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Oulipian Exceptionalism

Résumé

Abstract

Mots-clés

The Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle is fifty years old. Fifty years old! Fifty years! Having myself turned sixty just two days ago, amid much wailing and gnashing of teeth, I am in a good position to measure just how long fifty years is. Not to put too fine a point on it, it's a very long time. And it's even longer, of course, if you count each decade as a millennium, like the Oulipians do.¹ Over those fifty years, the Oulipo has turned its attention to a great many matters of weight, from the size of the menhirs at Carnac to the notion that the crisis in off-track betting could be explained by the fact that trainers read Baudelaire aloud to racehorses (Bens, *Oulipo 1960-1963* 56, 230). What may be even more astonishing than the group's longevity is its record of civility. No excommunications here, no witch hunts, no blood-drenched seppukus. Indeed, its rules provide that nobody, once elected, can quit the Oulipo—and even after their death, its members are not excused from the group. From the original ten Oulipians, the group has grown to include thirty-seven people, and, thus reinforced, its activity continues unabated today, in the very same spirit of vigorous, collaborative interrogation that animated its beginnings.

Looking back upon the Oulipo, what emerges is the picture of a group that is utterly exceptional, and my purpose today is to parse that exceptionalism just a bit. I should mention that I have been a devoted reader of the Oulipo's work since the 1970s. But I have always read them from a very marginal position, whether flat-out on the plains of Nebraska or perched on the Eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains—in any case, a very long way from Paris (and indeed from a lot of other places one could name). Consequently, my own reading of them may itself be exceptional, a little quirky and idiosyncratic, and for that I apologize (I think). That being said, I would like to suggest a few areas in which the Oulipo seems particularly exceptional with regard to other groups, or schools, or movements, or tendencies, or currents, or what have you. I shall invoke five exceptions, one for each decade (or millennium, as you wish). These are highly personal choices, to be sure. Any serious reader of the Oulipo might well choose five very different ones. And any Oulipian, most certainly, would have a far more precise idea of what constitutes the group's exceptionalism. In my defense, I should remark that each of the exceptions I intend to note is present, *potentially* at least, in the Oulipo's First Manifesto. Moreover, every one of these five exceptions seems to me, well, perfectly exceptional.

In its meeting of April 17, 1961, the group came up with a definition that has since withstood the test of time: "Oulipians: Rats who must build the labyrinth from which they

propose to escape."² In that pleasantly wry manner, they cast one of the foundational principles of their project, that of working through deliberately conceived and freely accepted systems of constraint. Now, in any discussion of constraint, two considerations quickly emerge. On the one hand, *any* piece of writing involves a set of baseline constraints, because the medium of writing, language, is bound by norms, some more rigid than others, some more supple. Moreover, other considerations, such as genre, may impose certain protocols upon a writer. What interests me here, though, is the notion of systematic artifice, as expressed in a carefully elaborated and voluntarily imposed set of writing rules. On the other hand, as Marcel Bénabou puts it, "Constraint, as everyone knows, often has a bad press. All those who esteem the highest value in literature to be sincerity, emotion, realism, or authenticity mistrust it as a strange and dangerous whim" ("Rule and Constraint" 40). Constraint is often conceived as a restrictive process, one that severely limits the field of possibilities available to a writer. Yet while it is undoubtedly true that the use of systematic artifice and writing rules in a literary text does make certain writerly gestures impossible, it may also provide for fresh and largely unsuspected possibilities, and for new sorts of mobility as well.

The members of the Oulipo approach the notion theoretically from a variety of angles. Jacques Roubaud argues that "constraint is a principle, not a means," characterizing it as "an axiom of a text" ("Mathematics" 87, 89). Jacques Jouet suggests that "The constraint is the problem; the text is the solution. If you will, the constraint is the enunciation of an enigma, and the text is the answer—or rather one answer, for usually there are several possible ones" ("With" 4). For Marcel Bénabou, constraint eases the transition from language to writing ("Rule" 41). Georges Perec proposes an idea that may seem curious. Speaking of the lipogram, he says: "In this sense, the suppression of the letter, of the typographical sign, of the basic prop, is a purer, more objective, more decisive operation, something like constraint degree zero, after which everything becomes possible" ("History of the Lipogram" 107).

I recall reading that latter remark for the first time, long ago, and finding it counterintuitive and difficult to accept at face value. How can constraint *open* possibilities for the writer, rather than foreclose them, one after another? How can it exercise a liberating force, granted the obvious restriction that it imposes? Pondering that remark over the subsequent years, in the light of a many Oulipian works, I have seen those questions answered materially and incontrovertibly in a variety of ways. Though constrained texts may assume dizzyingly different

shapes, one phenomenon that they seem to share is that constraint, paradoxically enough, provides them with a mobility that they might otherwise lack. In short, judiciously conceived and cannily deployed, constraint can make texts *move*.

To confirm that idea, one need look no farther than what has been called the seminal Oulipian work,³ Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes*. With its ten "master sonnets" adumbrating one hundred trillion potential sonnets, the text is clearly not so much about *being* as it is about *becoming*. And if the work seized the Oulipian imagination so profoundly, it is undoubtedly because it puts the group's foundational principle, "potential literature," into action in such a sleek manner. What interests me most particularly about the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes* is precisely the mobility that its constraint affords. The text is constantly moving and impossible to grasp. It is verbal, rather than nominal. One can take soundings in it here and there, but one can never traverse the landscape that it sketches. It escapes from us very largely, then, both ineluctably and definitively. And yet it *speaks* to us as it whizzes by. It has a great deal to say about literature and its uses, suggesting for instance that all literature is fundamentally combinatoric in character, and materially confirming, thus, insights by contemporary theorists such as Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, and Tzvetan Todorov. It argues that literature is playful in nature, a ludic dynamic wherein writer and reader find important points of articulation. It contends moreover that both writing and reading are deeply mobile activities—as anyone who has played with this text, shuffling verses from one configuration to another, will be forced to admit. It places literary form on stage and causes it to perform for us.

Finally, the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes* is also an eloquent defense and illustration of writing under constraint. In his conversations with Georges Charbonnier, Queneau remarked that this text was undoubtedly the most daunting one he had undertaken: "I had written five or six of the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes*, and was a bit loath to continue, actually I didn't have the courage to continue, the more it went along, the more difficult it was to do naturally" (1962: 116). Yet, once achieved, that exercise in *difficulté vaincue* puts difficulty itself into play, prompting it to speak overtly about process issues and the new possibilities that they place on offer. In close articulation, we are invited to retrace constraint along the axis of those process issues—indeed, such a gesture seems unavoidable—in the course of a reading that, *potentially* at least, will never end, a reading that constrains us, in turn, to be as wholly mobile as we possibly

can.

The second brief for Oulipian exceptionalism that I intend to argue devolves upon the very figure of the exceptional, the clinamen. It is a fine example of a strong trope in the history of thought, one strong enough in any case to come back with a vengeance after lying in the weeds for nearly two millennia. One recalls that Epicurus found the determinism of Democritus's atomic theory intolerable, and that he chose to refute that model in its most crucial point, its linearity, suggesting that the atoms *swerve* as they fall. Lucretius's account of that gesture underscores the idea that the *clinamen atomorum* occurs "at uncertain times / and at uncertain points" (*The Nature of Things* II, 218-19), that very indeterminacy serving to provide a locus of freedom and some much-needed room for maneuver. Paul Braffort has remarked that the Oulipo became aware of the possibilities offered by the clinamen in the early 1970s, and that from then onward, its "essential role" within the group's work became progressively more apparent ("Un système formel" 108).

As it is in so many other instances, the case of Georges Perec is exemplary in this regard. A fervent devotee of highly constraining structures and uncompromising literary symmetry, author of a 5000-character palindrome and a 300-page lipogrammatic novel, Perec gradually became convinced of the creative efficacy of the integration of a minimal element of indeterminacy into highly constrained literary structures. He told with relish the story of Chinese typographers who, after working for years to set an error-free text, would deliberately insert therein one typographical error.⁴ In his own work, however, the role of the clinamen is far less static; two examples will serve to illustrate that point.

Perec practiced extensively a venerable form known as the heterogram, a form in which each verse of a given poetic text is an anagram of every other verse within that text. After deploying that technique rigorously and unflinchingly in texts such as *Ulcérations* and *Alphabets*, Perec became convinced that those forms had to be made more malleable. He consequently introduced the clinamen into his heterograms, in the form of a variable letter in each verse. That is, each verse, rather than being strictly anagrammatic of every other verse in the poem, now includes a variable letter that is chosen "freely" in accordance with the poet's needs. Its role is analogous to that of the joker in certain card games, in that, from the moment it is introduced, a satisfactory result is more readily obtained. In each poem produced according to this new process, one can trace the path of the clinamen through the text, line by line, and its

consequences are considerable: the language of the new form, when compared to the old, describes a radical swerve toward the normative, the texts engendered are more *readerly*, less *writerly*. Moreover, Perec's tactic is strikingly similar to that of Lucretius, in that his clinamen is clearly a locus of free will, and a substantial humanization of constraint.

The second example is furnished by Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi*, a novel whose formal organization testifies to the application of several structures of systematic artifice, principally mathematical in nature. The clinamen plays multiple roles in that text, and its method of intervention is far more dynamic still than in the previous example. Bernard Magné, who has studied *La Vie mode d'emploi* in some detail, cites three examples of the clinamen therein. First, while the formal organization of the novel provides lists of forty-two constitutive elements to be integrated into each of the chapters, Magné notes that two components of each list, entitled respectively "false" and "lack," function programmatically throughout the novel as clinamens; the former imposes the transformation of an element in each list, the latter the suppression of an element. Magné remarks that, by this strategy, "the dysfunction of the system is itself systematized" ("Le Puzzle, mode d'emploi" 83). The second example occurs in chapter 51 of the text, in a "compendium" of the various narratives included in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. The clinamen here is centered upon the notion of lack, and one of its manifestations occurs in a passage dealing with an *atomiste*, a self-designation on the metatextual level, insofar as the construct of the clinamen resulted from the atomic theory of Epicurus and Lucretius. The third clinamen noted by Magné is also characterized by a lack: although the formal organization of *La Vie mode d'emploi* would seem to call for one hundred chapters, there are only ninety-nine in the text; in fact, the sixty-sixth chapter is "missing." In an interview, Perec offered an explanation:

This chapter must disappear in order to break the symmetry, to introduce an error into the system, because when a system of constraints is established, there must also be anticonstraint within it. The system of constraints—and this is important—must be destroyed. It must not be rigid, there must be some play in it, it must, as they say, "creak" a bit; it must not be completely coherent; there must be a clinamen—it's from Epicurean atomic theory: "The world functions because from the outset there is a lack of balance." According to Klee, "Genius is the error in the system"; perhaps I'm being too arrogant in saying that, but in Klee's work it is very important. ("Entretien" 70-71)

Perec's thinking on the subject of formal constraint takes, then, a marked swerve. From his initial belief in the value of maximal formal rigor as the guarantor of the text, he came to feel that the

textual system must be intentionally flawed—and the flaw scrupulously cultivated, in turn, as a crucial locus of poetic creativity.

Furthermore, just as Oulipians sometimes imagine themselves as characters in a novel written by Raymond Queneau, are we readers not tempted to imagine the Oulipo as a clinamen in the pattern of literary history? What other group has lasted as long? Surely not Dada, nor Surrealism, nor Futurism, nor the Lettrists, nor the Situationists, to mention just a few. What other group disrupts received ideas about literature in such a bracing, tonic manner? What other intervenes in both the material world of letters and in our readerly imagination at such "uncertain times" and "uncertain points"?

The third manifestation of exceptionalism that I would like to point out is the way that Oulipian writing coaxes form and content into a conversation that serves to illuminate both of them. From the outset—and indeed well before that—Oulipians insist upon the first of those terms. Very early on in his career, Raymond Queneau was deeply convinced of the importance of literary form, and that conviction would in turn shape the aesthetics of the Oulipo in crucial ways. In an essay dating from 1937 entitled "Technique du roman," Queneau calls for a renovation of the novel, and puts forward an eloquent brief for literary form:

Rules disappear once they've outlived their usefulness. But forms go on eternally. There are forms that confer all the virtues of the Number onto the novel's subject; and so, born of the story's various aspects and of its very expression, connatural with its central idea, at once daughter and mother to all the elements it polarizes, a structure takes shape, transmitting to the work the last gleams of the Universal Light and the last echoes of the Harmony of Worlds. ("Technique of the Novel" 29)

In that same piece, Queneau deplores the fact that the novel is the most *lawless* (as Gide put it) of literary genres; and in doing so, he introduces his "flock of geese" image, which has since taken on a certain notoriety:

Poetry has long been a favorite stomping ground for rhetoricians and rule makers; the novel, on the other hand, has eluded every form of law for as long as it has existed. Anyone can drive an indeterminate number of seemingly lifelike characters along before him, like a flock of geese, across an empty plain measuring some indeterminate number of pages or chapters. No matter what, the result will always be a novel. (26)

look for other kinds of absences here. It is in that sense, too, that a literal constraint enables the writing of existential constraint, allowing Perec to say certain important things that were otherwise unsayable for him at that point in his career. As counterintuitive as such a notion might seem, the idea that discursive freedom can be obtained through constraint animates every page of *La Disparition*; and in that dynamic form and theme are absolutely inseparable.

In a similar manner, the shape of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is extremely eloquent. The doubling of the narratives therein, one autobiographical, the other fictional, speaks to a broad duplicity of technique in that text. A curious oscillation effect is at work there, moreover, as the text shuttles between concealment and revelation, and between indecipherable aggregate and legible whole. The three points within parentheses that stand alone in the middle of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (W 85) are the very image of a suspensory condition that Perec describes. An ellipsis within parentheses: bracketed suspension, an eloquent figure of nullity. Perec's eloquence here escapes from language—but not from form. And that's the very *point*, of course: sometimes form itself must say what is practically unsayable, and the only reliable vehicle for a broken story may be a broken book.

The fourth Oulipian exception I would like to talk about hinges on the idea of exhaustion. There are, I believe, two ways of thinking about that idea in Oulipian practice. First, as what might be called *exhaustive exhaustion*, in the sense of a combinatoric structure that exhausts all of the permutational possibilities of a given set of integers. Such is the case of Perec's *Alphabets*, a series of 176 heterogrammatic poems. Each of the latter uses the ten most common letters of the French alphabet—A, E, I, L, N, O, R, S, T, and U—and the remaining 16 letters are used in eleven poems each. Each poem can be parsed as a structure of eleven lines, each containing eleven letters, and the collection as a whole is organized alphabetically, logically enough, with eleven poems with B as the variant letter followed by eleven poems in C, and so on to the end of the alphabet. What interests me most particularly is the exhaustive character of this text, the way that it pursues poetic possibility to the point of exhaustion, and the manner in which its smooth combinatoric masks what must have been a hellishly difficult linguistic challenge. *Alphabets* is exemplary of the Oulipo's will to push structures to extreme lengths, to the point where they render up their full potential. It is an obsessional impulse, I think (and I say that in high praise). In certain experiments—and most assuredly in *Alphabets*— the Oulipo pursues literary potential in the spirit that Ahab pursues the White Whale.

Jacques Jouet's "metro poems" might likewise be invoked as examples of *exhaustive exhaustion*. These are new poetic forms, felicitously urban ones, invented by Jouet himself, and intended to be practiced in the subway. Very briefly described, each of these poems chronicles a trip on the metro. Each line is composed between two stations, and transcribed while the train is stopped in a station; if the trip involves a change of subway lines, then a new stanza begins. Jouet's *Frise du métro parisien* can be taken as the apotheosis of the "metro poem." It is also, I feel, a sustained meditation on a certain idea of poetry—and of literature in general. In order to test the potential of the poetic form he had invented, Jouet imagined a trip on the Parisian metro wherein he would pass through every single station on the subway system at least once, with a minimum of reduplication. He called upon Pierre Rosenstiehl, a fellow-Oulipian and a professor of mathematics specializing in theory of labyrinths and graphs, in order to help him map out the most efficient itinerary. Jouet took his trip on April 18, 1996, beginning at 5:30 am and finishing at 9:00 pm. What resulted was *Frise du métro parisien*, a poem of 490 lines, distributed in 49 stanzas. Throughout his text, poetry turns back upon itself in a kind of reflexive gesture, examining its own traditions and conditions of possibility. Moreover, Jouet casts the poetic act here as a *vital* activity taking place in the real world, bound by real-world constraints: this is a poet with a train to catch. He reflects, too, upon the notions of rhythm and time, and the way in which this poem written on the subway necessarily conflates those important poetic notions beyond any possibility of disintrinsication. For the compositional rhythm that he has imposed upon himself leaves him no time for anything but his composition: "I have no time to dream of anything other than the poem," he remarks (17); and the small integers of time in his trip from station to station impose a subterranean rhythm upon his poem. He writes to pass the time, surely—but also to feel time passing. And he writes in that most quotidian space of the cityscape, the place where one's time usually does not seem to signify, in an attempt to persuade us that even the most banal, everyday experience may be lived poetically. The long day he spent there must have been an exceptionally exhausting one for Jouet, following his sleek combinatoric to the exhaustion of the metro system. One of the remarks he offers as he goes around and around in the metro reveals what he is actually about in his poem; and it may be taken also as a singularly apposite formulation of his own literary enterprise from its beginnings to the present: "I simply want to work round" (25).

The other way of thinking about the idea of exhaustion in Oulipian practice is through

what might be called *exhausting exhaustion*. In certain of their works, Oulipians pursue a notion relentlessly and indefatigably, worrying it without cease, like a dog with a bone, winking out its marrow little by little. Marcel Bénabou's *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* is a shining example of that sort. It is a deeply duplicitous, deliciously perverse text in which M. Bénabou attempts to explain why, though he was "born" to literature, he hasn't written any books. It's a book that is always beginning, built on hesitation, erasure, and a hallucinating series of false starts. Reading it, one feels as if one were walking in wet cement: it is as exhausting to read as it is irresistible. More than anything else, *Pourquoi* presents itself as a prolegomenon to another book, an ideal, virtual, and clearly impossible one that Bénabou would certainly write, if only he were able. His double conviction, that he in fact is a writer, and that nevertheless it is impossible for him to write the kind of books he was born to write, resounds throughout his work in cries of anguish. Both sides of that conviction are articulated in a textuality that resembles profession at certain moments, and confession at others. In the section of *Pourquoi* entitled "Farewell to the Reader," Bénabou describes his will to write as a kind of spiritual illness, one for which he is unlikely to find a cure, asking his reader to think about this book, and to reflect on a question that is clearly rhetorical in nature: "Is it not the story of an ever deferred meeting, of a frustrated love strewn with obstacles and crosspieces which is the victim of illusions and regrets? Of an unhappy and ultimately impossible love, that of its author for a certain idea of literature" (*Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* 107). There is wryness and self-parody at work in that question, and those will not be lost on the reader. Neither will the fact that Bénabou longs nonetheless for a perfect—and clearly impossible—reader, one who would be equal to the kind of impossible book he would most certainly write, if only he were able, a reader who would be utterly inexhaustible.

The other case of *exhausting exhaustion* that I would like to adduce is Jacques Roubaud's "*le grand incendie de Londres*" (and here I'm referring to the volume published in 2009, collecting the six single volumes belonging to that project, previously published from 1989 to 2008). It is, to say the least, a very impressive piece of work. First by virtue of its length: it numbers 2010 densely-packed pages, excluding the (highly detailed) table of contents. Next by virtue of its weight: at something just shy of four pounds, its very heft gives one pause. But the most impressive thing about it is perhaps the fact that it was published at all, appearing as it does at a time when people are turning their backs upon books, and particularly upon big, weighty

books—or so, at least, one hears. Roubaud's gesture, and that of his publisher, Le Seuil, has something bold and a more than a bit quixotic about it. How many people will be willing to take on a book such as this one? Clearly, this is not a book to be read between two stops on the metro; to the contrary, it is one that demands, on the face of it, a very considerable investment of readerly purpose. Just as its author puts himself to the test as a writer, this book puts us to the test as readers, calling upon us to rethink our readerly strategies and expectations. Simply stated, this book is one of the most deeply compelling literary projects of our time. It questions, it mystifies, and it gladdens. It irks and it soothes. It intrigues and it satisfies. It shines. It *exhausts*.

My final example of Oulipian exceptionalism hinges on the relationship of the playful and the earnest. It is an intriguing question—and a significantly vexed one—in the history of culture from antiquity to the present, animating—and at certain key points, distressing—the arguments of a great many thinkers. Most of the time, playfulness and earnestness are taken to designate dispositions of spirit that are mutually exclusive ones, defining the two poles of a spectrum of human behavior, two attitudes that may color our ways of being and doing, but which must never commingle. From its very beginnings, the Oulipo has consistently and materially refuted such a notion, arguing instead for a practice wherein the playful and the earnest intermingle in mutually productive ways. Certainly, they are not the only ones to take such a stance (other writers, from Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, and Diderot to Borges, Nabokov, Cortázar, and O'Dinn readily come to mind), but the insistency, the import, and the sheer breadth of their argument puts them in the first rank of those who might be called "ludic integrationists," people who believe that one may play very seriously indeed.

Jacques Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir*, a collection of poems that deal with the death of his wife, and with Roubaud's own process of mourning her, offers a particularly compelling example of that stance. Roubaud uses a variety of different poetic forms in that work, but each elegy is shaped in some fashion by the number nine. Numbers thus converse intimately with words in *Quelque chose noir*, and form clearly becomes thematized. Yet Roubaud's formal game is about as far removed as one can imagine from the sort of soul-less verbal pyrotechnics of which the Oulipo is often accused by those who seek easy pretexts to dismiss their work; and nobody, it seems to me, could fault Roubaud's seriousness of intent. To the contrary, it is a very solemn game that Roubaud is playing, a very deliberate and organized one which argues that meaning—in both experience and in poetry—becomes manifest only when we recognize its

shape, and that play always *means* something. Let us revisit in this new perspective, very briefly, three texts that I have already invoked.

The *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* is a text where playfulness and earnestness cannot be disintricated, and where they collaborate in ways that are highly productive of meaning. Moreover, that very collaboration is itself thematized in a sophisticated ludic manner. If that dynamic is so obviously exaggerated, it is perhaps because sometimes a set of issues can be apprehended more readily in such a fashion, especially when the process is carried to the verge of absurdity, performed a hundred trillion times over. As a test case for the reciprocal complementarity of play and earnestness, I regard the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* as irreproachable and utterly convincing.

La Disparition is a game with one, very simple rule; but that game, when played as earnestly as Perec does, produces some astonishing results. More broadly speaking, play is central to the text, both in terms of its production and its reception. For *La Disparition* may be thought of as a puzzle, constructed as such through a series of maneuvers each intended to negotiate the fundamental constraint, and presented as such to the reader who must, as it were, turn its pieces this way and that in order to assemble a coherent picture. On that horizon of possibility, another consideration looms very large indeed for Perec: the notion that he might write a dramatically new kind of novel. He articulates that notion at the end of *La Disparition*, in impeccably fluent Disparitionese, for the benefit of any reader who by that point has failed to grasp his intent: "My ambition, as Author, my point, I would go so far as to say my fixation, my constant fixation, was primarily to concoct an artifact as original as it was illuminating, an artifact that would, or just possibly might, act as a stimulant on notions of construction, of narration, of plotting, of action, a stimulant, in a word, on fiction-writing today" (*A Void* 281). Perec's game is thus a very earnest one, on a variety of levels. It testifies, furthermore, to a feature of play that deserves to be taken very seriously indeed, the fact that an individual, playing freely, affirms himself free to play.

Frise du métro parisien, finally, is a very amusing text. It is mobile and delicately self-ironizing; it puts on offer a vision of poetry that toys with our notion of what a poem must be in unconventional, intriguing ways. It should be remarked, however, that Jouet himself—though he has practiced many different literary genres—is primarily a poet, and moreover a poet who takes poetry very seriously indeed. It is hardly surprising, then, that upon inspection a variety of

earnest considerations may be seen to animate his text. First and foremost, there is the notion that daily life, in what is perhaps the most banal of its sites (at least in the urban version of the former), should be *played*. That game transforms quotidian experience through a kind of felicitous alchemy, affording it a purpose and an aesthetic potential that it otherwise seems to refuse most utterly; in short, it invests it with meaning. Furthermore, just like the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes* and *La Disparition, Frise du métro parisien* can be read as a manifesto, a declaration of principles for a certain kind of literature, one that exploits with bold ostentation the combinatory nature of language, playing that dynamic out as performance; one that relies upon systematicity and rigorous but freely accepted rules; one that points toward the exhaustion of possibility, and, through the same gesture, toward the invigoration of potential. In literature of that sort, it seems to me, the game is a very serious one indeed; and as we attempt to come to terms with it, however provisionally, the distinction that we habitually draw between play and earnestness makes no sense at all.

It is only appropriate that Raymond Queneau should have the final word here—though whether that word is final or liminal might be debated, granted that he enunciated it in 1937. As he calls for a reinvigorated and broadly modernized French, Queneau states, *j'écripa pour anniélé lmond* ("Ecrit en 1937" 22). Though that infinitive may seem a bit obscure, the sense of Queneau's remark is clear: he doesn't write to bore people stiff. It is an admirable principle, one that has animated the Oulipo's work consistently over the last fifty years; it is a principle that promises many more good things to come in the *next* fifty years—and, I hope you'll agree, an exceptional one.

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¹ See Jacques Bens, *Oulipo 1960-1963* 7: "The OuLiPo customarily counts its decades as millennia. [. . .] Like the goddess-mothers of Antiquity, the OuLiPo embraces the totality of time, past, present, future, in a word, eternity." My translation, as elsewhere, unless otherwise noted.

² Bens, *Oulipo 1960-1963* 43. See also Jean Lescure, "Petite Histoire de l'Oulipo" 36.

³ See for instance Jacques Bens, who says of the *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes*: "One can state with little risk of error that they constitute the first work of *conscious* potential literature. Or rather: *concerted*" ("Queneau Oulipian" 66); and Jacques Roubaud: "The first properly Oulipian work *par excellence*, claimed as such by the Oulipo, is a work that exhibits *potentiality* in all its force: the *Cent mille millions de poèmes* by Raymond Queneau. Its constraint is rather elementary, but its *potentiality* is spectacular" ("Perecquian OULIPO" 100-01).

⁴ Personal interview with Georges Perec, July 22, 1980.

