

Foreword

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There is nothing particularly “small” about this new book by Cécile De Bary, a professor of literature at the Université de Paris-7 (Sorbonne) and a well-respected specialist of the French contemporary literary scene and especially known for her keen studies of Oulipo. De Bary’s trademark vis-à-vis this dominating intellectual group is that she keeps her analyses at the right distance of the Oulipo productions: there is an intellectual empathy for this type of experimental production but, at the same time, De Bary maintains an enlightened approach of critical analysis. Because she has long been associated with the management of the Perec archives, her book is precise and factually accurate. As a result a reader who is only familiar with the vulgate urban legends of Oulipo often found in English accounts of this contemporary literary group, might be surprised to discover the reality of certain central events for the history of the Oulipo group. In addition to the clinical account of the cultural history of the Oulipo, an added benefit of De Bary’s book is that it offers powerful and sharp analyses of many specific complex or controversial aspects of Oulipo as a contemporary intellectual and literary group. This is particularly evident on

the aspect of the literary DNA of Oulipo : *a priori* the group was not destined to be a literary group, many of its members have nothing to do with literature, how come then, today, it is mostly known as such? Also the vexing question of the Oulipo as the poster child for the so-called formal type of “constrained writing”: is there an Oulipian literature that could be labelled as such and that does not proclaim its reliance on a pre-established “constraint”? De Bary offers a clear and accurate history of the development of this central issue within the group and offers sophisticated tools for evaluating current statements by Jouet and Forte about the possibility of an Oulipian text that would not require any implicit or explicit constraint.

Other issues presented in details in this book might be less familiar to an English speaking audience but are in fact an integral part of the debates that constitute a great part of the continued French and continental discussion about the success of this fifty year old French intellectual movement. The first statement that opens the book might immediately appear as a paradox: De Bary assumes as a given that Oulipo is NOT an avant-garde movement. This seems to fly against established ideas in the English-speaking world about the reason precisely why Oulipo is important. After all, a recent (2014) leaflet announcing a special MLA session sponsored by the Division on Linguistic Approach to Literature claimed: “It is easy enough to argue that the Oulipo group represents the intellectual ensemble that could be considered as the only current *avant-garde* in French

writing and poetics.” In asserting that “Oulipo is not an avant-garde group”, De Bary has for her the French historical context of the birth of the group as well as the official line pronounced by the members of Oulipo: they are not simply another “avant-garde”. If avant-garde movements come and go, then, Oulipo is not avant-garde, it is here to stay and the group founded in 1961 by the French writer Raymond Queneau and the French mathematician François Le Lionnais is still active today and its living members, in 2011, celebrated the 50th anniversary of its creation. In addition, today, the group is characterized by its multi-generational nature. Since 1960 to today, well-known figures such as Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, Harry Mathews, Jacques Roubaud, Marcel Bénabou, Paul Fournel, Anne Garréta, to mention only a few, have been official members of the group and diversely active in its development.

In contemporary French critical circles the term avant-garde is thus greatly devalorized and occurs mostly to indicate a generational clash: a younger group of writers refuses the accepted values of a previous generation and foregrounds a new system of values that will assure its social and cultural domination. Current French intellectuals are weary of this permanent sense of a war-like atmosphere in their world of *belles-lettres*. In English however, the term “avant-garde” is less a sense of historical succession than the sense of “cutting-edge” principles, of the discovery of a new epistemological framework that would offer new optics

on eventually old questions. As De Bary describes and explains in the first part of her book, this innovative aspect, the sense of the discovery of the *new* is very much in fact at the core of the Oulipo DNA. The object of Oulipian composition is language in all of its potentialities. As Jacques Roubaud narrates in his 1997 autofiction book *Mathématique* :, as language becomes the field of exploration of choice for Oulipo, the mission can be defined as a serious work to exploit it to the fullest thanks to the tools of formal logic, in particular, the new tools offered by set theory. In the *First Manifesto* of Oulipo one of the founders of the Oulipo group, François Le Lionnais, describes the two “lines” of the intellectual project: 1) “anoulipism”, an attempt to look at texts of the past to identify and collect compositional principles that can be reapplied and used in new contexts and, 2) “synthoulipism”, a systematic effort of research and discovery in order to “invent” new generative principles that eventually can help create new types of linguistic products; Le Lionnais underlines the fact that this latter project of discovery is the “essential” task of the group.

In a drastic rupture with the previous neo-romantic literature, including Surrealism, its Freudian reinterpretation, Oulipo presents itself as a brave attempt to gain control over subjectivity and arbitrariness. It crushes inspirational literature under the weight of linguistic and formal competency. In addition, given the historical period when created, in step with the Structuralist movement dominating French intel-

lectualism of the time, it heralds descriptive phenomenology over mimesis and expressionism. As rightly signaled by De Bary, however, as the members of Oulipo do not want to be simply assimilated to the main Structuralist movement, the group will define their effort towards understanding the actual functioning of language as "Structurelist." The goal is to understand the deep structures of human articulated language so as to propose a formal system that will invent new formal modes of expression. In the collective book of the group published in 1981, *OuLiPo: Atlas de littérature potentielle*, one finds an early attempt by one of the two founders, Raymond Queneau, to offer an initial attempt at classifying the group's work. The classification attributes to each linguistic domain a specific type of operation that gives rise to an Oulipian text. In the early 80's the so-called TOLLÉ table (or Table of Elementary Linguistic and Literary Operations) was proposed as a more complete list proposed by the current Perpetual Secretary of the Oulipo group, Marcel Bénabou. This table gives a clear overview of the field of linguistic potentialities exploited by the group's members.

Despite the fact that expressions used in the table such as "operation table" bring together the group's "clinical" approach and a fascination for numbers, it is clear that the terms designating the effect of each operation have exact counterparts in the field of linguistic analysis. The operational terms proposed by Oulipo (namely, "displacement," "substitution," "addition," and so on) all originate in models

that have been identified and enumerated within the domain of transformational grammar. It is therefore no surprise that the only category in the table that has a full set of operational potentialities is that of the phrase—the preferred object of all generative-transformational studies focusing on syntax.

In fact, the influence of this then dominating linguistic theory is so strong that when Jacques Roubaud, in another study, offers a synopsis of the operations that affect poetry's rhythmical component, he feels obliged, yet again, to use terminology borrowed from generative grammarians: "embeddings," "complementizer," "subjacency," "permutations," and so on.

As for the division into vertical columns in the TOLLÉ table, the algorithm that is used is not a homogeneous one, and the selection criteria that it proposes are much more eclectic. It seems to allow a high degree of objectivity and scientific precision, but once one goes beyond this initial impression one discovers a certain degree of vagueness and incoherence. This is largely because the categories which are used to name the substantive form within the confines of what one usually calls a "word" (*mot*); an imprecise term that is never used as a technical term in French analytical linguistics. However, this change in approach would necessitate a more basic understanding of semantics involved in narrative or poetic construction which is generally denounced as the missing link, or rather the blind spot, in the Oulipian linguistic project.

Thirty or so years later, these “innovations” proposed by Oulipo seem to have been mostly directed to formal constructs involving syntactical and established “genre” forms. For De Bary, the work on the constraints (intrinsic to the language material of the text or “procedural”—affecting the conditions of the enunciation itself) have resulted mostly in an evolution of the Oulipo towards a literary group placing its emphasis on the quality of the textual output rather than on the innovation and sophistication of the proposed constraint. Jacques Jouet in his recent text “Avec les contraintes (et aussi sans)” seems to deplore the fact that a few Oulipians are spending their time looking for new constraints but are neglecting writing books or even short completed textual utterances. To these remarks on the inflation of literature in the Oulipo project it is worth adding that the two latest coopted members are both first and foremost writers (2014—the Argentinian writer Eduardo Berti and the Spanish author Pablo Martin Sanchez) and that one of the recent recruits, Olivier Salon, although a mathematician by training has “devolved” exclusively towards literature.

Finally, De Bary considers another major impact of the innovative side of the Oulipo: the expending importance of Oulipo in the field of creative writing and its apparently eagerness to be involved in the establishment of writing workshops. De Bary mentions that also, probably, was in the Oulipo’s DNA since its name includes the term “OUvroir” which is an old French word meaning “workshop”.

Oulipo is thus mostly recognized as a literary group; it is still at the cutting edge of our creative contemporaneity, but it is more than that and literary critics have a tendency to remain focused on the sole literary achievements of the group which are the visible part of the iceberg. The Oulipo is larger than the sum of its multiple parts. If it deserves our interest and rewards our curiosity it is precisely because of its diversity. As usual, the well prepared explorer will need an excellent guide. De Bary's book is precisely that.

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