

The Oulipo and Modern Thought

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Introduction

The Secret of Lightness

Quintilian, the first-century Roman rhetorician, has a story about Plato composing *The Republic*. The way Quintilian tells it, the philosopher agonised over the first four words of his most famous work. He knew which words he wanted to use, but couldn't decide the best order to put them in. It's not that *The Republic* begins with any profoundly complex thought: κατέβην χθές εἰς Πειραιᾶ, the opening translates as 'I went down yesterday to Piraeus'. Nevertheless, according to Quintilian, these four words 'were found written on [Plato's] tablets in many different orders'.¹ Great philosophy, Quintilian wants us to know, depends on what we might consider to be literary qualities: rhythmical phrasing, a strong opening. In other words, it depends on rhetoric. Thus, we are asked to picture the philosopher playing with permutations, arranging words like unhewn stones, trying to find their best fit, knowing that there is power in their ordering as well as in their meaning.

In this book, I want to consider these same elements – literature, philosophy, the play of combinatorics – but in a different order. Rather than the great philosopher's painstaking concern for the literary quality of his work, this is a book about the types of thought encoded in the work of a group whose very name declares their interest to be primarily literary. The Oulipo – OUVroir de Littérature POtentielle – are known best for their investigations into the use of mathematical or stylistic constraints, for procedures often involving permutations like Plato's above, in the production of literature. Although academic interest in the group has grown considerably over the last decade, in the anglophone world at least their engagement with modern thought, with the debates of their academic contemporaries, has been largely overlooked.² This book, then, is an attempt to redress that balance, to use the evidence of meeting minutes and letters, as well as published works, to paint a different picture of the Oulipo, one which casts the group in the light of some of the intellectual currents of the twentieth century: psychoanalysis, structuralism, analytic philosophy, Surrealism. Oulipian work, almost by definition, is rigorous and painstaking in its construction; what I hope to show is that, very often, these are not the only characteristics it shares with Plato.

At their monthly meeting in March 1963, the Oulipo are discussing a nineteenth-century writer named J.-A. Révéroni. Révéroni, it seems, had devised a method of composing sermons using combinatorics, whereby a small number of elements could be shuffled to produce a large number of lessons. Naturally, this would be an interesting precedent for a group set up to explore mathematical approaches to literary creation, but unfortunately at the Oulipo's meeting no-one in the room has detailed knowledge of how Révéroni's process – his so-called *matrix* – works; the tip-off has come from the philosopher Michel Foucault.³

After some discussion about Révéroni's life, the following exchange occurs:

¹ Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. by D. A. Russell, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) IV, 8.6.64 (p. 463).

² In France the situation is slightly different. Camille Bloomfield's recent *Raconter l'Oulipo (1960-2000): histoire et sociologie d'un groupe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2017), for example, is a superb, archival historicisation of the Oulipo in its first decades, and will surely become essential for researchers working on the group.

³ Foucault had recently been researching Révéroni, and had published a short article on him the previous year: Michel Foucault, 'Un si cruel savoir', *Critique* 182 (July 1962): 597-611.

- Good. I can ask Michel Foucault, which is perhaps linked to my other intervention. I propose that we add Michel Foucault to our list of future invitees. You know he is writing a book, that's going to come out, on Roussel. I mean the problems of multiple parentheses, etc.
- Foucault? AULT?
- AULT, yes.
- I would have spelled it like the priest [i.e. Charles Foucauld]!
- Each to his own!!
- No, but anyway, he is the author of a book on madness...
- ... which is very good.
- *History of Madness*, which is not without interest.
- He is the author of *History of Madness*. He is now on the editorial board of *Critique*.
- He works at *Bizarre*?
- Yes, and now he is on the editorial board of *Critique*.
- He is not a psychiatrist, is he?
- Gentlemen, you have before you a proposal. What is your decision? Your vote...
- About the invitation?
- Yes.
- Everyone is in agreement?
- No-one objects?
- No...
- The proposal is adopted.⁴

Preserved in the Oulipo archives at the Bibliothèque National in Paris, this is a remarkable piece of minute-taking, giving us a wonderful insight into the way these meetings were conducted. The speakers aren't identified (though the first speaker, knowing that Foucault's book on Roussel is coming up for publication with Gallimard, is likely Raymond Queneau, a senior editor there), but this only intensifies the sense of chaos about the dialogue: people interrupt, talk over each other; there are repetitions, pre-emptions, jokes; the tone switches in an instant from erudite to bureaucratic to whimsical; some of the group speak admiringly of Foucault's work, others can't even spell his name. And in spite of this informality – this joyous, convivial polyphony – something formal nevertheless takes place: a vote is held, and the Oulipo decide unanimously to invite Michel Foucault to come and dine with them.

⁴ [- Ben ... Je peux demander à Michel Foucault, c'est peut-être lié à mon autre intervention; je propose de mettre Michel Foucault sur la liste de nos invités futurs. Vous savez qu'il a un livre en préparation, qui va sortir, sur Roussel. Je veux dire les problèmes de parenthèses multiples ... etc... / - Foucault? A U L T? / - A U L T. Oui. / - Moi, j'aurais dit, comme le Père! / - Chacun ses convictions!! / - Non, mais enfin, c'est l'auteur d'un livre sur la Folie... / - ... qui est très bon. / - *L'Histoire de la Folie*; ... qui ne manque pas d'intérêt. / - C'est l'auteur de *L'Histoire de la Folie*. Il fait partie maintenant du comité de rédaction de *Critique*. / - Y collabore à *Bizarre*? / - Oui et il fait partie maintenant du comité de rédaction de *Critique*. / - C'est pas un psychiatre, non? / - Vous êtes devant une proposition, Messieurs, quelle est votre décision? Votre vote... / - A propos de son invitation? / - Oui. / - Tout le monde est d'accord? / - Pas d'opposition? / - Non... / - La proposition est adoptée.] 'Photocopie du compte rendu dactylographié de la réunion du 22 mars 1963' (Paris, BnF, March 1963). Fonds Oulipo. Dossiers mensuels de réunion (1960-2010), Box DM-1 (30). Subsequent citations for Fonds Oulipo archival material will be given in the following format: '(FO, [box] [folder])'. In the case the 'Dossiers mensuels' boxes, i.e. those with a code starting in DM, scanned images are available to view online via the BnF's Gallica viewer: <<http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc98168h/cd0e48>> [accessed 8 August 2017]

The meeting with Foucault sadly never took place. Foucault's name appears again some months later on a list of people to invite, before slipping off the record, an unticked item on the group's ever-expanding To Do list.⁵ What this incident reminds us, however, is that, in the early 1960s, Foucault and the Oulipo were part of the same *milieu* – the discussion grows out of a face-to-face encounter, a casual conversation, between the philosopher and one of the group.⁶

Perhaps it is no surprise in the case of the veteran Queneau – co-founder of the Oulipo, former Surrealist, eminent Pataphysician, prominent editor – that his links to the world of philosophy should run deep.⁷ But Queneau was far from the only Oulipian with interests or connections of this kind. To take another example, then, this time concerning Jacques Lacan's often overlooked skills as a babysitter, Marcel Bénabou, who joined the Oulipo in 1970, relates the following surprising tale:

I remember a dinner party at ours where we'd invited Lacan, and my son David, who was then two or three, suddenly woke up crying. Lacan insisted on going to calm him down, and with a slow, dignified step he ascended the staircase leading to the child's room. My wife and I feared the worst but we let him go and waited anxiously for the result of this improbable encounter – our son was by no means an easy child. We did not have to wait long. A few moments later, we could see a smiling Lacan coming down those same stairs with a perkiness in his step. With a rapidity that provoked our admiration, he had managed to put the child to sleep. We never knew how he did it.⁸

What anecdotes like these illustrate is how little the Parisian intellectual scene during the 1960s and 70s was siloed by profession. Analysts and academics, writers and publishers: between these groups, and others, relations existed that were often both professional and personal. Ideas from one field were adopted – and critiqued – in another. Sometimes these links were formal, enshrined in the structured interdisciplinarity of an academic seminar or research centre; at other times they were not, as when the Oulipian Noël Arnaud describes the 'delightful correspondence' he shared during the 1960s with Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁹ In fact, so embedded were the Oulipo within the broader intellectual that at times the group struggled, even among themselves, to make the case for what was unique about their identity. This existential crisis

⁵ A similar fate befalls Roland Barthes, who is listed as a potential invitee in August 1970, but never makes an appearance in person. ['Pré-programme dactylographié du congrès d'août 1970 avec ajouts autographes de François Le Lionnais' (FO, DM-2 (54)).]

⁶ ['J'ai rencontré récemment Michel Foucault qui a publié une petite étude sur Réverony de Saint-Cyr et qui m'a assuré qu'il avait une matrice à sermons.']

⁷ For more on Queneau and philosophy, see Jean-Charles Chabanne, 'Queneau, Les Temps modernes, Sartre', in *Temps mêlés – Documents Queneau* 150+33-36 (1987): 355-61.

⁸ ['Je me souviens que, au cours d'un dîner chez moi auquel Lacan était convié, mon fils David, qui avait alors deux ou trois ans, se réveilla soudain en pleurant. Lacan insista pour aller lui-même le calmer, et monta d'un pas lent et digne l'escalier qui menait à la chambre de l'enfant. Bien que craignant le pire, ma femme et moi le laissâmes faire, et attendîmes, anxieux, le résultat de cette improbable rencontre, car notre fils n'était pas du genre facile. Nous n'attendîmes pas longtemps. Quelques instants plus tard, nous pûmes voir Lacan souriant descendre le même escalier d'un pas beaucoup plus guilleret. Avec une rapidité qui provoqua notre admiration, il avait réussi à endormir l'enfant. Nous n'avons jamais su ce qu'il avait pu faire pour cela.'] Marcel Bénabou, 'La Galère ou Pourquoi j'ai participé à la confection du volume intitulé 789 néologismes de Jacques Lacan', in *L'amour de loin du docteur L.* (Paris: L'Unebévue, 2004), pp. 27-31 (p. 28). Meanwhile, the curious tale of Jacques Roubaud's personal connection to Lacan is the subject of his tiny book, *Ma vie avec le docteur Lacan* (Bordeaux: L'Attente, 2004).

⁹ Noël Arnaud, 'Foreword: Prolegomena to a Fourth Oulipo Manifesto – or Not', in *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, by Warren F. Motte (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. xi–xv (p. xiv).

surfaces occasionally in the meeting minutes, for example in Queneau’s anxiety that the writers of the *Tel Quel* group or the *nouveau romanciers* might be doing essentially the same work as the Oulipo: ‘A number of writers now – notably those associated with the nouveau roman, or the *Tel Quel* group, or *Change* – are looking at the use of refined, sometimes quite intricate, constructions. Is their research any different from ours?’¹⁰



Fig. 1: Raymond Queneau (second from left) in 1952 with his son, Jean-Marie, and his wife Janine (far right). In between them are Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Image reproduced by kind permission of Gallimard/Queneau estate.

Prénom, NOM : Marcel BÉNABOU 006

assistera* à la réunion du 25 Avril 1973 n'assistera pas*

déjeunera* ne restera pas déjeuner*

* rayer les mentions inutiles

Je propose d'envoyer un exemplaire en service de presse à :

P. Emmanuel (G) J. Lacan (O) G. Mourin (G)
 64, rue de Valenciennes Paris 7 5, rue de Lille Paris 6 Université de Provence
 13 Aix en Provence

Fig. 2: Bénabou’s completed slip requesting that his friend Jacques Lacan should receive a complimentary copy of *La Lipo*. (FO, DM-3 (28)). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Oulipo.

¹⁰ [‘En effet, plusieurs écrivains aujourd’hui, notamment ce qui se réfèrent au nouveau roman, ou à l’équipe de *Tel Quel*, ou à celle de *Change*, sont attentifs à l’utilisation de constructions recherchées, parfois délicates. Leurs recherches différents-elles de nôtres?]. ‘Copie du compte rendu dactylographié de la réunion du 27 août avec corrections de Jacques Bens et François Le Lionnais’ (FO, DM-3 (8)).

A group, then, who are frequently in the company – both socially and intellectually – of the figures we now identify as the leading philosophers of their day, the chief exponents of *theory*, as we have come to call it: what I wish to argue in this book is that we can find evidence of these relations, of this engagement with the thought of the time, everywhere in the group’s work. In other words, we can read a great deal of Oulipian writing – from the 1960s and 70s, at least – as a creative participation in a variety of prominent intellectual debates. Arnaud in his ‘Prolegomena to a Fourth Manifesto’ makes a telling claim about the 1960s: ‘Academe, in the Oulipo’s first decade [...] had just begun – in France at least – its infatuation with surrealism and psychoanalysis. In the higher spheres, structuralism applied to analysis and literary creation had begun to consolidate its dogma’.¹¹ What is striking is how we can find exactly these concerns – surrealism, psychoanalysis, structuralism – encoded in the literary creation of the Oulipo during the same period. And as the intellectual climate changes – as it moves from structuralism to poststructuralism – naturally we can see this too reflected within the group’s minutes and their literary production.

In one sense there should be nothing surprising about this – I hope the above summary makes the case seem uncontroversial. Nevertheless there has been a tendency in much writing about the Oulipo, much anglophone writing at least, both to flatten time and to overlook place. The group’s development, and the context in which it occurred, are often ignored, while Oulipian whimsicality is given a prominence that obscures the sense of purpose that has always run alongside it. (Remember how, in the dialogue about Foucault above, through the cacophony of interruption and wordplay, the business of the meeting still proceeds relatively fluently.) On 25 November 1960, the day after the group’s first meeting, Jacques Bens circulated a memo among the eight who had attended. In it he asks a question which perfectly captures the balance of joviality and seriousness of intent: ‘Seeing as we aren’t meeting *just* to amuse ourselves (although that is, of course, a considerable part of it), what can we expect from our work?’¹² Or we might think of Arnaud again, who points out that, in several regards, the difference between the Oulipo and the structuralists was more one of tone or attitude than of method, concluding that ‘the [structuralists] enveloped themselves in a ponderous sobriety that rendered them impervious to Oulipian facetiae’.¹³ If the difference is simply one of sobriety versus ribaldry, then we need to be able to look past this – to look, in fact, for the shared structures underneath.

Alongside this, the make-up of the group (for example, the presence of the mathematician Claude Berge among its founder members) plus the convenience of framing the Oulipo in terms of the ‘two cultures’ debate – as a rare bridge between mathematics and literature – makes it easy to downplay the status of philosophy (broadly conceived) in their concerns. For these reasons, I hope that a book that frames the early Oulipo in terms of their engagement with forms of thought that were prominent in the 1960s and 70s, that reads their work in the light of structuralism, psychoanalysis, and surrealism, and that draws on the wealth of materials in the Fonds Oulipo – the wonderful set of archives held at the Arsenal site of the Bibliothèque National in Paris – to chart the Oulipo’s development, not just in terms of new

¹¹ Arnaud, ‘Prolegomena’, p. xiv.

¹² [‘Considérant que nous ne nous réunissons pas *seulement* pour nous divertir (ce qui est déjà considérable, certes), que pouvons nous attendre de nos travaux?’. Oulipo, ‘Circulaire n°1 dactylographiée de Jacques Bens du Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale du vendredi 25 novembre 1960’ (FO, DM-1 (2)).

¹³ Arnaud, ‘Prolegomena’, p. xiv.

members but in terms of new intellectual priorities, will be a valuable contribution to the growing body of work on this extraordinary group.¹⁴

Yet, even now as I read back through those last few paragraphs, I am conscious that they seem to tip the scales too far in the other direction, wringing the joy out of the Oulipo in favour of po-faced philosophical analysis. Of course, there *is* a sense of fun that is almost a given in the published output of the Oulipo, and this mustn't be overlooked. Even for a master like Perec, whose greatest works – *La Disparition* (1969) and *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) – draw deeply on the loss of his parents in the war – his father in battle; his mother in the camps – the sadness of the material is thrown into relief by the pleasure of experiencing the text as a piece of exquisitely crafted machinery. What jumps off the page when looking at the minutes of the group's monthly meetings is the spirit of conviviality – the wordplay, the in-jokes, the mock ceremoniousness – with which these events are conducted. How then to write an intellectual account of these *farceurs*? Will it not be, at best, a fundamental misunderstanding, at worst, an act of bad faith?



Fig. 3: An early Oulipo meeting in François Le Lionnais's garden. Le Lionnais and Queneau sport, respectively, a sailor's cap and a top hat, symbols of their 'benign dictatorship' over the group they founded. Image reproduced by kind permission of Gallimard/Queneau estate.

One early commentator would think not. The writer Guy Le Clec'h, who had seen the group up close as a guest at one of their early meetings, cuts straight through the bonhomie when he writes an introduction for the 1964 Oulipo special issue of *Temps mêlés*: 'The deliberately

¹⁴ The archives include the minutes that were circulated after each meeting and which often display the handwritten annotations of particular members. For a history of these archives, see Claire Lesage, 'L'archive, miroir de l'Oulipo', in *Oulipo*, ed. by Camille Bloomfield and Claire Lesage (Paris: BnF/Gallimard, 2014), pp. 66-68.

humorous aspect of this type of research should not however mask its seriousness.¹⁵ There *is* a seriousness but one that is couched in lightness. Le Clec’h’s term *mask* is an apt one, and an incident from the July 1963 meeting is telling. Discussing the S+7 method – an important Oulipian procedure for making new texts out of old ones – Jean Queval remarks slyly that what it produces is ‘un peu “farce”’: a little joke.¹⁶ Queneau is offended. He states that this is the first time – in nearly three years of meetings – that the word *farce* has been used to describe the Oulipo’s work. At this point, the academic Albert-Marie Schmidt intervenes, noting that theologians use the term in an entirely serious sense, and this observation restores the peace.

It is a strange little scene, but a rich one when thinking about how we should measure the seriousness of the Oulipian project. At face value, Queneau is hurt that Queval should describe one of the group’s flagship methods as if it were merely whimsical, a bit of a joke. No-one has said this before – at least not at a meeting, in front of the others – either about S+7 or about any of their other works. As Queneau would have it, then, in spite of the rambunctious tone of their gatherings, the group has always been completely in earnest about the seriousness of their activities. Alternatively, *contra* Le Clec’h, perhaps seriousness – not humour – is the mask that has been maintained with utter scrupulousness for the previous two-and-a-half years. But letting it slip, even briefly, is potentially fatal for the whole enterprise. The moment Alice denounces her tormentors as ‘nothing but a pack of cards’ is the moment she awakes and the story ends. No wonder Queneau is quick to pull Queval up on this.

The way that this eruption of skepticism is handled and amicability restored is typically Oulipian. Schmidt’s contribution is erudite and technical. He points to a precise use of language from an obscure field of knowledge (surely if there is any way to mollify an irate Oulipian then this is it). But what is so perfect about Schmidt’s solution is that, in informing the group that sometimes farce can be serious, he is giving them an academic precedent for something they already knew – something they have been acting out for the past three years (longer still for the pataphysicians among them). We can have it both ways; we don’t have to choose. It is not even necessary to *know* when the farce is serious and when it is farcical.

Not serious in tone, then, but serious in its aims? Perhaps even that is too leaden, too restrictive a definition of the group. But it will do for now. And as for the other side of the coin – the anarchic, the comic – it will be worth drawing a distinction between lightness and whimsicality. The latter – the throwaway, the droll – can be skimmed off the top of the group’s output with little disruption; the former is a defining characteristic. A decade after Queval’s potentially cataclysmic *faux pas*, a serio-comic Oulipo at the peak of its powers will welcome Italo Calvino to its membership. And it is Calvino, at the end of his life, who will enshrine lightness – *la leggerezza* – as the model for our times: ‘Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose [...] the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness.’¹⁷ Not merely a poet, or a philosopher, but a poet-philosopher: we are back with Plato shuffling his four words, looking for the perfect arrangement; or perhaps with Queneau, the very model of

¹⁵ [‘Que l’aspect volontairement humoristique de ce genre de recherches n’en masque pourtant pas le sérieux.’] Guy Le Clec’h, ‘Introduction’, *Temps mêlés*, 66-67 (1964): i-iv (iv).

¹⁶ Oulipo, ‘Compte rendu dactylographié signé «Ythier Marchant» de la réunion n° 35 du 1^e juillet 1963’ (FO, DM-1 (34)).

¹⁷ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Cape, 1992), p. 12.

the literary gentleman, diligently transcribing a lecture series on Hegel.¹⁸ And not merely lightness, but a *willful* lightness, one performed *in spite* of one's own gravity and the weight of the world. In a book which seeks to focus on the seriousness of the group's activities – to link their output and intentions with those of their contemporaries less touched with the gift of lightness – I hope not to do Calvino's image the disservice of making Oulipian play seem like labour, or of treating Oulipian *farce* always with a theological gravity.

* * *

Paris during the Nazi occupation: two men – François Le Lionnais, a chemical engineer, and Raymond Queneau, a writer and editor at Gallimard – meet in the literary *milieu* of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Their backgrounds are rather different: a native Parisian and the child of a noted concert pianist, Le Lionnais was raised in a highly-cultured *haut bourgeois* household; Queneau, from the coastal town of Le Havre, had come to Paris as a student and worked his way up the literary ladder with journalistic and translation work alongside his novels and poetry.¹⁹ Nevertheless, both share passions that cross the 'Two Cultures' divide: they are both keen chess players and amateur mathematicians; both, too, are serious in their commitment to literature and art. A friendship is struck up, one that will last their lifetimes, and will give rise, nearly twenty years later, to the Oulipo.

When Le Lionnais, a member of the Resistance, is captured and sent first to Buchenwald then to Dora, it is art that sustains him. In the camp, he and his friend Jean Gaillard keep their spirits up by recalling, in minute detail, their favourite paintings:

Thus did we contemplate at length in our minds' eyes Van Eyck's Rolin Madonna. I projected, as though with a magic lantern, the severe expression of the donor, the rabbits crushed under the columns, the drunkenness of Noah depicted atop a capital, the little tufts of grass growing between the stones in the courtyard and the six steps leading to the terrace, each detail of the circulating stream and of the urban agitation at its base. The tragically interlaced diagonals of Giotto's *St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata* disquieted him; the tender, delicious *Decapitation of Cosmas and Damian* by Fra Angelico charmed him. We took long excursions through *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Hieronymous Bosch (which hangs in Lisbon), through Da Vinci's *The Virgin of the Rocks*, [...], through Dürer's *Melencolia I*.²⁰

¹⁸ Alexandre Kojève's celebrated seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, delivered in Paris in the 1930s and attended by many of the leading intellectuals – including Blanchot, Merleau-Ponty, and Lacan – was subsequently published from Queneau's notes. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. by Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

¹⁹ For more on Le Lionnais's childhood, see *Un Certain disparate*, a series of interviews conducted with him in 1976 by Jean-Marc Levy-Leblond and Jean-Baptiste Grasset. Intended as a book – it even got as far as having an extensive index compiled (now in the archives at the BnF: FO, MS-5) – the project was shelved for thirty-five years before being resurrected by Olivier Salon and Anna Garréta as a series of blogs: <<http://oulipo.net/fr/un-certain-disparate/>> [accessed 9 August 2017]. For more on Queneau's childhood, see Michel Lécureur, *Raymond Queneau* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002). The most comprehensive account of the group's origins and foundation can be found in Bloomfield, *Raconter de l'Oulipo* (pp. 71-223).

²⁰ François Le Lionnais, 'Painting at Dora', trans. by Daniel Levin Becker, *The Believer* 11.5 (2013): 27-31 (29).

In these recollections we can see not only the seeds of the Oulipo's miniaturism, but of art – and of play – as a matter of life and death, as something that could keep at bay the otherwise unendurable reality of the camps. Le Lionnais would return from Dora; Gaillard would not.

Back in Paris, Le Lionnais and Queneau resume their friendship. Le Lionnais publishes the collection *Les Grands Courants de la pensée mathématique* (1948) while Queneau begins to have significant literary success. First of all with *Exercices de style* (1947), a stylistic romp in which the same short, banal piece of narrative (an argument on a bus followed by a conversation about a raincoat) is rendered in ninety-nine different ways, from Homeric epic to courtroom drama to butchershop slang. Then in 1959 with *Zazie dans le métro*, a novel whose insouciant teenage diction, rendered phonetically, became a national sensation, with *Elle* magazine reporting that 'the Zazie phenomenon is ravaging France like an epidemic. In the streets and on the metro, from the mountains to the beaches, we are all "speaking Zazie".'²¹

The next year finds Queneau working on a new book, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (hereafter *CMMP*). The work, in Paul Fournel's lovely phrase, is 'une espèce de self-service poétique' ['a kind of poetical self-service'].²² It consists of ten poems, all sonnets, each printed on consecutive recto pages. Between each line of poetry, the page is cut so that the individual line – rather than the whole page – can be turned over, revealing the corresponding line of the sonnet beneath. Thus, as with children's books of heads, bodies and legs, a large number of combinations – 10¹⁴ to be precise – can be derived. Queneau's task as author is to write his ten base sonnets so that any combination will be grammatically correct and conform to the sonnet rhyme scheme. But the difficulty of the exercise is causing Queneau to lose interest:

I had written five or six of the sonnets for *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* and was hesitating a little about carrying on, that is, I didn't have the strength to go on, the more I went along, the more difficult it was to do naturally, when I met Le Lionnais, who was a friend, and he suggested a sort of research group for experimental literature. That gave me the encouragement to carry on with my sonnets.²³

The 'research group' Le Lionnais proposes, of course, will become the Oulipo.

Nevertheless, while Le Lionnais and Queneau will forever be identified as the group's official founders, or *co-fondateurs*, it seems that the idea for the Oulipo might not have originated with Le Lionnais. In September 1960, a *décade* – a ten-day colloquium – was held at Cerisy-la-Salle in northern France. The conference theme was Raymond Queneau and the French language, and it was here that two of the attendees, André Blavier and Jacques Bens formed the notion of a secret society devoted to experimental writing. As Blavier tells it: 'one night, Jacques Bens and I were unable to sleep and had the idea of proposing to RQ and F. Le Lionnais a sort

²¹ ['Le phénomène Zazie a ravagé la France comme une épidémie. Dans les rues et dans le métro, à la montagne et sur les plages, on "parle Zazie".'] 'L'Insupportable Zazie va conquérir l'Amérique grâce à une petite parissienne', *Elle* (France) #714 (31 August 1959): 66-67 (66).

²² Paul Fournel, *Clefs Pour La Littérature Potentielle* (Paris: Lettres Nouvelles, 1972), p. 8.

²³ ['Je suis associé dans une sorte de group de recherches, que est intitulé OULIPO, c'est-à-dire OUVROIR de Littérature POTentielle, qui a été fondé par Le Lionnais. J'avais écrit cinq ou six des sonnets des *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, et j'hésitais un peu à continuer, enfin je n'avais pas beaucoup le courage de continuer, plus cela allait, plus c'était difficile à faire naturellement, quand j'ai rencontré Le Lionnais, qui est un ami, et il m'a proposé de faire une sorte de groupe de recherches de littérature expérimentale. Cela m'a encouragé à continuer mes sonnets']. Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Raymond Queneau* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 116.

of secret society to promote the kind of literature we loved.²⁴ Two months later, when the group hold their first official meeting – at the Vrai Gascon restaurant, 82 rue du Bac, on the Left Bank in Paris – six of the eight attendees were present at Cerisy.

The group begin to meet monthly thereafter – a practice which has continued almost uninterrupted to this day. With an extraordinary prescience, from the earliest days, detailed minutes were taken, typed up, and circulated – giving us a wonderful insight into the workings of a group whose international significance, of course, could not have been apparent at the time. In the first few meetings, a number of significant decisions are taken. Firstly, the eight members soon become ten, with two representatives from Collège de 'Pataphysique – Latis and Noël Arnaud – invited to join.²⁵ Secondly, the group undergo a name change, having identified itself initially as the Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale (abbreviated to Sélitex or SLE). By the second meeting, this title has been found wanting, and another, the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, is voted more appropriate to the group's specific aims. This name appears in abbreviated form – the Olipo – throughout that meeting's minutes. Next time the group meet up, however, Latis suggests a preferable contraction: the Oulipo finally has its name.

But how should we translate that word *Ouvroir* that gives the Oulipo its *ou*? Discussing the term, Arnaud notes that it has fallen into disuse in modern French, but besides denoting a shop or a workroom, it once meant a sewing circle in which well-off ladies would carry out sumptuous needlework for the benefit of the poor. 'Curiously enough,' he adds, in enthusiastically adopting the name, 'it was this last notion, the "sewing circle," that prevailed in the minds of the Oulipians.'²⁶ *Ouvroir* implies a certain modesty in the group's aims, an anti-theoretical self-image which, as we will see in the next chapter, sets them apart from the Structuralists. As Bénabou puts it, '[t]he notion of the *ouvroir* had been introduced precisely because it was a place of artisanal work. It wasn't about inventing grand theories, it wasn't about setting out to conquer something or other.'²⁷ There is even a sense of benevolence bound up in the idea of the sewing circle, with Jean Lescure claiming that the term thus 'flattered the modest taste that we shared for both beautiful work and good deeds'.²⁸ Nevertheless, I have yet to see the group's name translated anywhere as 'Sewing Circle for Potential Literature', and I do not propose to adopt that version here. Most English texts discussing the Oulipo hitherto have gone for *workshop*: the Workshop for Potential Literature. But this is not ideal since *workshop* already has a well-known literary sense – a session in which writers share their work and receive feedback from the group – and this is most definitely *not* what the Oulipo is, a point reiterated

²⁴ ['une nuit, on n'arrivait pas à dormir Jacques Bens et moi, on a eu l'idée de proposer à RQ et F. Le Lionnais une sorte de société secrète pour favoriser le genre de littérature que nous aimions']. Quoted in Camille Bloomfield, 'Histoire de l'Oulipo: Quelques jalons chronologique', in Bloomfield and Lesage, pp. 29-38 (p. 31). The original appeared in the Belgian paper *Les Wallons* on 21 January 1995.

²⁵ Founded in 1948 and based on an idea mooted in Alfred Jarry's posthumously-published novel *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (1911), the Collège de 'Pataphysique is another long-running avant-garde literary grouping. For the best English introduction to the Collège, see Alastair Brotchie (ed.), *A True History of the College of 'Pataphysics: Wüb Manifestos, Statutes, Calendar and Documents*, trans. by Paul Edwards (London: Atlas, 1995). Latis, meanwhile, was just one of the various identities of Emmanuel Peillet (1914-73), others being Jean-Hugues Sainmont, Dr Irénée-Louis Sandomir, Oktav Votka, Mélanie Le Plumet, and more.

²⁶ Arnaud, 'Prolegomena', pp. xi-xii.

²⁷ ['La notion d'ouvroir a été précisément introduite parce que c'était un lieu de travail artisanal. Il ne s'agissait pas d'inventer de grandes théories, il ne s'agissait pas de partir à la conquête de quoi que ce soit.'] The quotation appears in the transcript of an interview which a number of Oulipians gave for the journal *Page des libraires* in early 1996. (FO, MS-6 ('Page')).

²⁸ Jean Lescure, 'Brief History of the Oulipo', in Motte, *Oulipo*, pp. 32-39 (p. 33).

brusquely and frequently by pretty much all members.²⁹ We might then try *workroom* – a good direct translation of *ouvroir*, and one which, like its source, seems slightly archaic in English. This is the term which Queneau uses in an article for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1967 in which he introduces the group to English readers (see below), and I think this will do nicely: its slight awkwardness – ‘Don’t you mean *workshop*?’ – is correct.³⁰

In a radio interview in 1962, Queneau runs through the group’s members as follows:

Firstly there is François Le Lionnais, who is the founder; and myself, the co-founder. There is Albert-Marie Schmidt who, as you know, is a great sixteenth-centuryist. It is him we have to thank for the title of our working group. [...] To go on with the list, there is a mathematician, Claude Berge; Jacques Bens, who is secretary; and then two representatives from the Collège de ’Pataphysique, Noël Arnaud and Latis, since we are attached to the Collège de ’Pataphysique; then three other members who are poets and writers, Lescure, Duchateau and Queval. We have foreign correspondents, André Blavier, Paul Braffort, Stanley Chapman and Ross Chambers.³¹

(A further foreign correspondent, Marcel Duchamp, by then a naturalised American, was added to the roster in March 1962, just as Queneau’s radio interviews were being broadcast. However, Duchamp would in fact meet the Oulipo only twice, while passing through Paris in 1967 and 1968.) What comes across clearly as Queneau lists the group’s members is that this is *not* a writer’s group in the ordinary sense. There *are* writers – Lescure, Duchateau, and Queval (not to mention Queneau himself) – but they are listed last, while Berge is introduced specifically as a mathematician, Schmidt as an academic historian, and Latis and Arnaud are identified by their role in the Collège de ’Pataphysique (in fact, Arnaud is a writer while Latis is a philosophy teacher). The Oulipo, from the outset, is a place of exchange between the worlds of literature and science, communities between whom a certain amount of negotiation is both necessary and fruitful. As Le Lionnais puts it at one of the early meetings, ‘The fact is that our group includes both mathematical and literary people for whom the same words don’t always apply to the same notions.’³²

So what *is* the Oulipo if not a writers’ workshop? Neither *workroom* nor *sewing-circle* really tell us much about what the group do. Albert-Marie Schmidt’s early description of the group in the Protestant weekly *Réforme* offers us some insight when he calls them ‘a secret laboratory of literary structures’.³³ *Secret* here is a questionable label, especially if one applies it oneself in a

²⁹ See for example Queneau’s list, ‘What is the Oulipo Not?’, quoted below.

³⁰ Raymond Queneau, ‘Science and Literature’, *TLS* 3422 (28 September 1967): 863–64 (864).

³¹ [‘Il y a d’abord François Le Lionnais, que en est le fondateur; moi-même, qui en suis le co-fondateur. Il y a Albert-Marie Schmidt qui, comme vous le savez, est un grand seizièmeiste. C’est à lui que l’on doit la dénomination même de notre group de travail. [...] Pour continuer l’énumération, il y a un mathématicien, qui est Claude Berge; Jacques Bens, qui est le secrétaire; et puis deux représentants du Collège de ’Pataphysique, Noël Arnaud et Latis, parce que nous nous sommes rattachés au Collège de ’Pataphysique; puis trois autres membres qui sont des poètes et des écrivains, Lescure, Duchateau et Queval. Nous avons des correspondants étrangers, André Blavier, Paul Braffort, Stanley Chapman, Ross Chambers’]. The interviews, conducted by Georges Charbonnier, went out between 2 February and 27 April 1962. The transcripts are available as Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Raymond Queneau* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 116–17.

³² Meeting of 23 August, 1966. The minutes for this meeting are missing from the BnF archive, but appear, in Iain White’s translation, as ‘André Blavier *Circular No. 75 (+/-)*’, in Mathews and Brotchie, *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas, 1998), pp. 188–191 (p. 191).

³³ Quoted in Arnaud ‘Prolegomena’, p. xiii. The original appeared *Réforme* on 2 February 1963.

newspaper article – and there will be more to say about this later – but *laboratory* is helpful. This is a place of experimentation, where *literary structures* are proposed, invented, tested. Queneau also has some useful words by way of the following definition (albeit a negative one) of the group:

What is the Oulipo not?

1. It is not a movement or a literary school. We situate ourselves prior to aesthetic value, which is not to say that we ignore it.

2. Neither is it a scientific seminar, or ‘serious’ (in inverted commas) working group, even though we have a professor from a Faculty of Letters and another from a Faculty of Science among our number.

Finally, 3. It is not about experimental or aleatory literature (for example of the kind practised by the group around Max Bense in Stuttgart).³⁴

Queneau also has a few positive descriptions of the group, most notably that the Oulipo’s work is ‘amusing (at least for us)’, and he goes on to defend the value of playfulness using examples from the history of mathematics: ‘I must insist on this adjective “amusing”. Certainly, certain of our works, in the domain of simple “jests” or “wordplay”, might seem analogous to certain “parlour games”. Let us remember that topology and number theory were born, in part, out of what were once called “mathematical diversions” [mathématiques amusantes].’³⁵ If the structures that come out of the Oulipian laboratory seem like mere diversions then, we are reminded not to judge too hastily their usefulness or import.³⁶

But perhaps the most useful insight into what the group actually do comes from their meeting minutes. By the late 1960s Oulipo meetings have settled into a standard format, grouped under regular headings in the minutes: Creation, Ruminations, Erudition, Action.³⁷ Creation, as the group themselves put it, is the most important of the headings: ‘It is obligatory, on pain of the meeting’s cancellation, that there be at least one intervention under this heading. An Oulipian presents a new constraint, accompanied by at least one example. This presentation is followed by a general discussion.’³⁸ In Ruminations, new constraints not yet well-developed

³⁴ [‘Qu’est ce que n’est pas l’OU. LI PO? 1. Ce n’est pas un mouvement ou une école littéraire. Nous nous plaçons en deçà de la valeur esthétique, ce qui ne veut pas dire que nous en faisons fi. 2. Ce n’est pas non plus un séminaire scientifique, un groupe de travail “sérieux” entre guillemets. [...] Enfin, 3. Il ne s’agit pas de littérature expérimentale ou aléatoire.】 Raymond Queneau, ‘Littérature potentielle’, *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*, 2nd edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 317-45 (pp. 321-22). The published text was first delivered as a talk to Jean Favard’s Seminar of Quantitative Linguistics in January 1964.

³⁵ [‘J’insisterai cependant sur le qualificatif d’“amusant”. Il est certain que certains de nos travaux peuvent paraître, du domaine de la simple plaisanterie ou encore de simples “jeux d’esprit”, analogues à certains “jeux de société”. Rappelons-nous que la topologie ou la théorie des nombres sont nées en partie de ce qu’on appelait autrefois les “mathématiques amusantes”.】 Queneau, ‘Littérature potentielle’, p. 322.

³⁶ Le Lionnais will feel the need to reiterate this sentiment in the group’s second manifesto: ‘Most writers and readers feel (or pretend to feel) that extremely constraining structures such as the acrostic, spoonerisms, the lipogram, the palindrome, or the holorhyme (to cite only these five) are mere examples of acrobatics and deserve nothing more than a wry grin, since they could never help to engender truly valid works of art. Never? Indeed. People are a little too quick to sneer at acrobatics.’ [François Le Lionnais, ‘Second Manifesto’, in Motte, *Oulipo*, pp. 29-31 (p. 30)].

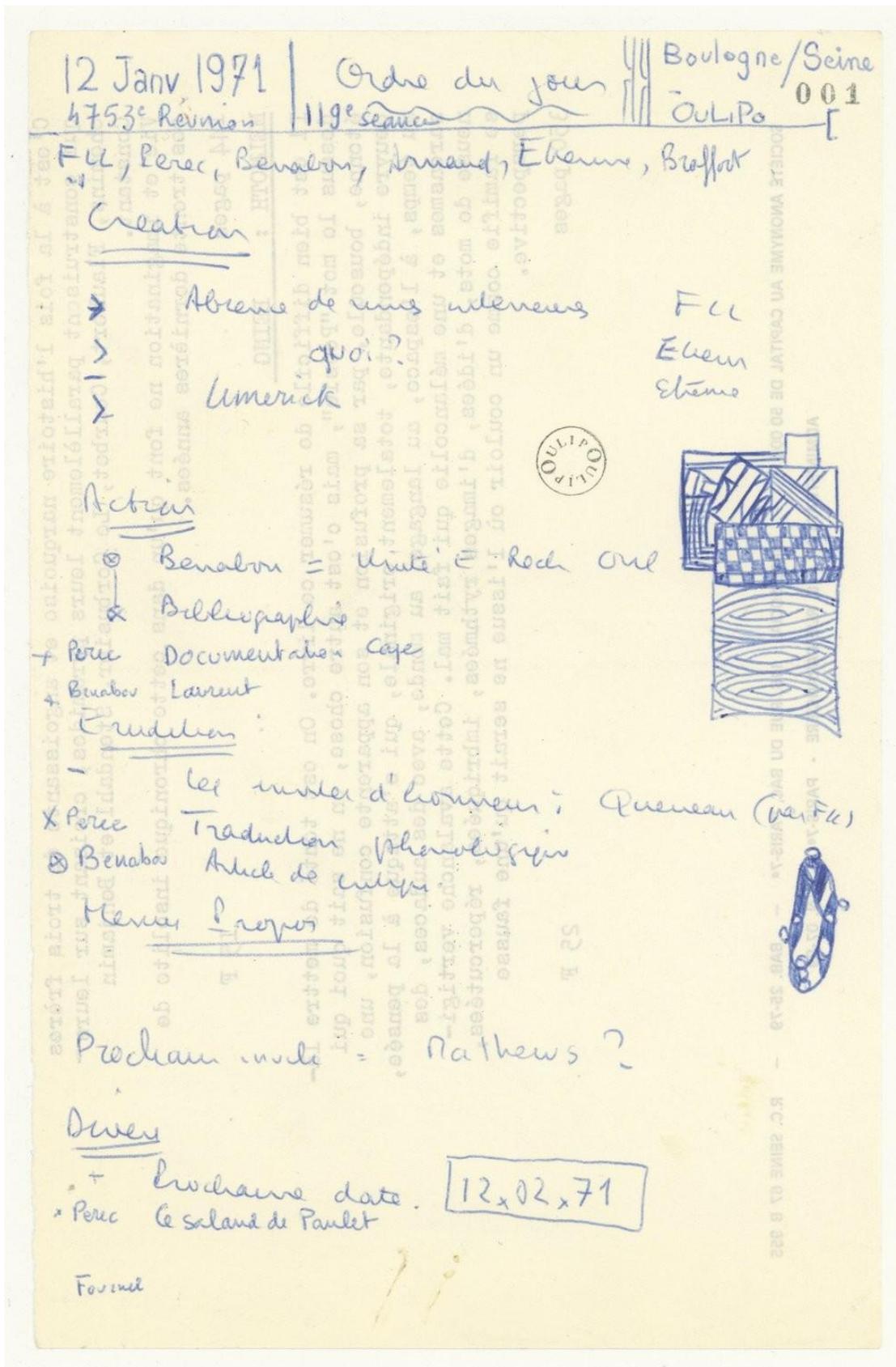
³⁷ These headings seem to develop out of an earlier, roughly synonymous set: Pratique, Théorique, and Anecdotique. See ‘Ordre du jour autographe de François Le Lionnais de la réunion du 23 août 1966’ (FO, DM-2 (6)).

³⁸ [‘Il est obligatoire, sous peine de nullité de la réunion, qu’il y ait au moins une intervention sous cette rubrique. Un oulipien présente une contrainte nouvelle, accompagnée au moins d’un exemple. Cette présentation est suivie d’une discussion générale.】 Oulipo, ‘Des rubriques’, *Oulipo* (Paris: ADPF, 2005), pp. 18-19 (p. 19).

enough to produce a textual example are introduced for wider consideration, while in Erudition members present on works which predate the group but exhibit Oulipian characteristics.³⁹

Taking the meeting of January 1971 as an example then, Georges Perec's minutes, scribbled on the back of a sales list for a bookseller, are brief but informative. This is the 119th meeting, taking place at Le Lionnais's house in Boulogne-sur-Seine on 12 January. Those present are Perec, Le Lionnais, Arnaud, Bénabou, Luc Étienne, and Paul Braffort. The meeting's Creation section consists of three items: Le Lionnais's 'Absence de rimes intérieures' ['Absence of internal rhyming'], Étienne's 'Limerick', and another by Étienne which Perec seems to have missed (there is a gap in the minutes, where a note added in Le Lionnais's hand wonders 'Quoi?': 'What?'). The meeting proceeds to Action, here concerned largely with the group's long-running attempt to bring out a collection of their experiments with the publisher Jonathan Cape (see below), while among the topics under Erudition is a discussion of homophonic translation ('traduction phonologique') led by Perec. For the next meeting, scheduled for 12 February, Harry Mathews is mooted as a guest.

³⁹ Further headings cover finances and the arrangement of the next meeting. For a more detailed outline of the format of an Oulipo meeting, see 'Des rubriques'.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 4: Georges Perec's handwritten minutes to the group's meeting of January 1971 (FO, DM-3 (1)). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Oulipo.

So this is the form adopted when the Oulipo meet amongst themselves. But if the group's purpose is to invent and appraise literary structures that might be of use to a wider literary world, how do these creations filter out? These days, we may be familiar with the Oulipo via their website or their monthly Thursday night performances – *Les Jendis de l'Oulipo* – at the BnF in Paris. In their early days, however, the group were considerably more retiring. Nevertheless, some of their experiments were published, albeit discreetly, during their first years. An important collection of the Oulipo's work, including Le Lionnais's essay 'La Lipo' – the text that would become known as the group's first manifesto – was published privately by the Collège de 'Pataphysique as a special issue of the Collège's *Dossiers* series – Dossier 17 – in December 1961.⁴⁰ Then, just over a year later, an Oulipo special issue appeared in André Blavier and Jane Graverol's small-format review *Temps mêlés*. The introduction here is slightly disingenuous: 'For some time [the Oulipo] has been a secret society, but their works have become so important that they have decided to divulge them'.⁴¹ While this label of a *secret* or *semi-secret* society is attached to the Oulipo almost as a matter of course in its early days – Camille Bloomfield calls it 'The Myth of Secrecy' – in truth the group had been divulging themselves in small doses all along, in newspapers, on the radio, and in appearances at seminars and conferences in fields that took their interest.⁴² The *Temps mêlés* issue, for example, is made up for the most part of contributions to a conference on cybernetics, which five of the group – half its membership – had attended and where they had spoken openly about the Oulipo's work on the relationship between procedure and creativity.⁴³ In 1964, the Oulipo also travelled *en masse* to Blavier's hometown of Verviers in Belgium to present a staged version of one of their meetings which was broadcast on Belgian radio. Not exactly a secret society then, but one at least unconcerned with finding a popular audience, one whose collective publications would reach a certain *cognoscenti* – of Pataphysicians, or the avant-gardistas who read *Temps mêlés* – but few others.⁴⁴ It is a curious detail that, for a long time, the group's first major collective publication seemed destined to be an English one.

In the autumn of 1967, the *Times Literary Supplement* ran a feature called 'Crosscurrents' in which four continental intellectuals were invited to consider the relationship between literature and another discipline. Umberto Eco wrote on literature and sociology, Italo Calvino on literature and philosophy. Queneau and Roland Barthes both chose to write on literature and

⁴⁰ For the context in which 'Le Lipo' is re-envisaged as a manifesto, see Camille Bloomfield, 'Les manifestes à l'Oulipo: La disparition d'une forme', *Études littéraires* 44.3 (2013): 35-46.

⁴¹ ['Ils ont longtemps constitué une société secrète mais leurs travaux sont désormais si importants qu'ils ont décidé de les divulger.'] Guy Le Cle'h, 'Introduction': i.

⁴² See Bloomfield, *Raconter de l'Oulipo*, pp. 214-22.

⁴³ The conference, entitled 'Pensée artificielle, pensée vécue' ['Artificial Thought, Lived Thought'] was at Cerisy, 9-19 July 1963.

⁴⁴ Many years after this half-observed secrecy has been abandoned, Hervé Le Tellier will propose an interesting and persuasive reason for its having been adopted in the first place. In the transcripts for an interview conducted for a feature in the magazine *Page des libraires* in 1996, Le Tellier will muse that Queneau, as the group's most celebrated member, was concerned that the Oulipo might appear to the outside world like a personality cult, or a coterie of sycophants: 'I think the reason the group was more or less secret was that it was what Raymond Queneau wanted. I think that if the group had not been secret, it would have seemed like a bunch of young people gathered around Raymond Queneau. And that was not at all what he wanted. He said, I don't want to be the new Breton'. ['Je pense d'ailleurs que c'est la raison pour laquelle le groupe était plus ou moins secret, c'était une volonté de Raymond Queneau. Je pense que si le groupe n'avait pas été secrète, il serait apparu comme étant plusieurs jeunes gens autour de Raymond Queneau. Et ce n'était pas du tout sa volonté. Il disait je ne veux pas être le nouveau Breton.'] (FO, MS-6 ('Page')).

science, with Barthes giving a primer of literary Structuralism while Queneau introduces the Oulipo to British readers. The Queneau article begins by bemoaning the Two Cultures schism that separated the arts and sciences.⁴⁵ ‘It is still the fashion for a poet to boast that he does not know the first thing about mathematics,’ he complains, illustrating his case with Victor Hugo’s robustly anti-scientific poem ‘Le Calcul’. Mathematics, for Hugo, is an abyss whose depths he goes on to plumb in verse:

<p>Au fond, presque indistincts, l’absolu, l’innombrable, L’inconnu, rocs hideux que rongent des varechs D’A plus B ténébreux mêlés d’X et d’Y grecs; Sommets, solutions, calculs où l’on voit pendre L’addition qui rampe, informe scolopendre! Signes terrifiants vaguement aperçus! Triangles sans Brahma! croix où manque Jésus! Réduction du monde et de l’être en atomes!</p>	<p>At the bottom, almost indistinct, the absolute, the innumerable, The unknown, hideous rocks gnawed by weeds Of gloomy A plus B mixed with Xs and Ys; Sums, solutions, calculations where we see addition, That shapeless scolopendra, dangling, creeping! Terrifying signs, dimly perceived! Triangles without Brahma! Cross with no Christ! Being and the world reduced to atoms!</p>
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(ll. 74-81)⁴⁶

For Queneau, of course, this type of partisanship – of arts versus sciences, and the former’s proud ignorance of the latter – represents a dismal state of affairs. All is not lost, however, and towards the end of the article Queneau describes the reconciliation underway in Paris:

a study group of which I was a founder-member [...] along with a ‘scientist’, François Le Lionnais. I am speaking of the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workroom for Potential Literature), the so-called Oulipo, which, since 1960, has been working towards the discovery of new or revived literary forms, this research being inspired by an interest in mathematics.⁴⁷

With these words, the Oulipo is introduced for the first time into the mainstream Anglophone literary world, and three months later, on the last day of 1967, Nathaniel Tarn, an editor for the publisher Jonathan Cape would write to Le Lionnais proposing a book of Oulipian material for the new series, Cape Editions. Tarn describes Cape Editions as promoting ‘experimental work in linguistics and communication sciences’, and early texts in the series include translations of Lévi-Strauss’s *The Scope of Anthropology* (1967) and Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero*.⁴⁸ However, it would also include literary material such as Baudelaire’s *Twenty Prose Poems* (1968) and Jarry’s *The Supermale* (1968). Sadly, despite a unanimously positive response to Tarn’s approach, for the Oulipo, the Jonathan Cape publication was not to be. An agenda item almost every month throughout the late 60s, the ‘dossier Jonathan Cape’ stalled as the group debated over the collation of materials to be included. Then came a letter from Tarn announcing that he had terminated his association with the Cape, but stating that the publication might still go ahead without him. Further communications from other figures at Cape followed assuring the Oulipo of their continued interest, but by the early 70s the trail had gone cold. Meeting minutes began to

⁴⁵ Raymond Queneau, ‘Science and Literature’, *TLS* 3422 (28 September 1967): 863–64.

⁴⁶ Victor Hugo, *Toute la lyre* (Paris: Hetzel & Quantin, 1888).

⁴⁷ Queneau, ‘Science and Literature’: 864.

⁴⁸ Oulipo, ‘Lettre dactylographiée et signée de Nathaniel Tarn à François Le Lionnais du 31 décembre 1967 de Cape Edition’ (FO, DM-2 (20)).

refer to the ‘dossier ex-Cape’, which would eventually be rehabilitated as a project with Gallimard, becoming the landmark collection *La Littérature potentielle* (*La Lipo* for short) in 1973. A second collection, *Atlas de Littérature potentielle* followed in 1981. In the mean time, beginning with Perec’s *Ulérations* in 1974, the group started to publish pamphlets of their work in small runs of 150 copies. This series, known as the Bibliothèque oulipienne, now runs to over two hundred titles, and volumes which collect the most recent numbers are now available on general sale.

Alongside these private or collective publications, of course, there are the notable Oulipian works which some of the group’s distinguished writers have brought out: Jacques Roubaud’s ϵ , Perec’s *La Disparition* (the novel without an *e*), Harry Mathews’s *Cigarettes*, and Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, to name but a few. In spite of all the protests that the Oulipo is not a writers’ group, and that its aim is only to produce and test structures which may – or may not – be adopted beyond its sphere, it is these fully-formed works, more than anything else, that have established the group’s reputation with an international reading public.

The above sketch gives some outline of the Oulipo’s foundation and the group’s journey from willed obscurity to a degree of public conspicuousness. As such it merely retells a story that has been told often before. What is lacking – the gap that this book sets out to fill – is an intellectual account of the group’s position during this period in the broader debates that were going on around them. Despite some striking similarities of approach, for example, the Oulipo, as we have seen, remained officially unaffiliated to the Structuralism that had become such a dominant mode in French academia in the 1960s. At the same time, we can see from the early minutes how much of a fascination cybernetics held for the group.⁴⁹ A note, for example, marked ‘Top Secret’ and circulated with the minutes of the group’s second meeting states that certain members have been tasked with gaining access to one of the computers at IBM or Bull: ‘[t]heir goal is to try to utilise electronic machines for different works of literary analysis, as part of the activities of the *OLiPo* [sic].’⁵⁰ (The mission is not immediately successful: three years later Queneau will complain to the Seminar of Quantitative Linguistics that ‘not having machines at our disposal [is] a continual *lamento* at our meetings’.)⁵¹ Noting the importance of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s early 1950s cybernetics seminar – attended by Roman Jakobson and Jacques Lacan – in shaping the Structuralism of the next decade, Chapter One examines the balancing act which the Oulipo performed in following the same path while refusing to be swallowed up by Structuralism’s considerable cultural heft.

The second chapter looks at the implications of a common Oulipian practice. If we think back to those minutes from 1971 with Perec’s doodles alongside them, we might remember the item ‘traduction phonologique’ introduced as a point of Erudition by Perec. In fact, translating

⁴⁹ In fact, not quite everybody shared this fascination. As Bloomfield and Campaignolle put it: ‘With the exception of Latis – an Oulipian who had come from the Collège de ‘Pataphysique and who did not hide his dread faced with technology – the group shared a love of technology’ [‘À l’exception de Latis – Oulipien venu de la ‘Pataphysique qui ne cache pas son effroi face à la technologie – le group affiche une technophilie partagée.’] Camille Bloomfield and Hélène Campaignolle, ‘L’Oulipo et l’informatique’, in Reggiani and Schaffner, *Oulipo mode d’emploi*, pp. 319-36 (p. 323).

⁵⁰ [‘Leur but est de tenter d’utiliser des machines électroniques pour différents travaux d’analyse littéraire, dans le cadre des activités de l’*OLiPo*.’] The note is missing from the BnF archive, but appears in Jacques Bens anthology of early meeting minutes, *Genèse de l’Oulipo (1960-63)* (Bordeaux: Castor Astral, 2005), p. 38.

⁵¹ [‘Nous regrettons de ne pouvoir disposer de machines: *lamento* continuel au cours de nos réunions’]. Queneau, ‘Littérature potentielle’, p. 322.

for sound rather than sense – better known as ‘homophonic translation’ – has a venerable history in the Oulipo going back to the group’s first publication, the Pataphysical Dossier 17. The group are certainly fond of this technique, but they are not the only ones. The most notable Anglophone example of homophonic translation – Celia and Louis Zukofsky’s *Catullus* – also dates from around this time.⁵² Moreover, this type of interlingual punning has had its place in the toolkit of psychoanalytical interpretation since Freud’s early paper ‘The Psychological Mechanism of Forgetfulness’ (1898). An awareness of this that is part fascination and part cynicism finds its way into homophonic exercises by Queneau, Arnaud, Mathews, and Perec. It is a stance – deeply informed, but also resistant or at least conspicuously ambivalent – reminiscent of the kind of doublethink concerning psychoanalysis that Elisabeth Roudinesco identifies among French writers of the interwar period. Drawing up a list that includes Queneau along with Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud and Michel Leiris, she claims that these figures were

influenced by the theoretical adventure of Freudianism and also had experience of the analyst’s couch, but whose interest in the theory was independent of their views on the treatment. To sympathize with the Freudian revolution was for them an intellectual act, whereas to go to an analyst merely meant to have one’s malady dealt with as directly as possible.⁵³

Chapter Two looks at the place of homophonic translation within the Oulipo and finds in its use a kind of puckish critique: a way of kicking out at one’s own analyst, and a way of satirising particular strands in psychoanalytic thought.

One of the most striking aspects of the Oulipo, when compared with other groupings of the French avant-garde, is its longevity. Although the last of its original members, Jacques Duchateau, died in early 2017, the Oulipo is still going strong: still meeting, still producing work in the Bibliothèque oulipienne series, still recruiting new members. This policy of cultivated regeneration, however, has not always been in place. Aside from the investiture of a few ‘foreign correspondents’, for its first few years, the group’s membership was fixed at ten. In 1966, however, the Oulipo underwent something of a crisis. Minute-taking had deteriorated, and a frustration at the narrowness of the group’s interests had set in among certain members. At the August meeting, Le Lionnais bluntly summarised the direness of the situation:

let’s get down to business, in other words, the Oulipo, which might as well be called the Ou-peu-po, the Workshop of Few Potentialities. I put on the agenda (the same old agenda) a report on revitalising [...] the Oulipo. Two solutions are available: either bringing the Oulipo up to strength whenever a vacancy occurs, or letting it gradually die a natural death, in honourable annihilation.⁵⁴

A decision was taken that day to expand the Oulipo, to bring in new blood in order to revivify the group. Beginning with Jacques Roubaud in 1966, and over the next few years taking in

⁵² Celia and Louis Zukofsky, *Catullus* (London: Cape Goliard, 1969).

⁵³ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-85*, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 121.

⁵⁴ ‘Circular No. 75 (+/-)’, (i.e. meeting minutes for August 1966), p. 188.

Georges Perec (1967), Marcel Bénabou (1969), Harry Mathews (1972), and Italo Calvino (1973), the Oulipo became an extensible entity.

Nevertheless, something that comes across rather strongly whenever the group describe their history is a difference in character that is felt to obtain between the first generation of members and the ‘second wave’. In 1972, Paul Fournel – himself a second-waver, elected to full membership only that year – published a book entitled *Clefs pour la littérature potentielle* (at that date the lengthiest public treatment of the group, since *La Lipo* – the notorious ‘dossier ex-Cape’ – was still slowly working its way into print with Gallimard). Fournel has these telling words to say about the two cohorts of the Oulipo:

According to Le Lionnais, and perhaps not all Oulipians would agree on this, the arrival of the ‘young ones’ has brought about a change of attitude within the Oulipo. Of course, it is not a matter of going looking for interviews, but rather of not being opposed to the overtures of the outside world. The ‘young ones’ need a bit of publicity...

And then these ‘young ones’ have arrived with their questions and their ideas, and some of them have not been slow in bringing up the problem of relations with the University. Should there be a seminar of potential literature within a literature department?⁵⁵

Fournel’s language is circumspect, and, as we have seen, the group’s stated secrecy was not exactly scrupulously observed in its first few years. Nevertheless, the view that a once secretive society was becoming less so at the start of the 1970s is an uncontentious one.⁵⁶ A catalogue essay for the Oulipo exhibition at the BnF in Paris in 2014, labels the more retiring founder members – Schmidt, Queval, Berge, Bens – as ‘Les discrets de l’Oulipo’: ‘The Quiet Ones of the Oulipo’.⁵⁷

A taste for publicity, however, was not the only change in attitude that the ‘young ones’ brought. Chapter Three will look at a more conceptual shift that the group underwent during the same period, a shift which maps conveniently onto the two generations of the group in the 1960s and 1970s, and which goes straight to the heart of what Oulipian exercises might achieve: whether the goal is to evacuate the subject from writing – to ‘let language itself speak’ – or whether, on the contrary, these modes of writing are a means of invoking repressed material, of accessing the ‘unadmitted self’ in order to say the things the writer didn’t realise that they wanted to say. This movement, I argue, reflects a change in the group’s relation to Surrealism. Although it seems that new members are as wont as their seniors to express the Oulipo’s antipathy to the Surrealists, there is a philosophical edge to this disavowal that can be far more keenly felt in the earlier writing than the later.

⁵⁵ [‘D’après Le Lionnais, et tous les oulipiens ne sont peut-être pas d’accord sur ce point, l’arrivée des “jeunes” a entraîné un changement d’attitude à l’Oulipo. Il ne s’agit bien sûr pas de rechercher les interviews, mais bien plutôt de ne plus s’opposer aux ouvertures vers l’extérieur. Les “jeunes” ont besoin d’un peu de publicité... Et puis ces “jeunes” sont arrivés avec leurs questions et leurs idées, et certains n’ont pas tardé à poser le problème des rapports avec l’Université. Faut-il créer un séminaire de littérature potentielle au sein d’une U.E.R. de Littérature?'] Fournel, *Clefs*, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁶ For more on the public-facing Oulipo, see Coraline Soulier, ‘L’Oulipo en public’, in Christelle Reggiani and Alain Schaffner, *Oulipo mode d’emploi* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2016), pp. 149-67.

⁵⁷ Bertrand Tassou, ‘Les discrets de l’Oulipo’, in Bloomfield and Lesage, *Oulipo*, pp. 59-65.

Other important binaries arise in this period, between procedural and constrained writing, for example, or between the so-called ‘syntactic’ and ‘semantic Oulipo’, that is, between operations at the level of the letter (anagrams, lipograms, etc.) versus those that work at a more conceptual level (constraining character, location, plot). As Le Lionnais puts it during the meeting of August 1966, ‘Little by little we are moving from the syntactic to the semantic’.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it would be wrong to imagine that these can be mapped clearly onto the different factions in the group’s membership. We must be aware too of changes extrinsic to the group – of philosophical shifts which were being felt more broadly in French intellectual life, and which, because the Oulipo has never been an isolated community, are echoed in their output. Even an Oulipian can change their mind, and Chapter Four focuses on Italo Calvino to show how the shift which the previous chapter outlined in terms of two cohorts of the group can also be discerned in the work of a single member. Examining Calvino’s writing from around the period that he became first of all a guest and then a full member of the group, we find a modulation from a rigid version of combinatorics to one in which a minute bending of the rules – the application of the Lucretian *clinamen* – is the very act that elevates a work to the status of Art.

During early discussions about the ill-fated English-language edition of their experiments, François Le Lionnais wrote a letter to the project’s editor at Jonathan Cape. Le Lionnais explained that Oulipian work can be divided into three categories: works that are easy to translate; works whose translation is difficult, or even very difficult; and works which are untranslatable. Unfortunately, Le Lionnais reasoned, this last category would include some of the Oulipo’s most characteristic work, and to omit these would risk giving a false impression of the group.⁵⁹ Perhaps the edition could include a *description* of these untranslatable texts, along with *comparable* attempts in English. Aware then of the special problems their work throws up for translation, it is little wonder that untranslatability should be almost as much a theme as a characteristic in Oulipian writing. Chapter Five looks at a sequence of short stories by Perec and Mathews which are based on the same narrative set-up: a field linguist who stumbles on a language of paradigmatic oddity. The chapter demonstrates how these stories use a template from analytic philosophy, that of W. V. O. Quine’s ‘gavagai’ language, to reflect on the act, and the limits, of translation.

In the following chapters, then, the Oulipo are depicted as being not just deeply knowledgeable about the philosophical debates of their time but also engaged in their cut and thrust. The argument, however, must not be taken too far. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and much of the material in the Oulipo’s archives serves no grander purpose than to satisfy an experimental curiosity: is this technique an effective way of producing writing? It is not the intention of this book to introduce a thoroughgoing suspicion, a way of seeing Oulipian writing always as the expression of a theory; rather, the aim is merely to make the group seem more rooted, less a band apart than a collective of wry *virtuosi*, amusing themselves sometimes with their own specific concerns and sometimes in mischievous observation of their peers, heckling from the balcony of the academy.

⁵⁸ ‘Circular No. 75 (+/-)’, (i.e. meeting minutes for August 1966), p. 188.

⁵⁹ ‘Lettre dactylographiée de François Le Lionnais à Nathaniel Tam du 22 avril 1968’ (FO, DM-2 (25)).