation from different points of view (*MO* 156).

Restated along lines that attempt to think of a constraint's vocation as a metaphor for the more complex set of callings that make an Oulipian Oulipian, or that draw an Oulipian reader into becoming an Oulipian reader, in the continuation of the group's autofictional novel, when figured according to the Quenellian pole of influence, some of the newly inducted characters recognize that even if some adages remain in force—i.e. “Help yourself and the heavens will help you” (*Aide-toi et le ciel t'aidera*)—for each individual, there always is yet another piece of providence to be earned, and the other characters in the story are there to verify, to test, perhaps acquiesce to its feasibility.



### **Propositional Fiction (Buffalo Chapter)**

1. Suppose that five short millennia after the initial convening of a small herd of independently minded, similarly inclined individuals (the Oulipo)—established simultaneously in concrete and abstract fields, in fields that had already, at the time of the herd's convening, become fields of intersecting fields, the dimensions of which might be as well mapped by the minds of its future generations as that of its earliest ancestors—a festive gathering is called in town of Buffalo, New York to mark, together in some fashion, the highlights of the past, the milestone of present, and the challenges of future roaming in these fields of fields, these high plain meadows that had in the meanwhile become simultaneously expansive and restrictive, to say the very least.

2. Suppose that on the occasion of this gathering, in order to take stock of, and celebrate the way the herd told its stories in the past, the ones present this very day (because not all of the herd can make all of the meetings overtime, depending on when and where they are held, quite naturally) begin to recollect some of the animal myths it had put to use in the past, better to present its ways of being to itself and to the greater public, beginning, of course, with an early identification with the noble rat, a survivalist animal and one well-versed in arts of experimentation: 'we are the rats who build the labyrinths from which we propose to escape.'

3. Suppose that over the years, with the shifting terrain and the high volume roads that modern transportation brings to the high plains (not to mention the railroads), the figure of the rat, still noble by all accounts, is quietly supplanted, surreptitiously substituted as figure in some of the sagas, by his cousin the mole (Family Talpidae), but a special variety of mole who, perhaps more heroically than escaping from above ground labyrinths the way the rat can, manages not only to wend his way through the darkness of unground burrowing—as most moles do—but has succeeded, by force of will, hard work, and exceptional talent, to break through those surfaces rendered hard and compact by the weight of heavy traffic: 'after the rat, comes the mole, the mole who breaks out of the roads paved over by constraint.'

4. Suppose that in this occasional replacement of the figure of the mole where once that of the rat was used, there were inscribed, for all the members of the herd, the dawning of new horizons, the definition of new individual ambitions, as well as new challenges for the group, some of which would be difficult fathom because they might put into question old stories, some more easily recounted because they shed light on the unquestionable accomplishments of the fellow who inspired the figure of the hard-nosed mole.

5. Suppose that on this happy occasion of gathering to recollect, to celebrate, and to meditate, the very recognition of there being such slippage in the species with which the herd identifies itself were to cause much discussion, some merriment, perhaps even some re-evaluation, if not re-directive editing of the "gaggle of geese" myth against which an elder of the herd once warned, and with which, in any case, the herd's active storytellers had, for some time already, been toying; in this case, it wasn't just "anyone" driving a "gaggle of geese," the "geese" were perhaps not so easily driven (perhaps more like herding cats), and what was come of it all was already more than just a novel.

6. Suppose thus that in this place, on this celebratory occasion, a proposition is put forth, a proposition made in pure citational fashion, culled raw from the fields of language (not always native to this land, nor for that matter, to this herd), offered up, not only for its lexicographical simplicity, nor merely for its grammatical economy, but also, and perhaps most ephemerally, for its potential to describe the reciprocity of influence between the various individuals (present or absent) that constitute the herd, namely, that *Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo*.

7. Suppose that in order for this proposition to have begun to reach its fullest expression some explanation and extension of the meaning of the words would need to take place, perhaps beginning with the verb *to buffalo*, meaning *to overawe*, *to impress*, or *to intimidate*, and thus by extension, not exceedingly far from *to amaze*, *to stagger*, or, in terms dear to the *Collège de 'pataphysique* (one of the herd's former (and current) stomping grounds), the verb *épater*.

8. Suppose then for a minute that, under these circumstances, what drives a herd toward new horizons, toward greener pastures, or steeper prairies, higher plains, and their opposites, is precisely the respect each member of the herd holds not only for the others in the herd (tough this be significant), but above all, for that which buffalos, that which overawes, which amazes and staggers with its ingenuity.

9. Suppose then too for a minute that forms of phrases, however apparently redundant, however steeped in imitation, are also potential forms of life, protean in nature, good to try on, sport for a few hours, take for a test drive, so to speak, say the duration of a two-day colloquium, and perhaps discard, as indeed are many theories, or file somewhere under plagiarism by anticipation.

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- All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Levin Becker, *Many Subtle Channels* (Boston: Harvard UP, 2012), p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> *The Noulipian Analects*, eds. Matias Viegner and Christine Wertheim (Los Angeles: Les Figues Presses, 2007), p. 157. Henceforth cited as “*Analects*.”

<sup>3</sup> See *Analects*, 1-13; 91-98, 207-210. Also available in the Drunken Boat Oulipo dossier, [www.drunkenboat.com](http://www.drunkenboat.com), along with commentary by Kenneth Goldsmith and Bruna Mori.

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Peter Consenstein and cited in his *Literary Memory, Consciousness, and the Group Oulipo* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. 277.

<sup>5</sup> See Oulipo, “Troll de Tram (Le Tramway de Strasbourg),” *Bibliothèque Oulipienne* 68 (1994); see also Jean-Jacques Thomas, “Amstramtram, pic et pic et hypogrammes,” *Lendemain* 109 (2003), 15-58.

<sup>6</sup> I believe it best to read Bök’s complaint as a sort of straw-man argument. Consider, for example, this remark: “[E]ven though Perec might recount a dystopic allegory about an Olympic kingdom, Oulipo nevertheless ignores this pointed warning about the sociological correlations between athletic rivalry and militant fascism in order to equate artistic freedom with the freedom of “marathoners” who excel at calisthenic enterprises” (*Analects* 159). This strikes me as disingenuous coming from the poet whose *Eunoia* not only richly pays homage to Perec, but who also openly boasts of his own calisthenic enterprises: “Eunoia has required seven years of daily perseverance for its consummation. [...] The text makes a Sisyphean

spectacle of its labour, willfully crippling its language in order to show that, even under duress, language can still express an uncanny, if not sublime, thought” Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto, Coach House Books, 2001), pp.105, 103. It may be worthwhile to observe, in passing, that the word “calisthenics” is derived from *kallos* “beauty” and *sthenos* “strength,” thus meaning *beautiful strength*, which is related, or a living neighbor to “beautiful thinking,” the sense Bök gives to the word “Eunoia,” one of the shortest English words to contain all five vowels.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example §67 of his *Philosophical Investigations*: “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’ [...] I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.” Translation G. E. M. Anscombe. (London, Basil Blackwell: 1953), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Roubaud, “Perecquian Oulipo,” *Yale French Studies* 105 (2004), p. 108 ; subsequently cited as “*Perecquian*.” For more on this distinction, see Warren Motte, “Raymond Queneau and the Early Oulipo,” *French Forum*, 31.1 (Winter 2006), 41-54.

<sup>9</sup> See, Jean-Jacques Poucel, « ChiQuenaude: Vie brève de la morale élémentaire », in *La Licorne* 81 (2008), 15-54.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Jouet, *Raymond Queneau, Qui êtes-vous?* (Paris: La Manufacture, 1988), p. 65. Subsequently cited as “*RQ*.”

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Jouet, « Le deuil », in Oulipo, *Moments Oulipiens* (Bordeaux: Le Castor Astral, 2004), p. 84. Subsequently cited as “*MO*.”

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Roubaud, « L’Auteur oulipien », in *L’Auteur et le manuscrit*, éd. M. Contat, (Paris: PUF, 1991), p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> “Canada-dry” refers to a text that displays all the characteristics of obeying a formal constraint, but in fact fails to do so. This “constraint” is not currently listed on the Oulipo’s website. Cf. In this issue, the essay by Dominique Raymond, « Être et ne pas être une contrainte. L’étrange cas du canada-dry ».

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Roubaud, “S’écrire sous la contrainte (remarques 1967–1999),” in *Portrait(s) de Georges Perec*, éd. Paulette Perec (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2001), p. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Motte, *Op. Cit.* ; Jean-Jacques Thomas, “OuLiPotempkin: Down with the Tyranny of Constraints.” *French Forum* 30.1 (2006), 113-126.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Queneau, *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (Paris: Gamillard, 1950), p. 27.

