Jean-Jacques Thomas

OuLiPotemkin
Down with the Tyranny of Constraints!

In 1870, in the month right before the beginning of the French—Prussian war, an almost unknown writer deposits a new book called Poésies II at the Dépôt Légal of the French Bibliothèque Nationale. Isidore Ducasse (better known to posterity under his nom de plume: Comte de Lautréamont) believes that he has again produced a masterpiece. This time he hopes his new volume will bring the success he deserves, unlike the preceding one, Les Chants de Maldoror that, much to his chagrin, was not noticed by the readership as expected.

Alas, Poésies II will have no more success than Les Chants de Maldoror and it will not be until the late 1930s, when André Breton and the surrealists discover it, that Ducasse’s works will finally be recognized for their originality and innovation. Fame and fortune for its commentators will come in the late 1970s when Poésies II is regarded as the text that, in its time, opened the coffin of the Romantic literary movement and was a precursor to the language poetry that becomes the mark of French poetry at the end of the 20th century. The group Tel Quel and, in particular, Marcelin Pleynet will foreground Ducasse’s work. The study of Ducasse’s work will be an important part of Julia Kristeva’s reflection on negativity in poetry in her book La Révolution du langage poétique published in 1974. For example, she writes: “In Poésies II one has to read Isidore Ducasse’s declaration about poetry not as a negation of a negation—even if it seems that way, but as the affirmation of the trace of negativity, or as an affirmation of a necessity that poetry can only exist in a negative state of the discourse.”

Given the importance of Ducasse’s work for the Tel Quel group in the 70s, it is poetic justice that, today, Ducasse’s ideas about poetry appear more in line with what could be described as the poetics of the
Oulipo, a movement which, historically, has ties with the literary journal *Change* that was *Tel Quel*’s preeminent intellectual challenger in the 70s and 80s. While Kristeva and the *Tel Quel* group will recognize Ducasse for the materialism and the social conviction of his ideas about poetic discourse, *Change* and the Oulipo group will claim Ducasse’s legacy because of his scientific approach to poetics and his resolute conviction that the salvation of poetry lies in its firm conformity to a rationalistic and formalist line.

Nothing further from Isidore Ducasse than ontological lyricism, nothing further from Ducasse’s poetry than the unique poem for the special occasion. With eloquent fury he denounces the poetic moments when Lamartine celebrates the color of his mother’s hair or when Hugo glorifies the sweat steaming off his father’s horse after the battle of Austerlitz. Ducasse’s best known sentence is: “[In poetry] I am not interested in case studies; I am only into finding rules.” Further along he finds it necessary to add a few remarks about the necessary state of mind of a true writer: “The writers who are familiar with the capacities of reason are much stronger than those who are totally unfamiliar with its power.” This remark certainly constitutes what the Oulipo movement calls “anticipatory plagiarism” [*plagiat par anticipation*]. Indeed, in 1932, Raymond Queneau, the historical founder of Oulipo, writes:

> The seventeenth century classical playwright who writes his tragedy according to a certain number of constraints that he is familiar with is freer than the poet who writes anything that comes to his head and who, in fact, is the slave of rules that he does not know.

Finally, it is also Ducasse who wrote: “When I write, I am fully in control of my thoughts.”

The Oulipo movement is officially founded on February 13th, 1961—no, it was not a Friday! On that date the *Secrétaire Général particulier du Vice-Curateur Baron du Collège de Pataphysique* performs the official naming of the group that is first a subaltern group within the *Collège de Pataphysique*. It is important to note that when its two founding fathers, François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau decide to create the group it is only because the first nine members share a community of thinking about literature as a *science* of creation. The three basic principles found in Isidore Ducasse’s *Poésies II* are at the core of the foundation of Oulipo:
1) a movement that will not simply focus on producing individual works of art but will devote its activity to exploring global rules of esthetic creation,
2) the writer always knows the rules and will be absolutely conscious of what he/she is doing, and 3) the success of the written work lies in the perfect implementation of the pre-established rules.

At the time the Oulipo movement was created, these three principles were the unifying beliefs of its original members. Strangely, there was no federализing contract, no inaugurator text, no stated purpose, no outline of goals, no manifesto, just a performative statement establishing the group and trade marking its name. It was a nebulous intellectual enterprise in part thrown together by one passion: the scientific model, and one rejection: that of surrealism and its reliance on the unconscious as the basis for human creativity.

A first transitional internal definition is proposed in April 1961, two months after the creation of Oulipo. This swiftly drafted mission statement simply makes the two basic tenets of the group explicit:

**OULIPO**: movement that proposes to examine how it is possible for a scientific doctrine focusing primarily on language (and thus with anthropological concerns) to define under what conditions and with what means it is possible to manipulate language so as to produce esthetical pleasure (emotion and imagination).

In fact, it took a total of seven months, from February 13 to August 28, 1961, for the Oulipo group to publish its *First Manifesto*.

In its opening part the *First Manifesto* offers a declaration of three strict principles: “1. Oulipo is not a literary movement. 2. Oulipo is not a scientific seminar. 3. Oulipo does not produce fortuitous literature.”

In the second part, Le Lionnais recognizes that Oulipo, as a working group, will pursue two distinct research directions: what he calls the *analytic* and the *synthetic* axes. The analytical work will focus on the texts of the past to see if there is any possibility of recognizing principles or mechanisms in them that had escaped their author and that can be put to contemporary use; that's what we can call the “archival” aspect of Oulipo and the reason why the group feels that they are part of continuing poetic research that is now more than twenty centuries old. The synthetic research of Oulipo is the most well-known aspect of this creative
group: to elaborate new principles that will serve as governing rules for the production of new texts that will fulfill the creative potentiality inscribed in the pre-defined program of production. It is in this part of the \textit{First Manifesto} that Le Lionnais pontificates that this scientific enterprise should be placed under the guiding principle of mathematics: “Mathematics—more particularly abstract structures of contemporary mathematics—Algebra as well as Topology—offer a thousand new directions for our exploration.”\textsuperscript{9} With this statement, Le Lionnais squarely places the poetic experiments of Oulipo under the tutelage of numbers, a move that situates Oulipo in the same tradition as Lucius Apuleius, Lucrecius and, closer to us, Edgar Allan Poe and, yes, Isidore Ducasse who wrote: “In literature, the number is everything.”\textsuperscript{10}

At the origin of the Oulipo movement, control, system, algorithm and well-defined sets of literary, linguistic and poetic principles give the movement its specificity. Raymond Queneau is the brother-in-law of André Breton, the historic founder of Freudian Surrealism. After a year of family life they had a major personal and theoretical fall out (as documented in \textit{Odile}, Paris: Gallimard, 1937). This biographical anecdote is usually advanced in lieu of intellectual justification to explain why, during its early years, Oulipo is perceived as the exact polar opposite to Surrealism. As a matter of principle, Oulipo demands a conscious form of poetic creation away from the elusive “inspiration,” a controlled writing of the text away from the fortuitous encounters of surrealistic fame and the explicit indication of its inner rules of production away from the unconscious irresponsibility of the writer. Early on the label “constraint-governed literature” [“\textit{littérature à contraintes}”] was coined to define these writings marked by an emphasis on “control” and on an explicitly pre-established set of writing procedures.

When I first began to lecture and write on Oulipo, Perec, Roubaud, Fournel, etc. the Oulipo was only a sweet sixteen year old movement and not very well-known.\textsuperscript{11} It is now officially forty-five years old and still running strong. In fact, it has shown extraordinary resilience as a literary movement and it would be a mistake to look at it today as if it were still the movement of the sixties or to think that it has always been the same. The group has changed, particularly in the last five years when historical figures have disappeared and new writers or intellectuals have been co-opted: Grangaud, Métail, Garetta, Jouet, Cerquiglini, to mention just a few of the new names associated with the current movement.
In order to understand today’s situation with Oulipo as a member of the “extreme contemporary” [“extrême contemporain”] in French literature, it is important to consider that it is the result of an evolution, and to include the archives in any assessment that we could formulate about its current status and creative potential. At the beginning of this essay I summarized the main elements as they are expressed in the founding documents. In 1996, Jacques Roubaud, one of the major members of the current Oulipo, published a book entitled Poésie, etcetera: ménage. The last part of the book called “Section I—De l’Oulipo” can be seen as a contemporary revisionist version of the Oulipo manifestos. Any reader familiar with the original Oulipian texts can appreciate that the Oulipo certainly has gone “a long way baby” since its somewhat obscure and sober beginnings.

For reasons of explanatory expediency, I will limit my remarks to what I consider the three main distinctions between Roubaud’s current view of what Oulipo is and the original dogmatic definitions.

First, for Roubaud, Oulipo is (and was) a literary movement.

Second, for Roubaud, not only does Oulipo derive its special literary flavor from the fact that it is a “scientific seminar” but, furthermore, its very raison d’être is to be a research laboratory whose purpose is to pursue experiments with literary constraints according to mathematical models. On these two very points, Roubaud is in direct contradiction with the first manifesto proposed by Le Lionnais that stated clearly that the Oulipo is not a literary movement, and that it was not to be a scientific seminar.

Caesar, meet Brutus, and vice versa.

The third major difference concerns what is at the core of the theoretical debate about Oulipo’s discursive mode of production: freedom, and its difficult coexistence with an explicit poetics of the constraint.

Le Lionnais and Queneau both accepted the necessity of the poetic constraint as the way to avoid the mode of “anything goes” that they saw as a major component of post-surrealist writing. The existence and the necessary presence of the constraint was a given of the Oulipo movement and its signature label. In the early Oulipian texts many discussions deal with the nature of the constraint, its form, its relations to rules and principles, but what we do not find are discussions about the necessity of the constraint. This is why it is surprising to discover in
Roubaud’s text *the exhumation of a sort of Gnostic Gospel about the place of the constraint in the movement’s dogma*. As I indicated, Le Lionnais’ *First Manifesto* states that the division in the movement was between pursuing a synthetic or an analytic line of work. According to Roubaud, right during the early days of Oulipo, the main division in the movement was about the very question of the inflexibility of the constraint. While the two founding fathers, Queneau and Le Lionnais were the enforcers of the strict deference to a pre-established constraint, there was another line, apparently, defended by an Oulipian member who had, historically, always been considered as a lesser-known figure of the movement. Opposed to the forbidding and unforgiving figure of Jean Queval, a journalist and a “minor” novelist. Roubaud defined Queval’s line as an “a-theoretical” version of the Oulipo. Roubaud writes: “On the other side, Jean Queval [...]. Thus the Oulipo has introduced [...] the concept of ‘clinamen’ [...]. ‘Clinamen’ is an intentional violation of the constraint for esthetic purposes.”

It appears that, from the beginning, the Oulipo membership would have been divided as there was within a force that resisted the inevitability of the global system of a scientifically pre-established constraint and its oppressive totalitarianism. In his introduction to *Oulipo, a Primer of Potential Literature*, Warren Motte rightly speculates that there is probably some tension within Oulipo vis-a-vis the overall necessity of the constraint and, based on Roubaud’s considerations in the early eighties, Motte qualifies Le Lionnais as an “ultra” within the spectrum of the Oulipian usual cast of characters. But this well articulated early resistance to the constraint has never been foregrounded until recently and there has been no obvious co-presence of a resisting text accompanying the “official” manifestos, no “minority report” so to speak.

By chronicling the debates between Queval and Le Lionnais in *Poésie, ménage, etcetera*, it seems clear that Roubaud felt that it was necessary in 1995 to rewrite the history of the Oulipo so as to accommodate what he may have perceived as a shift in the production of the Oulipo writings of that period. Queval’s so-called “clinamen” and the freedom of creativity it entails since it suspends the absolute power of the constraint offer the possibility of presenting a more “intuitive,” a more “disconcerting,” a more “esthetic” way to deal with the con-
trolled nature of the Oulipian texts. At this point, it is probably worth noting that Roubaud himself is not a “founding father” of Oulipo and only became a member in 1966; thus he has no reason to feel bound by the sinister sins of the fathers. It is also remarkable that Roubaud does not limit himself to offering a highly personal rewriting of Oulipo’s early history. In a few of his most recent texts he seems intent on showing that the intellectual line that he has been associated with in the Oulipo movement is also the line that appears to be the most orthodox if one considers the continuity of evolution of Oulipo from the early sixties to the late nineties. This re-appropriation of the Oulipo core is never more obvious than in Roubaud’s attempt to substitute another title for Oulipo’s “founding” book. Until now, a commonly accepted fact is that the first Oulipo text ever published is Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*¹⁸ and that it came out for the foundation of the Oulipo since it was published in 1961, the very year Oulipo was created. In *Poésie, etcetera, ménage*, Roubaud endorses this aspect of the Oulipo vulgate: “The founding book by Raymond Queneau [...] *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* simultaneously proposes all the texts that can potentially be constructed if one varies the combinatory selection of the lines found in the ten basic poems (sonnets).”¹⁹ Oulipo has never recognized the existence of a second “founding book.” However this is what Roubaud suggests in his introduction to the 2004 book, *De l’Oulipo et de la Chandelle verte*²⁰ by Jacques Bens when he affirms:

[...]. In 1965, Jacques Bens publishes [...] 41 sonnets irrationnels, the second book that can properly be considered “Oulipian” after the *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* de R. Queneau. In this book, Jacques Bens proposes a new poetic form, which is one of the main tasks assigned to Oulipo according to its founder, François Le Lionnais. It is a fixed form, with very strict constraints and a form derived from the canonical fixed form of the sonnet [...].²¹

This insertion, in 2004, of a second “founding text” for Oulipo is certainly not gratuitous. In fact the important term that Roubaud uses to innocently propose the inclusion of this second text in the Oulipian canon is the term “constraint” especially reinforced by “strict.” No one would (or should) have used that term to describe the “first” Oulipian text, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*. No matter what the “official history” of the Oulipian movement says, unless we consider *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* an Oulipian book “by anticipation,” the text cannot be
“Oulipian” because, when it was published, the Oulipo, as a movement, did not yet exist. The text, as a gimmick, was conceived in 1960 and published (released) in early 61 when Oulipo had not yet been “named.” Queneau’s text with a postface from Le Lionnais is in fact the output of the work of the “Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale,” a forerunner to Oulipo. If one accurately reads Le Lionnais’ postface it is easy to see that the text deals with something that will not be at the core of the Oulipo experimentation: the text as a combinatory ensemble of distinct elements, the so-called “combinatorics.” In 1960 and early 1961 Le Lionnais sees the future of literature in what he calls “littérature combinatoire”; for him it is a “new formula for literary composition with a great future.”22 A giant intellectual step in the group will take place between February 1961 when Cent mille milliards de poèmes is published and August 1961 when the first Manifesto appears. As I have indicated, it will no longer be important to reflect on what an “experimental literature” could be, nor will “combinatorics,” as an interactive controlled game mixing mathematics and literature, be seen as the principal source of the creative productivity. Instead, the call for “combinatorics” will be replaced by the doctrine of the “strict constraint” as the main source of potentiality.

Roubaud endorses that line of the primacy of the constraint and not of “combinatorics” à la Queneau. Roubaud’s rewriting of the Oulipo doctrine in Un art simple et tout d’exécution brings this correction of course of the movement to light:

1. [. . .] OULIPO has a one goal: Potentiality, which is inscribed in its very name,
2. To reach this goal, Oulipo has several strategies. Among these the main one is the constraint. The name Oulipo, the Oulipian literature, are generally associated with the idea of constraint.
3. Potentiality and constraint are two fundamental notions for the study of poetic forms, Oulipian forms or not [. . .].23

One can assume that “combinatorics” should probably still be counted among the “several strategies” used by Oulipo to reach the goal of “potentiality”; however, no other “strategy” is proposed in the rest of the essay which is entirely devoted to a study of the different types of constraints. This is the proof, again, that Oulipo, according to
Roubaud, should be understood as a movement based on the overwhelming power of the constraint as the principal, if not the exclusive, means to explore creative potentiality.

Roubaud's recent new appraisal of the early moments of Oulipo and his late emphasis upon a more profound line of dissent on the centrality of the constraint during the founding discussions find confirmation in an anecdote found in the book of memories by Jean Lescure, another original member of the Oulipo movement. In this text published in 1973, Lescure tells us that, at one point during the preliminary discussions that accompanied the founding of Oulipo, a proposed definition of the Oulipo was rejected. This now quite well-known definition was: "Oulipian writers: rats that are engaged in building the labyrinth from which they propose to escape." Clearly, what is implied in this definition is that the notion of the "constraint" was perceived by a subgroup as the key to the new project of the movement. However if the presence of a self-imposed constraint is the task represented by the metaphor of the labyrinth, then the constraint is not the end of the process as *Le Lionnais* wanted us to understand it; the constraint exists only in so far as it is conceived as a challenge. The literary game becomes research into how to subvert the régime and regain literary freedom. The Oulipian writer is not a masochist; he wants to be an escape artist.

Jean Lescure, who recalls this controversy during the foundation of the Oulipo, cannot be accused of being one of the members historically opposed to the determinist *diktat* of the constraint, *au contraire!* As Warren Motte reminds us in his new edition of *Oulipo, A Primer of Potential Literature*, Lescure has flatly stated: "What the Oulipo intended to demonstrate was that these constraints are felicitous, generous, and are in fact literature itself."

It is in the light of this revisionist history of the Oulipo now proposed by Roubaud in *Poésie, etcetera, ménage*, that Roubaud's most recent appraisal of Georges Perec's work takes its full value. In the book *Portrait(s) de Georges Perec*, published in 2001 by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France under the editorship of Paulette Perec, Roubaud writes: "Perec, as an Oulipian author, is also the one who tried to escape the labyrinth built around him by Queneau and *Le Lionnais.*" To read between the lines here: Roubaud rehabilitates the rejected line of the early Oulipo: one has to escape the labyrinth, and,
indirectly, he accuses the founding fathers of being responsible for turning the constraint into a revolting confined coercion for the writer.

I have shown elsewhere that Père and even Roubaud himself should be read in their most recent texts as literary libertarians, as escape artists. They are apostates of the original definition of the constraint and no longer use the created text as a mode of exploration of the potential value of the pre-selected constraint. They no longer believe in the original synthetic goal of the Oulipo to define and enumerate constraints that can be adopted by other writers as “off the shelf” systems for generating new texts. They prefer to define the constraint as a governing system only as a pretext to elaborate a complex strategy to defy its impersonal and universal nature and to turn the literary game into a play of the self.

Père and Roubaud are not the only Oulipo members who displace its focus towards affect, intention and esthetics. Italo Calvino, in American Lessons, writes that if he had to choose between writing texts that would further scientific knowledge or texts that would be considered lyric texts of the self, he would opt to write texts that attest to his communion with the world rather than to his understanding of it: “I have always relied upon imagination as a means for an extra-individual and extra-subjective knowledge of the world, so I may as well declare myself on the side of [the imagination as identity of the soul with the world].”

Roubaud may well consider that Queneau and Le Lionnais are on the side of the terror of the constraint, and that he has a more playful relationship to it. However there is always someone more leftist than thou, someone who is going to consider you as more rigid, more coïncé, more “by the book,” or more precisely more by the constraint than thou. Jacques Jouet, who certainly is one of the most innovative members of the current Oulipo, paradoxically, today also appears ready to play the role of the leader who is most theoretically disengaged from the tyranny of the constraint. In an essay aptly entitled “With the constraints (and also without)” Jouet directly challenges what he considers Roubaud’s “last stand” or “minimalist stand” of the textual constraint. Roubaud has long proposed to the group that Oulipo accept as the “last stand” of the constraint the principle according to which a text generated by a constraint at least talks about that constraint. Jouet does not think that all Oulipians should agree with this
last stop of the constraint before the immense wasteland of the fortuitous inspiration. While Roubaud wants to make it into an ecumenical part of the doctrine and calls it the “Peter principle,” Jouet systematically only refers to this minimalist constraint as the “Roubaud principle.” By attaching the name of its creator to this lowest conception of the presence of the constraint in an Oulipian text, Jouet refuses to endorse it as a collective principle and he uses any occasion to further express his rejection of the unavoidable necessity of the constraint when one writes. In so doing, among the current Oulipo members, Jouet marks his own independent status and secures his own claim for creative freedom within the constraint and his right to write without constraint (a ruse?). Roubaud’s principle, for Jouet, is one more occurrence of the “intellectual” side of Oulipo, one more avatar of the fetishism of the constraint as essential to the theory of literature. In case one has not understood his claim, he writes: “To write with constraints is but one manner to write literature. It is not the only one. Just one.”31 If, for Roubaud, the coercive constraint is “revolting,” for Jouet it is, literally, unspeakable. For him, these “conceptual” members of the Oulipo who still spend most of their time theorizing about the constraint do not speak, do not write: “The constraint can have a large output. Then one does not have to write. Don’t be scared; if needs be, one can use the constraint as an excuse to only produce blank pages.”32 Opposed to the Oulipo theoreticians, Jouet considers himself a “craftsman,” a “worker bee,” one of the “faber” members of the Oulipo who actually write and produce texts. Furthermore, he claims that as an Oulipian writer he is free to select to write texts with or without constraints; if he is told that there has to be a tight relationship between text and constraint to produce a text that is said to be “Oulipian,” then he will reclaim his total freedom to write texts that are not Oulipian even if he is an Oulipian writer.

Down with constraint! Freedom from constraint! Oulipo-secession.

Most of the texts quoted here date back to the end of the twentieth century or to the beginning of the twenty first century. As I indicated, soon Oulipo, as an intellectual movement, will be 46 years old. According to the founding status of the movement, its members can neither resign nor be excluded once they are asked to join the group. Thus we probably should be ready to recognize that a new régime and a new line is taking over the Oulipo movement. Since I am not yet ready to
purge Roubaud, let’s accept his rewriting of the Oulipo’s official history and its hero of the early revolt, Jean Queval, and let’s call the faction that is demonstrating today for freedom from constraint: “The Oulipo of the Quevalier persuasion” (certainly a more elegant denomination than the sans constraint art brut version: “Oulipo and the Queval factor”).

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Notes
1Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974) 414. “On lira donc l’affirmation proclamée par les Poésies [de Ducasse], non pas comme une négation de la négation (même si elle se donne parfois ainsi), mais comme une affirmation sur la trace de la négativité, ou comme une affirmation aussi nécessaire que ruinée.” Renditions are mine.


3Ducasse. 791. “La force de la raison paraît mieux en ceux qui la connaissent qu’en ceux qui ne la connaissent pas.”


5Ducasse, op. cit., 781. “Lorsque j’écris, ma pensée, elle ne m’échappe pas.”


8Le Lionnais. 11. These three principles appear under the title “Note de l’éditeur” and also on the back cover; in both texts they are defined by a quote from the “spokesperson of the OULIPO, at a lecture at the Henri Poincaré Institute.” The “editor” and the “spokesperson” are one and the same: Raymond Queneau who had been General Secretary of Gallimard since 1941 and the Director of the Encyclopédie de la Pléiade collection in the same publishing house since 1954. This text should thus be considered his contribution to the *First Manifesto*. 1. Ce n’est pas un mouvement littéraire. 2. Ce n’est pas un séminaire scientifique. 3. Ce n’est pas de la littérature aléatoire.”


Thomas: Down with the Tyranny of Constraints! / 125


13Cf. ibid., “Queneau and Le Lionnais’ explicit ambition was to substitute to traditional literary values [. . . ] new traditions by the discovery of constraints as ‘productive’ as those that had governed French literature over many centuries” (214).

14Cf. ibid., “Oulipian texts are thus the literary results of the axioms, according to rules of deduction [. . . ] that render them analogically similar to chains of theorems, corollaries and scholia, which are the building blocks of a mathemati text” (211).

15Cf. ibid., “The President, Le Lionnais, always ‘radical’” (210); “François Le Lionnais was a very strict and narrow-minded Oulipian who never accepted concessions” (216).

16Ibid., 215.

A l’autre pôle se trouvait Jean Queval. Romancier [. . . ], traducteur. Jean Queval avait une pratique de la contrainte oulipienne originale, plus intuitive que théorique (quasiment a-théorique) et sévèrement déconcertante pour les esprits non prévenus. [. . . ] On rencontre constamment, au-delà de la difficulté à suivre les consignes strictes de la règle (ce qui est parfaitement maîtrisable), le regret de ne pouvoir employer tel mot, telle image, telle construction syntaxique, qui nous sembleraient s’imposer, mais qui nous sont interdits. L’Oulipo a donc introduit, pour de telles situations, le ‘concept’ de clinamen (dont l’origine démocratie indique assez bien la finalité: un coup de puce donné au mouvement rectiligne, uniforme et terriblement monotone des atomes originels pour, par collisions, mettre en marche le monde du texte dans sa variété). Le ‘clinamen’ est une violation intentionnelle de la contrainte, à des fins esthétiques [. . . ].


[. . . ] En 1965, paraissent, sous son nom, aux Editions Gallimard, la deuxième œuvre proprement oulipienne après les Cent mille milliards de poèmes de Raymond Queneau (cmm), les 41 sonnets irrationalnels. Dans cet ouvrage, Jacques Bens propose une forme poétique nouvelle, ce qui est une des tâches principales de l’Oulipo, selon son fondateur, François Le Lionnais. C’est une forme fixe, aux contraintes strictes et [. . . ] une forme dérivée de celle du sonnet [. . . ].

22François Le Lionnais, “Postface: A propos de la littérature expérimentale,” in Raymond Queneau, Cent mille milliards de poèmes (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) [n.pag.].

De Lycophon à Raymond Roussel en passant par les Grands Rhétoriqueurs, la littérature expérimentale accompagne discrètement la littérature tout court. Avec les ‘Exercices de style’ [by Queneau, 1947] et le présent recueil, elle entend sortir de cette semi-clandestinité, affirmer sa légitimité, proclamer ses ambitions, se constituer des méthodes, bref s’accorder
à notre civilisation scientifique [...] Voilà donc—appelée, me semble-t-il à un destin envi-able—une nouvelle formule de composition littéraire offerte à qui voudra l’expérimenter.

23Marcel Bénabou et al., Un art simple et tout d’exécution (Lyon: Circé, 2001) 21."

1. L’Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, OULIPO, a un but: la Potentialité, inscrit dans son nom même.

2. Pour atteindre ce but, l’Oulipo a plusieurs stratégies, Parmi celles-ci, la principale est la contrainte. Le nom Oulipo, la littérature oulipienne, sont généralement associés à l’idée de contrainte.

3. Potentialité et contrainte sont deux notions essentielles pour l’étude des formes poé- tiques, oulipiennes ou pas [...].

24Jean Lescurce, "Petite histoire de l’Oulipo," in Oulipo, la littérature potentielle, op. cit., 36. "Oulipien: rats qui ont à construire le labyrinthe dont ils se proposent de sortir."


[...] L’imagination comme instrument de connaissance, l’imagination comme identification à l’âme du monde. Auquel va ma préférence? D’après les propos mêmes que j’ai tenus, je devrais être un ardent partisan de la première tendance, puisque selon moi le récit unit une logique spontanée des images à un dessein rationnellement poursuivi. Mais, d’autre part, j’ai toujours cherché dans l’imagination le moyen de parvenir à une connaissance extra-individuelle, extra-subjective; aussi ferait-il bien de me déclamer plus proche du second courant, celui qui prône l’identification à l’âme du monde.

29Jacques Jouet, "Avec les contraintes (et aussi sans)," in Marcel Bénabou et al., Un art simple et tout d’exécution, op. cit.

30Jacques Roubaud, "Note sur l’Oulipo et les formes poétiques," in ibid., 32. "@96 CO_XVI—The ideal Oulipian constraint follows the James principle (it governs all the elements enumerated in the text that respects it)." "@96 CO_XVI—La contrainte oulipienne idéale satisfait au Principe de James (elle commande la totalité des éléments intervenant dans la composition du texte qui la respecte)."

31Jacques Jouet, ibid., 34. "Écrire avec des contraintes est une manière de faire de la littéra- ture. Ce n’est pas la seule. C’en est une."

32Jacques Jouet, Un art simple et tout d’exécution, op. cit. 33. "La contrainte peut servir à produire beaucoup. Elle peut servir à écrire peu. Je vous rassure, s’il en est besoin, on peut par- faITEMENT BLANCHETER PAR LA CONTRAINTE."