

OuLiPo group:
Potential Literature

Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle

SM2220 Generative Art & Literature

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OuLiPo: Brief History

Founder:

Francois Le Lionnais

First meeting:

November 1960 (then still called S.L.E., meaning “seminar of experimental literature”)

S.L.E. renamed Oulipo on December 19, `60

Activities:

composition of poems

1973:

Publication of *La Littérature potentielle* →
Oulipo began to affirm itself openly

OuLiPo: Brief History

Key Players:

*François Le Lionnais, Albert-Marie Schmidt, Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Duchateau, **Raymond Queneau**,*

Georges Perec, Jacques Roubaud, Luc Etienne, Marcel Benabou, Paul Fournel, Italo Calvino

Oulipo: definition of the groups' works

Formal innovation

Raymond Queneau:

Potential literature is “the search for new forms and structures that may be used by writers in any way they see fit.”

François Le Lionnais:

“The Oulipo’s goal is to discover new structures and to furnish for each structure a small number of examples.”

OuLiPo: seminal work

Raymond Queneau is known to have nourished and directed the evolution of the group.

One of the exemplary works of the group is by him:

Cent Mille Millions de poèmes
[a hundred thousand billion poems]

A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems

10 sonnets

[“sonnet” = a 14-line poem with any of several fixed formal RHYME patterns]

Each line of each poem may be replaced by its homologue in the other nine poems

To each of the ten first lines, the reader can add any of ten different second lines: 10^2

The sonnet has 14 lines, the total possibilities offered by the collection are of the order of 10^{14} (a hundred trillion sonnets)

→ Interest in traditional works and rediscovery of old works

→ “Analytic” intention

[*Anoulipism*] internal generator

→ Combinatorial ensemble

→ “Synthetic” intention

[*Synthoulipism*] external generator

→ The text is in its *potential* state.

→ Literary madness

A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems

“Potential” literature

If one spends 1 minute to read 1 sonnet, 8 hours a day, 200 days per year, it would take more than *a million centuries* to finish the text.

...towards technical superiority

See digital work *One Hundred Million Poems*:
http://www.uncontrol.com/_massin/massin_small.html

OuLiPo: Brief History

Key Concern:

“Every literary work begins with an inspiration...which must accommodate itself as well as possible to a series of constraints and procedures.”

(Lionnais)

i.e. thought → rules

OuLiPo: Brief History

Position on Literature:

[literary madness]

“The only literature is voluntary literature.”

(Raymond Queneau)

*This implies the revolutionary conception of the objectivity of literature → i.e. opens literature to all possibilities of manipulation.

OuLiPo: Brief History

Position on Literature:

“The only literature is voluntary literature.”

(Raymond Queneau)

*To explore literature is to explore language

OuLiPo: Brief History

Position on Literature:

To explore literature is to explore language

*to study the properties of language

*to create word games

...begging the question of medium-specificity

...going to less normative levels

An OuLiPo stance...

The invention of language,
The creation of writing,
The creation of grammar

.....

were all polemical.

They did not happen without a fight.

An OuLiPo stance...

Potential Literature is both...

Critical activities

(research)

&

Creative activities

(play)

An OuLiPo stance...

Potential Literature is both...

Critical & Creative activities

Fundamental Rule –

“Poetry is a simple art where everything resides in the execution.”

OuLiPo methods...

- Constraints:

Vocabulary and grammar

Generic constraint etc.

- Inspirations:

- Procedures:

OuLiPo methods: *Constraints*

Two Principal Tendencies

ANALYSIS

- Investigate works from the past in order to find possibilities beyond the authors' own anticipation

SYNTHESIS***

- Develop new possibilities unknown to those who came before us

OuLiPo methods: Constraints: *Two Principal Tendencies*

ANALYSIS [Anoulipism]

- Investigate works from the past in order to find possibilities beyond the authors' own anticipation
- e.g. "Cento" – taken from Markov's chain theory

SYNTHESIS*** [Synthoulipism]

- Develop new possibilities unknown to those who came before us
- e.g. "*Cent Mille Milliards de poemes*"
(*100,000,000,000,000 Poems*) by Raymond Queneau); the Boolean haikus

OuLiPo methods...

○ Constraints:

Vocabulary and grammar
Generic constraint etc.

○ Inspirations:

Mathematics

○ Procedures:

OuLiPo: inspirations: mathematics

Mathematics as a source of inspiration for exploration

Algebraically...

- Recourse to new laws of composition

Topologically...

- Considerations of textual contiguity, openness and closure

OuLiPo: inspirations: mathematics

Other possibilities for exploration

Anaglyphic poems

- Texts that are transformable by projection

Special vocabulary: other languages

- e.g. the language of crows, foxes, dolphins; computer languages etc.

OuLiPo

○ Constraints:

Vocabulary and grammar
Generic constraint etc.

○ Inspirations:

Mathematics

○ Procedures:

To critique literature & to create new possibilities
To apply mathematic principles to literature

OuLiPo methods...

○ Constraints:

Vocabulary and grammar

Generic constraint etc.

○ Inspirations:

Mathematics

○ Procedures:

To critique literature & to create new possibilities

To apply mathematic principles to literature

Methods/Procedures: Aspects of literature experimented on...

*Formal aspects: (1st phase)

alphabetical, consonantal, vocalic, syllabic, phonetic, graphic, prosodic, rhymic, rhythmic

*Semantic aspects:****(2nd phase)

meanings (concepts, ideas, images, feelings, emotions)

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Lipogrammatic (an example)

“Lipogramatics is the art of writing in prose or in verse, imposing on oneself the rule of excluding a letter of the alphabet.”

(G. Peignot: *Poetique curieuse*)

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- *Fixed-form poetry:*

-obeys strict rules concerning the length of its verses, the order, alternation, or repetition of rhymes, of words, or even of entire verses

[“limited-form poetry”: number of verses and nature of subject are often predetermined]

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- *Fixed-form poetry:*

Three examples:

- 1) Redundancy in Mallarmé
- 2) The S + 7 Method
- 3) Isomorphisms

Recurrent Literature

Any text that contains, explicitly or implicitly, *generative rules* that invite the reader (or the teller, or the singer) to pursue the production of the text to *infinity* (or until the exhaustion of interest or attention).

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Recurrent Literature

(by incremental complexity)

**Repetitive Literature*

**Iterative Literature*

**Recursive Literature*

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Recurrent Literature

-Repetitive Literature

**Explicit Repetition*

e.g. The window opens onto Time Square.
The window opens onto Statue Square.
The window opens onto his secret garden.

e.g. Flowers wither in cold.
Ice melts in heat.

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Recurrent Literature

-Repetitive Literature

**Implicit Repetition*

e.g. A story in which the first and the last lines are identical.

e.g. The “nested” story: At the end of the story, the circumstances are such that all the parameters have regained the value they had in the beginning, suggesting that the story is about to begin again in identical fashion

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Recurrent Literature

-Iterative Literature

Rule of “Identity” replaced by “similarity”

e.g.

Misery, self-imposed misery.

Woe to those who dwell in self-imposed misery, woe to those who dwell in self-imposed curses...

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Recurrent Literature

-Recursive Literature

**Text A contains a rule that generates Text B*

e.g. If on a Winter's Night a Traveler (Italo Calvino)

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- **Combinatory Literature**

- “*Cent Mille Millions de poemes*”
(*100,000,000,000,000 Poems*) by Raymond Queneau);
- *The Theatre Tree (a combinatory play)* by Paul Fournel and Jean-Pierre Enard

- **Recurrent Literature**

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- **Combinatory Literature**

THREE Oulipian vocations:

- 1) The search for new structures (undoing old norms)
- 2) Research into *methods of automatic transformation*
- 3) Transposition of concepts in mathematics into word games*****

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- **Combinatory Literature**

Transposition of concepts in *mathematics* into *word games*

[some examples]

Geometry (Le Lionnais's poems)

Boolean algebra (intersection of two novels by J. Duchateau)

Matrical algebra (R. Queneau's manipulation of texts)

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- **Combinatory Literature**

Transposition of concepts in *mathematics* into *word games*

[case example]

Factorial novel/Factorial Poetry

Hopscotch (Julio Cortazar)

Episodic Story

Un Manuscrit trouve a Saragosse (Potocki)

Works by Eugene Sue

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- **Combinatory Literature**

The Theater Tree: a Combinatory Play

By Paul Fournel with Jean-Pierre Enard

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

- **Combinatory Literature**

The A.R.T.A. (workshop of advanced studies and techniques) literary project at The Centre Pompidou

...to establish a basis for a possible agreement between computer science and literary creation

OuLiPo: Methods/Procedures

Algorithmic Literature

e.g. *A Story as You Like It*
(Raymond Queneau)

Harry Mathew's Algorithm
(refer to class exercise)

Generative character of the OuLiPo's workshops of potential literature

potential literature (i.e. previously non-existing) :

(1) developed a number of devices which they employ to create works – from existing works, or to draw new bases for possible works from existing literature

Generative character of OuLiPo works

(2) Some examples of the techniques they derive:

- “substitution” (see p. 26, “dictionary times three”): automatic generation by chance...
- “generative trees”:
creating a kind of pattern, a schematic, or a design of the elements in a given genre, e.g. the detective novel (one forms a tree of possibilities of who the murderer is, and end up with a schematic that looks like a family tree, from which endless numbers of detective stories could be formed)

Types of Generators

“...Oulipo generators may be classed as either **reductive** or **proliferative**.”

OuLiPo generators: *Reductive* generators

*Reductive procedures (generators):

e.g. operations as inventories of existing works (p. 169, 183 of the handbook) in which nouns or other parts of speech are listed...; lipogram (p. 97 of handbook) etc.

Proliferative (procedures) generators:

*alluded to what Leibnitz called ***arte combinatorial***

*Work examples:

ranging from serial music to Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poemes*; combinations and recombination form the body of the procedures...

*also in the form of an **analytic process**

e.g. Enard's "Theatre tree" (p. 281 of handbook)

e.g. Le Lionnais's "generative analysis" of the detective story

Linguistic/formal Vs Situational generators

Bruce Morrissette:

- He draws the distinction between *linguistic/formal generators* and *situational generators*, with particular reference to the OuLiPo group.

[Morrissette, "Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou," P. 25]

Situational generators and linguistic generators
are not always so easy to separate

[Morrissette, “Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou,” p. 27]

OuLiPo: *Oulipism*

Oulipeme

A text produced by the Oulipo

Oulipism / an Oulipist work

A text written, even if pre-Oulipo, in the style of an Oulipeme

[Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests*, p. 39]

e.g. Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*

e.g. Zimmerman Nowacek's *Life in the Garden* (a deck of stories), 1999