

OULIPIAN MESSAGES

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The result of Oulipo's various formal manipulations seems devoid of any recognizable content, let alone "messages." Indeed, their products are almost exclusively syntactically generated and if there is a message at all, it is quite secondary for the reader. They most clearly reverse the Sartrian doctrine where style and form were thrown in the bargain ("par dessus le marché"). For Oulipo, the message, if any, is extra and comes with the bargain. But why then speak of Oulipian messages? Because Oulipo posed the question of semantics, and therefore of message. In the second manifesto we find:

On the other hand, *semantic* aspects were not dealt with, meaning having been left to the discretion of each author and excluded from our structural preoccupations.

It seemed desirable to take a step forward, to try to broach the question of semantics and to try to tame concepts, ideas, images, feelings, and emotions. The task is arduous, bold, and (precisely because of this) worthy of our consideration. If Jean Lescure's history of the Oulipo portrayed us as we are (and as we were), the ambition described above portrays us as we should be.¹

At that point, then, it was only a wish to deal with content. Eight years later, in the *Atlas de littérature potentielle*, the semantic ambition is still not fulfilled. Very few Oulipisms are semantically generated and according to Queneau's "Classification des travaux de l'Oulipo,"² only one work, Italo Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, seems to have been generated by semantic constraints.

We also speak of Oulipian messages because their products must contain some kind of message, or else we would not be publishing, reading and commenting on them.³ Without that message, whatever it may be, Oulipo's products would only be background noise, unrecog-

nizable from a multitude of events (or, properly speaking, non-events) and unnoticed. The questions which we must ask ourselves therefore are: What is and where is the Oulipian message? How do we grasp it, or what must we do in order to grasp it? And finally, what does it say? In order to answer these questions, I would like to perform an Oulipian experiment myself.⁴ Indeed, the very fact that such a notion of "Oulipian experiment" exists, that I can mention the term, that I can extract a model from their experiments and reverse it unto their own work, indicates that there is something in the body of their work which is akin to a "message." The experiment that I shall perform is a little removed from Oulipo (although, as we will see a bit later, the choice is far from arbitrary), but is instead inspired by the famous biologist Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*.⁵ Monod imagines a probe sent to Earth from Mars to determine rules by which natural objects can be differentiated from man-made ones and, through these rules, to make sense of terrestrial biological forms in general. Like Monod's probe, we can approach an exotic place—Oulipo—which sputters information, but whose message we are unable to decipher. The Oulipian products we receive are monstrosities, just like the two-headed snakes or the little men with antennae that our collective imagination has until recently encountered on unknown planets. Oulipian messages are for now incomprehensible and very much akin to earthly messages for the Martian probe. It is our ambition, however, to see if they contain any meaning that escapes us because of the rules we are accustomed to using. We could, perhaps, take the place of Monod's Martian probe, examine Oulipian products and attempt to construct a set of rules that may make some kind of sense of these products.

Let us look at one of those Oulipian/Martian products, given to us as a piece of literature. We will of course assume that our probe could differentiate between a literary and non-literary product at least in their formal appearance:

Vin sur l'eau

On a exploité le fleuve du ciel de la mer. Des miroirs de grosse salle. Le cheveu se trouve permis dans l'aube de soie. Le crépuscule neige s'englobe sur l'homme de celui-ci, celui-là c'est dans le plaisir de l'heure. Un rouge gobelet recouvre autour des lunes claires. Ciel, dons, vents et onces donnent pouvoir l'or de mouton clair. Dans ce boeuf-là le plaisir n'appliquait pas.⁶

First we notice that it has the appearance of a prose poem: a short prose piece with a title, a beginning and an end. If we consider it as a prose poem, we can adopt an approach, venture an interpretation. There is no need to "explain" it thoroughly; it is sufficient to show that an interpretive effort allows us to lower its level of absurdity. The piece is indeed semantically very rich. The "Vin" and "Eau" of the title remind us that wine is diluted with water ("couper le vin avec de l'eau"). "Vin sur l'eau," wine on water, blood on water: this is not very far from Baudelaire's "Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige." The first lines: "On a exploité le fleuve du ciel de la mer. Des miroirs de grosse salle" are semantically harmonious. "Les fleuves du ciel" could be passing clouds which echo this sentence of Max Jacob: "un grand fleuve traversait le ciel." "Fleuve" and "mer" belong to the same semantic field, and the resemblance between the sky and the sea is somewhat of a poetic cliché. The sea reflects the sky, as do, perhaps, the "miroirs de grosse salle." Continuing a little more: "Le cheveu se trouve permis dans l'aube de soie" reminds us of the expression "le cheveu dans la soupe," the agent of disturbance. Perhaps what is disturbed here is the harmony between the sky and the sea. The end of the sentence confirms this: "le cheveu se trouve permis dans l'aube de soie," the hair disturbs the silkiness of dawn. "Le crépuscule neige . . .": "crépuscule" recalls "aube" and "neige" recalls "soie," and so on. But let's stop here. It is evident that the interpretation could go on, almost undisturbed, with the help of what we can bring to the text: literary allusions, our own cultural background, clichés, and some sort of interconnection between the elements. We could also imagine reducing its level of absurdity (and increasing its coherence) by seeing in it a development or a drama, by making it describe an "état d'âme," by transforming it into a surrealist text or a quasi-Mallarméan poem. Were the author known, we could further relate the images to biographical data and then do a full-fledged psychocritical analysis. The point is that we can always reconstruct meaning, make up a story or construct an interpretive model from a set of data (in this case, admittedly quite beautiful data) which could give something of a poetic message to whomever wanted to invest some work.

Something quite similar occurs in Dorothy L. Sayers' novel, *The Nine Tailors*. There, a manuscript is found by a young woman who wants to become a writer. At first, the manuscript is characterized as "potty" and "lunatic." Not that it is total nonsense, but it is exotic

(somewhat “Martian” or “Earthly” depending on your position) and extremely out of the ordinary in the little town of Fenchurch St. Paul. A few lines of the manuscript will suffice to show its level of incoherence:

I thought to see the fairies in the fields, but I saw only the evil elephants with their black backs. Woe! how that sight awed me! The elves danced all around and about while I heard voices calling clearly.⁸

Again this sample has the flavor of a surrealist text on which we could perform some kind of surrealist reading. But there is more to it (or less, depending on your perspective): it will take the formidable Lord Peter Wimsey to discover that it is a cipher—which he solves with the help of the rector—and eventually to solve the murder case at hand. We can at this point formulate a first hypothesis concerning the Oulipian product: the Oulipian message is to be found not in the text but in the work one is likely to perform on that text.

In order to move on, we must abandon somewhat the Monod/Martian probe analogy and reveal that “*Vin sur l'eau*” (like many other Oulipian products) is the result of a processing of another text. Let's consider now the source text:

Déjeuner sur l'herbe

On a perdu la clef de la boîte de sardines. Des sardines d'excellente qualité. Le sel s'est dispersé dans le fond de la musette. La sauce tomate se répand sur la robe de celle-ci, celle-là s'assoit dans le gras du jambon. Un gros bourdon voltige autour des miettes beurrées. Papiers, épluchures, détritres et boîtes vont agrémenter la nature de produits manufacturés. Dans ce temps-là le campigne (*sic*) n'existait pas encore. (*Oulipo*, p. 184)

The level of absurdity of this text is much lower than that of the target text (“*Vin sur l'eau*”); it is much more coherent but, by the same token, semantically much poorer, since it would allow much less “interpretation.” It tells the story of a failed picnic, one that is easily recognizable and one that we have probably all experienced. We receive its message much more readily because the degree of improbability it contains is low, much lower than that of the target text. If we were to consider only the titles, “*Vin sur l'eau*” is much

more improbable than "Déjeuner sur l'herbe," which, to anyone who knows a little art history, is a cliché that, as it turns out, adds very little information. Let us remember, however, one of the basic principles of information theory which states that the more improbable a message is, the more information it contains. If I walk into a room on a rainy day and declare that it is raining outside, my declaration does not contain much information since my audience already has that knowledge. If, however, I declare on a day in the middle of July something highly improbable (in the usual as in the mathematical sense) for the situation, such as "it is snowing outside," the message becomes very informative if it is actually snowing or absurd if it is not. The same probably holds true in literature. Consider, for example, the phrase: "La marquise sortit à cinq heures." Because this phrase and all its variants had become a highly probable cliché for the novel, Breton rejected it, preferring to fabricate metaphors by joining together two terms that were as far apart as possible. The farther apart the two terms, the greater the "étincelle poétique." Or in other words, the more improbable the conjunction of the two terms, the greater the poetic message.

This is not to say, however, that because of its high level of probability relative to "Vin sur l'eau," "Déjeuner sur l'herbe" is totally devoid of information. It is poor only relative to "Vin sur l'eau." Nor does this imply that it is devoid of meaning. On the contrary, we readily recognize and assimilate its meaning; compared to the other text it just does not have as much information and we can say that its news factor is somewhat low. If, however, we place it in a context, real or fabricated, its information and meaning increase proportionately as we construct the context. If we know, for example, that it is a passage from a novel (it is in fact a paragraph from Raymond Queneau's *Les Enfants du Limon*), it too could become rich in information. It could translate, for example, the anguish of the organizer of the picnic, or the snobbish attitude of the narrator towards those who practice "le campagne." A more interesting and richer reading (from the point of view of information theory) could show this passage as the metaphor for the tendency of any organization to deteriorate, to slide down the entropic scale. This is "more" interesting, "more" informative, because picnics and thermodynamics have little to do with one another and yet, just as in the surrealist metaphor, their conjunction is quite meaningful and informative. In other words, the complexity and the degree of

information of this passage are, in certain ways, the product of the work of the reader, the product of the relationships she or he establishes between the text and a context, whether real or imaginary.

We can now bring a qualification to our first hypothesis: if the Oulipian message is in work, that work consists in establishing relationships, either contextual, as in "Déjeuner sur l'herbe" or intertextual, as we began to see in "Vin sur l'eau."

If the Oulipian message is to be located in the relationships, then no doubt we must consider the source-text (A: "Déjeuner sur l'herbe") and the target-text (B: "Vin sur l'eau") as one set, the text AB, necessarily more complex and richer from the point of view of information than A alone or B alone.⁹

Considering AB as one set, we notice that from A to B there is syntactical redundancy: the constructions, sentence by sentence, are identical. Moreover, personal pronouns occupy identical positions in both and are identical except when an agreement is necessary. The verbs are different, but their tenses are the same. They occupy the same position in both texts and they are used in the same manner: negatively, in their reflexive form, etc. So much for redundancy, that is, for what has *not* changed from A to B and for what has brought nothing new to the set. If the texts were completely redundant, that is if B were identical to A, it would simply be its copy and we wouldn't have a set AB, but rather A twice. Being completely redundant, B would have a news or information factor of zero. The partial redundancy of these two parts of AB is therefore neither totally useless nor without news. It does bring something new: it permits us to put A and B together to form one new set AB which is a different text from A or B alone. Without this redundancy, there is no justification whatsoever for conjoining them, for establishing relationships between them.

Let us now examine the differences. A contains 71 words, B contains 70. The last word of A ("encore") has not been reproduced and translated in B. Each noun, adjective, and verb is different in the two parts. These differences, coupled with the redundancy, allow us to say that B is a transformation of A (or A is a transformation of B, it doesn't really matter). But as soon as we say transformation we imply diachrony and history: something unknown to us happened in time between A and B (or B and A). We have a starting point and a point of arrival. We have perhaps a beginning and an end of a novel, but we still do not know the plot of that potential novel. It is up to us to provide the work (to produce the story) in order to assimilate A to B. The same

phenomenon occurs in the work of that other Oulipian-without-knowing-it, Raymond Roussel, who likewise chose a starting point (a sentence) and a point of arrival (its exact homophone) for one of his novels, and who then labored to invent the relationships between the two (the novel itself).¹⁰ We find it again with the not-so-Oulipian Proust, who wrote a first and a last chapter for his *Recherche* and who also labored for thousands of pages to fabricate the relationship between them. For Proust, as well as for Roussel and perhaps for us, his message was in the work he had invested.

In order to establish the connections between A and B, all that is required of us, as readers, is a little imagination. We could, for example, examine what *kind* of words in B take the place of words in A. We could perhaps find some kind of coherence in the substitutions. Or we may discover that one is the coded translation of the other, just like Sayers' cryptogram. But suffice it to say that, systemically speaking, there must be something which is neither A nor B, which is not contained in either A or B, yet which intervenes between them in order to produce one from the other. This intervention could be our imagination or, as in a cryptogram, the work of formal constraints. To look at it differently, if we imagine that B is supposed to be a copy of A, we recognize that an interference, or noise, has been introduced into the system which transformed certain elements of A to produce B, exactly as in the genetic manipulations Oulipians are fond of evoking.¹¹

A further qualification of our starting hypothesis is now necessary: we said that the Oulipian message is in the work which goes into the establishment of the relationship between different elements. We must now add that this work has all the characteristics of an interference. Information theory has established that order came from noise. Oulipo adds—along with all of literature, perhaps—that noise, or interference, is work.

Up to this point we have proceeded (like Monod) as though we did not know which constraints were used to transform A into B. We have seen that, theoretically, we could invent them. Let us consider a new set: A + B + C, C being the actual constraints, as they are spelled out by Oulipo, which permitted the transformation from A to B. C, the recipe, is quite simple: take a text, empty it of all its nouns, adjectives and verbs, and what remains is a *texte préparé*. Replace the nouns, adjectives and verbs by those taken from three other texts. Then adjust slightly the resultant text ("add salt and pepper to taste")

to eliminate any grammatical incompatibilities. In the case of our texts A and B, it took very little "salt and pepper": "celui-ci" was replaced by "celle-là" and the last word, "encore," was taken out. The result is what Oulipo calls, to continue the culinary metaphor, *un texte accommodé*. In the case of the set ABC, the nouns are taken from a Chinese poem entitled "En offrant le vin," the adjectives from the beginning of *Fantômas*, and the verbs from a work by the mathematician Alexander Grothendieck entitled "Sur quelques points d'algèbre homologique." Mathematics, a Chinese poem, and a popular serial novel have interfered with a text to produce another. The resultant text keeps the syntactic traces of the source text and the lexical traces of the intervening texts. The resultant text is in a way the ghostly representation of the other texts, what Oulipo calls their "chimera." It is also their chimera (in the mythological sense) because it is made up of different components of the source and intervening texts. Finally, and as Oulipo points out, it is also a biological chimera, as the term is used in biology to designate an organism made up of tissues of different genotypes. If we removed the set ABC from diachrony (without, in other words, paying attention to what came first and second, without considering its transformational aspects) we could argue that all five texts (the source, the target and the three intervening texts) are the chimeras—in all its meanings—of each other. Which is the *préparé* (gutted) and which is the *accommodé* (stuffed) or which text is the stuffing will depend on the choice made by the observer. Nothing, moreover, would prevent him or her from doing a permutation and coming up with five factorial sets (one hundred and twenty, to be precise) analogous to the set ABC.

There remains the question of chance in the choice of the components of C (the choice of the interfering texts and the constraints). I would like to argue that chance plays only a very small part in this game. First, as we have seen, work is at the basis of the transformation. One way to define work, in terms of thermodynamics, is in opposition to chance. In effect, a steam engine produces anti-chance: it canalizes hot molecules to drive a piston. Of course, the canalization is not complete, as there is still a great amount of energy that is lost, of "noise" that is produced. Work consists of organizing what was chaotic in a prior state. Second, we have also seen that what could now be called the tools of that work is a simple set of constraints introduced into A to produce B (the chimera recipe). These constraints have no meaning in themselves but are totally formal. (For those of us

who use computers, they are similar to the word processing program with which we can write a recipe book or a dissertation on Lucretius.) The constraints are also quasi-absolute, as we cannot start performing a chimera and half-way through change to another oulipism, just as we could not start making a stew and half-way through change to a recipe for *steak au poivre*. In other words, we process A in a certain and definite way to obtain B. These constraints, which are a form of redundancy, ensure that a given transformation is performed rather than any other transformation. They fight chance. They control and canalize the transformation of A into B.

Redundancy is a notion not only familiar to information theorists and Oulipians (see, for example, Raymond Queneau's "La Redondance chez Phane Armé," *Oulipo*, pp. 185-90) but also to biologists (my choice of Monod's Martian model to study Oulipo is perhaps clear now) who distinguish, along with linguists, two types of redundancy in genetics. One kind, not context sensitive and called D1, "is the statistical rule that some letters are likely to appear more often than others, on the average, in a passage of text." It measures "the extent to which a sequence of symbols generated by a message source departs from the completely random state where each symbol is just as likely to appear as any other symbol." The other type of redundancy, D2, is context sensitive and measures "the extent to which the individual symbols have departed from a state in which context does not exist."¹² Both are important and their doses (more or less D1 or D2) are critical in the study of evolution. In the case of A and B, both D1 and D2 are at work. We have seen that the exact grammatical structure of A has been repeated in B. This is a redundancy of the type D2 (context sensitive). While nouns, adjectives and verbs are not exactly redundant between A and B, their replacement still participates in the D1 type of redundancy since it is performed according to constraints imposed on the choice of elements; they "depart" in other words, "from the completely random state." The adjectives, nouns and verbs are repeated from three different texts *and only* from these texts. In effect, we have the introduction of three foreign bodies which act as parasites and substitute themselves for the original nouns, verbs and adjectives in the host structure. It is important to insist that the three foreign bodies are redundant in two ways. First, adjectives replace adjectives, nouns replace nouns, and verbs replace verbs. Second, the adjectives must always come from the same text, as with the nouns and verbs. Any departure from these

rules would introduce chance and arbitrariness into the procedure. For example, using a verb in place of a noun, or switching sources would make the resulting text nonsensical and aleatory. The redundancies, one of the principal modes of constraints, ensure then a certain amount of meaning while fighting chance. Georges Perec's *La Disparition* comes to mind as an example of the operation of the two sorts of redundancies. For a context-free redundancy (D1), he chose to completely omit the letter *e* from his novel. To omit a letter is a redundancy because a redundancy could also be negative: to use no *e*'s is equivalent to writing a poem with more *x*'s than the normal statistical use of that letter in French, such as Mallarmé's "Ses purs ongles." And for context-sensitive redundancy (D2) he chose, like Mallarmé, to respect all the rules of the French language. The result in both Perec and Mallarmé is complexity and greater information.

One could still object that the interfering texts were chosen haphazardly. But we could argue the contrary. These texts are indeed foreign to A and quite removed from it, but they were not totally aleatory choices. You or I most probably would have chosen different texts because of our different cultures, interests, tastes and preoccupations, or because of the different books that happened to be on our desks. We could also imagine the choice as being in accordance with the result we would like to accomplish: more or less abstract, more or less poetic, technical or exotic. We can be fairly certain that the author of this chimera had considered several choices (choose your ingredients well!) before deciding upon these three. His choice has been something of his signature. The proof of that signature, of the uniqueness of each resultant text, is to be found in another oulipian exercise where an "homosyntaxisme" (the so-called "generic" term for the chimera) was performed by several different Oulipians and the results were totally different for each one (*Oulipo*, pp. 176-80). This is not proof of chance. Rather each different text is the proof of the individual *necessity* of a signature. Each participant filled the syntactic structure his own way for different reasons and toward different goals and, as such, each text bears the signature of its author.

As Oulipo has amply shown, they were not the first to "oulipionize." If Oulipo had such difficulty in inventing semantic constraints, one could wonder if it is not because all of literature could be considered Oulipian, precisely because it consists, among other things, of semantic recombinations. In any case, a striking example of

an oulipism is found in a poet whose project is the furthest removed from Oulipo. In *La Rage de l'expression*, Francis Ponge has a text entitled "Formation d'un abcès poétique" where he shows his efforts to put into verse a poem which he had written in prose, "Le Bois de pin." He arrives at five elements which he says are "indéformables":¹³ four elements of two verses and one element of one verse. He then suggests that these five elements could be disposed, as he says, *ad libitum*: element 1, then 2, 3, 4, 5; or 1, 2, 3, 5, 4; 1, 2, 4, 3, 5 etc. He thus performs a true permutation which would give 120 different poems. This is indeed an oulipism of the same kind as Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliard de poèmes*.¹⁴ The difference is that Ponge's project is concerned with expression while Queneau's and Oulipo's are not. He wants to withdraw "le bois de pin" "from death," from "the silent world," from the "non-remarque" and "non-conscience" (p. 113). He wants therefore to take into account the real in order to extract from it a quality proper to it. In other words, "dire tout ce que l'on peut sur le bois de pin et *seulement* à son propos" (p. 145). In summary, one could say that Ponge's project is a generalized cratylism: transmit the real through language. His permutation becomes a way to transmit the complexity of the real. One could say, on the other hand, that Oulipo remains on this side of cratylism. It is no more interested in the real than in expression. Oulipo wants to move away from the real, using the oulipisms, permutations included, as a vehicle for achieving a distancing from the real.

If Oulipo's concern is not expression, then it is undoubtedly difficult to speak of its message. Up to this point, we have only tried to locate the Oulipian message: it is in the space of interference. We can now speak of what it says, but in order to do so we must distinguish between message and information. In principle, information is a raw form which does not contain semantic value. It is the sounds over a telephone wire, for example. The message, on the other hand, is what the receiver understands. It is that which, in the best of cases, invites some kind of action on the part of the receiver. A good but perhaps perverse example of this distinction is Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style*.¹⁵ Upon reading them, we realize, after two or three "exercises," that the message is always the same: a man on a bus who steps on another's toes, rushes for an empty seat, etc. The information, however, is new every time. The perversity here is that there are 99 different texts that say the same thing but in a new form each time.

We continue to read them, we laugh, we are fascinated, we share them with our friends and we want to read more of them. With the reading of each new exercise, the message becomes increasingly trite and secondary; the information, on the other hand, becomes richer and incites us to action (laughter, reading more, etc.). Queneau has, in effect, managed to transform information into message. This is, perhaps, the monstrosity—the chimera—of the Oulipian message: information and message are one and the same. We move thus to the tickling of a second level of abstraction: the different forms of a single message are, in themselves, the message. The hypothesis we have established (work, the establishment of relationships, interference) are not contradicted because that work, whether it be performed by the reader or writer or both, is always in the order of formal constraints. The Oulipian message is formal. These formal messages incite to action since we are presently talking, thinking, writing about Oulipo, and also because the entire Oulipian project is *programmatic*: it is an invitation to use constraints to *write*.¹⁶

Post-Scriptum:

What I tried to accomplish here could very well be called an Oulipo-critique. It follows closely a homosyntaxism. I indeed took an Oulipo product and a body of knowledge quite removed from it, biology and information theory. I then “folded” one into the other in order to get an essay (this one) quite different from them but which says, hopefully, something about Oulipo’s message. I have, thus, performed exactly what I was trying to demonstrate. But something strange happened on the way: in order to study Oulipian products, my probe (and I) had, in effect, to take its method from these same products. The probe (and I), was overtaken by the products it was studying, it reorganized itself to the image of the very thing it was studying and became, itself (and I, with it), a chimera.

NOTES

1. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, trans. and ed., Warren F. Motte, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 29.

2. Oulipo, *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), pp. 73–77.
3. A complete list of recent Oulipian activities would be out of place here. I would like to mention however the wonderful anthology put together by Warren Motte (note 1), and his equally good book on Georges Perec, *The Poetics of Experiment* (Lexington: French Forum, 1984), as well as the numerous sessions on Oulipo in conventions in the last few years.
4. I am perhaps prematurely giving away part of the answer to the Oulipo's semantic enigma: in order to grasp their message, one must perform an Oulipian experiment.
5. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970, p. 20 *et passim*.
6. Oulipo, *La littérature potentielle (Créations, Re-créations, Récréations)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 184. Henceforth referred to as *Oulipo*.
7. *Le Cornet à dés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945 and 1967), p. 203.
8. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World: 1934 and 1962, p. 63.
9. I am following here the suggestion of another biologist, Henri Atlan who in *Entre le cristal et la fumée; Essai sur l'organisation du vivant* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), pp. 39–60, demonstrated the applicability of the "order from noise" principle in the genetic coding process. He shows that noise (the haphazard interferences in a genetic coding) are in effect to be *added* to the original genetic message and that the result contains *more* information than a "normal" (without noise) delivery of a message.
10. *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres* (Paris: U.G.E, 1977), pp. 11–12.
11. "On peut comparer—*mutatis mutandis*—ce problème à celui de la synthèse en laboratoire de matière vivante. Que l'on n'ait jamais réussi cette performance ne prouve pas qu'elle soit a priori impossible. Les succès remarquables des actuelles synthèses biochimiques permettent d'espérer mais ne prouvent cependant pas que l'on arrivera (et rapidement) à la fabrication d'êtres vivants" (*Oulipo*, p. 26).
 "One may compare this problem—*mutatis mutandi*—to that of the laboratory synthesis of living matter. That no one has ever succeeded in doing this doesn't prove a priori that it's impossible. The remarkable success of present biochemical syntheses allows room for hope, but nonetheless fails to indicate convincingly that we will be able to fabricate living beings in the very near future." Motte, *Oulipo, A Primer*, pp. 30–31.
12. Lila L. Gatlin, *Information Theory and the Living System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). Quoted in Jeremy Campbell, *Grammatical Man: Information, Entropy, Language and Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), pp. 118–19.
13. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, pp. 140–41.
14. Paris: Gallimard, 1961.
15. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
16. Or to put it differently, Oulipo's project is the systematic elimination of Mallarmé's mythic *page blanche*.