TWENTY QUESTIONS FOR NOËL ARNAUD

WARREN F. MOTTE, JR.
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Noël Arnaud is the president of the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Oulipo). This interview took place at M. Arnaud's home in the South of France on June 24, 1985.

Warren Motte: What were the founding principles of the Oulipo?

Noël Arnaud: The importance of the circumstances surrounding the Oulipo's creation is more than historical: they conditioned and posed the principles upon which the Oulipo came together and began to act. The historians of the Oulipo (almost all of them members of the group, by the way) have generally simplified, much simplified even, the Oulipo's phases of gestation and birth. As a result of this, the reader of Oulipian works, of the Oulipo's theoretical texts, asks the question which you just asked and cannot find an answer. That question may be formulated in the following manner: "How was it that suddenly, in France in 1960, certain individuals became interested in the mutual complementary of mathematics and literary creation?" It must first of all be noted that this concern was not *in itself* absolutely new; nevertheless, all recent literary schools (Romanticism, Symbolism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism) denied or neglected this aspect of poetic creation. After all, that makes for a rather long period, easily two centuries. During this time, only a few isolated, obscure individuals continued to examine the relations between mathematics and literary creation. When the Oulipo was founded, and even, of course, during the period I just alluded to, there was nothing comparable to the Grands Rhétoriqueurs and their art of rhetoric, or to the Pléiade and the poetic art of Jacques Pelletier du Mans. In France in 1960, we were far removed from a conception of poetic creation based on strict rules, especially mathematical rules. It's true that a new generation of poets, although nourished by Surrealism, put,

let's say, the "stupefacient image" into question and no longer relied blindly upon psychic automatism, finally returning to controlled expression. But these poets would not have accepted to conform to anything other than classically syntactic constraints and structures. All the modes of poetic creation, of poetic construction, dating from the time of the Troubadours were thought of as amusing exercises, as philological recreation. It was in these conditions that the Oulipo was born, and I believe that historico-literary context to be important. The conditions were favorable on the one hand, because the great Surrealist poetry was dying out (in any case, it had already produced its major works). On the other hand, the conditions were rather uncertain, because poetic creation was stagnating in a theoretical marasmus. In September 1960, a number of friends and admirers of Raymond Queneau got together at the Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle for a colloquium on the theme (and it is useful to bear this theme in mind), "A New Defense and Illustration of the French Language." Obviously, for the people at the Cerisy colloquium, the model, the very illustration of this theme was the work of Raymond Queneau. The organizers of the colloquium, the speakers, and most of the participants knew that Raymond Queneau had built several of his works upon mathematical structures ("mathematical" in the broad sense; that is, sometimes merely arithmetical). To their way of thinking, Queneau seemed to be one of the rare contemporary writers to have reconciled mathematics and letters in fictional works, that is, apart from all didacticism. In Queneau's work, the mathematical architecture is shrouded in the movement of the story, and hidden by the imaginary (of course, one must except *La Petite Cosmogonie portative,* for example, which is didactic and acknowledged as such). Four of the speakers belonged to the Collège de Pataphysique: Jacques Bens, André Blavier, Jean Lescure, and Queneau himself. On the final day of the colloquium, September 10, 1960, these four people, these four members of the Collège de Pataphysique, drafted a letter requesting the creation of a Chair of General Quercanology within the Collège. They defined this post as a chair for the study of Quenellian creative processes, mathematical processes in particular. This letter was signed by Bens, Blavier, Lescure, and by Queneau himself, which is rather surprising when one knows the extent of Queneau's modesty, verging on timidity. These four people presented their project to François Le Lionnais, also present at the colloquium, and François Le Lionnais

agreed with them. It was he who suggested that the field of study be broadened to include all the methods of fabricating literary texts. Queneau in turn, relieved to be no longer alone before the dock, accepted the project: thus the Oulipo was born. It held its first meeting on November 24, 1960. This historical reminder demonstrates that the founding principles of the Oulipo were born of an *oeuvre,* the study of an *oeuvre,* that of Raymond Queneau, wherein mathematics serve as a means of novelistic or poetic creation. Queneau brought forth new processes based on mathematics; it was on the basis of these processes and in the intent of discovering others equally productive that the Oulipo was founded and began to develop its work.

WM: You mentioned the Collège de Pataphysique: what were your relations in the early days with other literary groups?

NA: As soon as it was founded, the Oulipo was admitted to the Collège de Pataphysique as a commission, more properly, as a subcommission of a larger commission presided over by Raymond Queneau. Moreover, the Collège de Pataphysique published the first works of the Oulipo in its journal. Actually, there was nothing extraordinary about this: the Oulipo's scientific vocation conforms to the preoccupations and the very statutes of the Collège's constitution. Also, the majority of the Oulipo's founding members were also members of the Collège, beginning with Queneau, who was one of its oldest members and surely one of its very first Satraps, since he was named Satrap of the Collège de Pataphysique in 1950, the Collège having been founded in 1949. Thus, Queneau was really at the source of the Collège de Pataphysique. As to our relations with other groups, I think I may say that there were none, neither with the Surrealists (even if certain members of the Oulipo had been, during various periods, Surrealists), nor with the Lettrists (who were beginning to splinter into several tendencies or subgroups). This didn't prevent us from issuing a personal invitation to François Dufrêne, who had gone from Lettrism to Ultralettrism; but François Dufrêne was already the friend of many of us (in certain cases an old friend), and above all he possessed a very real, very profound, and very broad poetic culture. At that time, and even before the Oulipo's foundation, François Dufrêne was interested in the Grands Rhétoriqueurs (this was, after all, very rare). Dufrêne wrote the Oulipian hymn, entitled "Oulipojava," which was set to music by Paul Braffort and performed in

public several times. But actually we had no relations with *the* Lettrist group or *a* Lettrist group. I think that it ought to be stated firmly that the Oulipo has never considered itself as a group: it saw itself as a laboratory, then it became an institution, much like the Académie Française. Yes, the Oulipo is more comparable to the Académie Française than to a literary group or school, such as they have defined themselves until now. You'll note (and I think this is of a certain importance) that the Oulipo's work was kept secret for a long time, which behavior is the opposite of that of a literary group or school, whose first concern is to publish, publish a lot, publish the works of its members. In the Oulipo's case, the contrary happened: even Queneau, when he was asked by George Charbonnier to participate in a series of radio programs, came to the Oulipo to ask how far he could go in revealing the Oulipo's work, principles, and constitution.

WM: For example, in M. J. Favard's seminar?

NA: Yes, exactly. Of course, people knew that the Oulipo existed in its early days, due to the usual, unavoidable indiscretions, but actually nobody knew, for several years, exactly what the Oulipians were up to in their monthly meetings. It was rather amusing, because many literary figures, well known, laurel-wreathed writers, tried their best to get themselves invited to a meeting, out of curiosity of course, sheer mundane curiosity. For a long time, from the day that we decided to invite a guest of honor to each of our luncheons, we preferred to invite scientists rather than writers. Such a preference again distinguishes the Oulipo from contemporary or previous literary groups.

WM: What were your relations with the critical community? I know that they were at times rather difficult, especially in the case of academic criticism.

NA: Oh, there was never any real polemic. First and foremost, we always refused to engage in a polemic with anyone at all (another thing which distinguishes us from literary groups with a taste for polemic). Actually, there were no official relations with the critical community. The Oulipo kept itself abreast of contemporary research in linguistics, and of the creations and theories of the New Novel, for

example. I must add that personal friendships existed—and still do exist—between certain Oulipians and certain Structuralists or Poststructuralists. In the beginning, we were particularly interested by the work being done in quantitative linguistics; from our first meetings onward, we invited certain specialists from this field. Essentially though, we felt that our work had its *own* specificity, so that when someone asked us about the relation of the Oulipo to the Structuralists (as you have just done), we answered with a lexical nuance which may seem like a joke: we said that we were not Structur*a*lists, but rather Structur*e*lists. This was not out of "opposition" to the Structuralists—who, in a certain sense, were working in a field close to our own, in a spirit which in any case was not unfamiliar to us—, it was simply to circumscribe our own field of activity more rigorously.

WM: To return for a moment to historical considerations, Oulipians often allude to their precursors, whom they call "plagiarists by anticipation": what is the precise status of these figures?

NA: After having inventoried the literary structures, constraints, and processes used in modern French literature ("modern" in the fullest sense, that is, from the Troubadours until our day), one fact became apparent: many structures, often very skillful, had been invented. Our goal, our *raison d'être,* was to invent new structures. Sometimes, an Oulipian would invent a structure ("invent" in the sense of "create"), sincerely believing it to be new. And, after some thought, some research, the Oulipo would find that this structure already existed and that it had been used two or three (or ten) centuries earlier. The Oulipian's work was no less worthy for there having been a plagiarist, a plagiarist by anticipation, a predecessor. To call these predecessors plagiarists by anticipation was a way of paying tribute to them. The inventory of extant structures and constraints was the Oulipo's first task, proposed moreover by Raymond Queneau in the first meeting. It was not enough to establish that every literary work has a certain construction, that every author (even the most mediocre) uses structures unconsciously, structures inherited from tradition, or even imposed by the publisher (today, the number of pages in a novel is standardized, normalized); the quality, the viability of the old structures had to be measured. We thus chose (without excluding a reassessment of our choices) a certain number of

constraints which seemed to be still viable and capable of being rehabilitated. We began with the idea that certain ancient structures had not produced all that they might have. Thus, the palindrome and the lipogram: Georges Perec took those forms well beyond what they had produced until then. This led us to a new notion: in the domain of literature under constraint, every world record is Oulipian, and Georges Perec is the world recordman in the lipogram and the palindrome—perhaps he will be beaten one day, but for the time being he remains the Oulipic champion of those two events.

WM: To what extent can one speak of an Oulipian "poetics," that is, a theory of literature?

NA: Don't overwhelm us with ponderous words, nor attribute to us ambitions which we have never held. Let's examine things more concretely. For us, there are two potential literatures, which we call "lipos": an analytic "lipo," or anoulipism, whose task is to discover in certain authors conscious or unconscious structures and methods of creation; and there is a synthetic "lipo," or syntholipism, whose goal is to invent new structures. We have reserved the expression "experimental literature" (the formula that moreover defined the Oulipo for the space of a meeting, its first meeting) for the past, even for the recent past, for literary history: in the Oulipo's eyes, everything that precedes it is experimental. Provided that one takes pains to define them rigorously, the complementarity of analysis and synthesis is frequent and almost necessary to the Oulipo. When we borrow a method of creation from an author, ancient or modern, we try to sharpen it, to ameliorate it, to render it more operative; sometimes we try to mathematize it, which is an important aspect of Oulipian work (within the Oulipo, the role played by the mathematicians is a considerable one). Thus, we sometimes try to mathematize a given structure: then, it goes from anoulipism to syntholipism, because we work on it, we ameliorate it, we complete it, we broaden it, and, above all, we give it a rigor which it rarely possesses when it's found in literary history. There remains the question of the balance of analysis and synthesis. Actually, we don't wish to establish a perfect balance: we would like the scales to tip in favor of syntholipism. With all due modesty, the number of new structures invented by the Oulipo is beginning to become rather imposing. Obviously, if we listed the structures invented by the Oulipo against those which already existed,

ours would still be fewer, but our work is already very prolific. The Oulipo is certainly the greatest producer of structures (and has been for twenty-five years)—so much so that one may ask if the Oulipo is not the only producer of structures. I look in vain for another one with a similar level of activity, having produced such results. Let's be clear on this point: during its first years of existence, the Oulipo invented structures and constraints, limiting itself to illustrating them with a short example (with the exception, of course, of Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*), and we must not forget that structure doesn't guarantee talent. Nevertheless, after a while, voluminous works were born, founded upon a given structure, most often upon several imbricated structures. It so happens that these works were written by people who, in my opinion, possess unquestionable talent: Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, Harry Mathews, Jacques Roubaud, and others, younger and less famous, whose works have not yet become internationally known. Thanks to all of them, the balance of analysis and synthesis has been respected and, I feel, if we weighed the twenty-five years of Oulipian activity, the scales would tip in favor of synthesis.

WM: What is the role of formal constraint in the Oulipo's work?

NA: That's a question which seems important, but I wonder if it really is, granted that the Oulipo was created in order to define formal constraints. Thus, it's a very important role. Can one say that it is capital when compared to each author's imagination, his talent, or his genius? It's always the same story, the same question: one may be an excellent literary theoretician without being a creator. An interesting constraint is not necessarily immediately adopted by an author of genius; sometimes, it waits for its genius a long while. Take the classic example of the sonnet (there's a rather complex formal structure after all): typically, it's a structure of extraordinary homogeneity; also typically, it has resulted in several masterpieces and an enormous mass of mediocre texts.

WM: At what point does constraint become counterproductive in a literary work; that is, is there a point where the constraint, being too obvious, warps the reading of the text?

NA: There, you denounce an evil which we must guard against.

Let's remember Queneau's lesson: when the work is finished, the scaffolding must be removed, just as masons remove the scaffolding from a building once it is completed. The trouble with some contemporary works is that the structures, the methods upon which they were based are, precisely, too obvious. This sort of thing becomes altogether academic.

WM: But isn't that the case of the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes?*

NA: Most certainly, but the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* is intended to be a machine as well as a text; it is both a text and a machine for reading that text. No, I'm thinking rather of novels (or poems, but above all novels) which try to illustrate a method, a process, and where this process is constantly, incessantly obvious: ultimately, that becomes bothersome. Works based on constraints must be good works *if they are published as works* and not (as the Oulipo has often done in its anthologies) as simple illustrations of a structure. Oulipians offer examples (which don't need to be, themselves, works of genius) in order to demonstrate that a structure is viable, that it can function. But if one uses a structure to construct a work, if one offers this work to hundreds or thousands of readers, I really see no interest in leaving the scaffolding visible, apparent. Only in such cases does constraint become counterproductive. There is another means of avoiding this difficulty when constructing a work under constraint: that's the clinamen, which we must discuss.

WM: Among the constraints used by the Oulipo, there are many based on mathematical structures. What precisely is the role of mathematics in Oulipian work?

NA: First, I believe that mathematics is beneficial to the Oulipo: it's a sort of fence preventing the Oulipo from wandering out of the field it demarcated for itself. But it has another role, that of furnishing new structures to those Oulipians who are not themselves mathematicians. Perec wasn't a mathematician, but he assimilated and used mathematical structures brilliantly; this is also true of Mathews and Calvino, and of most of the members of the Oulipo (Roubaud, for his part, is both writer and mathematician: his case is different and ideal). When one considers the role of mathematics in

the Oulipo, the role of the letter must also be examined. The transposition of certain mathematical structures into literary creation does not in any way diminish the letter's role (I should remark that not all mathematical structures can be transposed—it must not be thought that the Oulipo advocates the adaptation of all mathematical structures to literature). Many Oulipian constraints are literal; as far as I know, neither the lipogram nor the palindrome has been mathematized yet. Nor alphabetical poetry and drama. In any case, these constraints, and many others, are not mathematical. One may try to mathematize constraints, as Paul Braffort and Jacques Roubaud of the Oulipo try to do for many constraints, structures, and processes which were not mathematical and did not seem to be mathematizable.

WM: A contradiction sometimes exists, I feel, between premeditated, rigorous constraint and the aleatory which intervenes in the system. Would you care to talk about the role of the clinamen in the Oulipian structure?

NA: Yes, the aleatory and the clinamen are closely related. It must be recalled that the theory of the clinamen is attributed to Epicurus, and that it came down to us through Lucretius, Cicero, and certain other Ancients. Alfred Jarry learned it from Henri Bergson, his philosophy teacher at the Lycée Henri IV when Jarry was studying for the entrance exam at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (which, moreover, he failed). The clinamen is a slight deviation of the atom in its fall. Thanks to this imperceptible swerve, the atoms intertwine and cohere; much simplified, that's Epicurus's theory. And according to him, it's there, in that imperceptible swerve, that are born matter, living beings, and chance—chance so that our free will should not be annihilated. Jarry borrowed this theory and deployed it as the principle of all reality, of all thought, and of all artistic creation. Moreover, the clinamen is one of the foundations of Pataphysics as Jarry defined it and as the Collège de Pataphysique adopted and endeavors to practice it. This reminder is useful if one wishes to understand the Oulipian interpretation of the clinamen, for the latter conforms to Jarry's own and to that of the Collège de Pataphysique. In applying constraints, especially those constraints which we call "heavy" (difficult, rigorous constraints), the clinamen is a sort of freedom offered to the writer: the latter is free not to follow the

constraint if, at any given moment, it proves unworkable, if it prevents the production of the text, if it constitutes an impossible barrier. It's a means of getting the text back on its feet, of launching once again into the use of the constraint itself. In other words, the text stalls, and it must be started up again: this is how the Oulipo conceives the clinamen.

WM: Hasn't that been systematized in certain structures, that is, aren't there structures wherein the intervention of the clinamen is previously programmed?

NA: Absolutely. The most rigorous Oulipians program the clinamen, that is, they force themselves to use it only a certain number of times, in places which are themselves programmed. There, the perfection of the Oulipian clinamen is attained.

WM: What sort of possibilities does computer science offer to the Oulipo?

NA: The Oulipo was one of the first (in France, of course) to use computers for literary creation, and not merely for linguistic quantification (among other uses known at the time). The presence within the Oulipo of a renowned computer scientist, Paul Braffort, explains this anteriority. The *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* served to demonstrate, to the Oulipians themselves first of all, the infinite possibilities of combinatorics. When the Oulipo began to give public workshops, around 1973, a computer, working on Queneau's book, became a great attraction (somewhat in the music hall or circus sense of the word) of these workshops. Everyone could construct their own personal poem, signed, dated, even with the precise time the poem was constructed. Today, that may seem a bit childish, but I feel strongly that the Oulipo, thanks to Paul Braffort, contributed to interesting the public in computers; it presented the computer to the public in a new and pleasant light. More profoundly, this literary use of the computer interested several writers and, soon thereafter, teachers. Today, the use of computers is commonplace, especially in schools; here in France, it's one of the methods of teaching reading and writing. Apart from Braffort, several Oulipians have become rather specialized in computer science; they were founding members of an association for the use of the computer in literary creation. The

president of this association (called ALAMO) is Jacques Roubaud, by the way.

WM: Ludism is one of the capital aspects of Oulipian work: to what extent does the insistence on the ludic character of the literary text harm the group?

NA: Well, for us, the word "game" has no pejorative connotations. However, your question proves that the Oulipo ought to render its position regarding "games" more precise. It would be regrettable if Oulipian work seemed *only* to play, to play in order to win, to win a trophy, a laurel wreath, a good grade, or a check. The Oulipo is not a vocational school preparing people for radio or television game shows. Overcoming a difficulty is not enough to our way of thinking; the real goal is to use constraints (new constraints, if possible) to write a work. When the Oulipo was founded, "word games," very popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had fallen largely out of favor. In primary school, in secondary school, at the university, few teachers dared to use them as means of awakening their students to literature. Any teacher who dared to introduce the study and practice of the pun, the spoonerism, the palindrome, the tautogram, and the like into the academic program would have been sent directly to the principal. In 1960, the Oulipo was thus right to suggest study and serious use of literary games: twenty-five years later, all these "philological pleasantries" are common fare, and Oulipian work is often used in class to render literature attractive to students. We, of course, have no objection to that. We simply regret that, for certain people, the Oulipo's vocation is limited to amusing little children or to keeping students awake in class. We must constantly return to the Oulipo's goal, as Queneau defined it: to propose structures or constraints (derived or not from literary games, word games, etc.) to writers so that they may construct works. Literary games have existed since people began to write. Our Greek and Roman ancestors, our cultural ancestors, multiplied word games, games on words, games on and with letters, and so forth. For the Oulipo, these games are interesting only if they result in a work which, through its workmanship and its content, apart from the difficulties it overcomes, captivates the reader. There may be gratuitous games in it which, in a sense, are self-contained (and Oulipians love to play them: the pleasure of play is no less intense than the pleasure of writing or

reading). In the strictest sense, there is no gratuitous literary creation, because one must succeed in producing a work, publishing it, and . . . finding a number, more or less great, of readers.

WM: Might one say that the ludic aspect of the act of production is mirrored in the act of reception?

NA: Strictly speaking (pushing things, I realize), no reader should be able to discover, alone, after a first reading, the structure or structures which enabled the work to be created; otherwise, in a certain sense, the work is a failure. The second reading can be analytic and can lead the reader to recognize such and such a structure or constraint. This second reading engenders another sort of pleasure. Don't forget that if Queneau hadn't himself revealed, long after the novel's publication, certain of the mathematical constraints he imposed upon himself in writing *Le Chiendent,* we would still be looking for them . . . or we would have abandoned the search.

WM: Until now, we've talked mostly about the theoretical aspect of Oulipian work; is there any sort of theoretical unanimity within the Oulipo?

NA: Yes, unanimity exists concerning the fundamental principles. The Oulipo itself, institutionally if you wish, constitutes a "poetics," but to say that there is *a* poetics would be excessive: that would presume that Oulipian methods and processes result in works which can be defined within a literary school, within a certain literary form: like Jacques Pelletier du Mans theorizing upon the Pléiade. In fact, that's impossible; Oulipian methods permit the creation of works whose inspiration is radically different (Romantic, Surrealist, Classical) and which differ both in form and genre. Moreover, the task which the Oulipo has set itself—the invention of new structures, an unlimited task—would render any Oulipian poetics precarious. There are processes of literary creation the Oulipo emphasizes or invents, that's all one can say. The rather modest intentions of the Oulipo must be remembered. It's a *workroom;* we work scrupulously, in a rather finicky fashion. One mustn't attribute to the Oulipo ambitions it has never held. Perhaps we could return for a moment to the notion of the aleatory, and recall that the Oulipo thinks of itself as "anti-chance."

WM: As Claude Berge once said?

NA: Yes, it was Claude Berge who introduced this expression. One could amplify it perhaps, but it's still true. Not that the Oulipo denies chance, which would be absurd, but that it intends to reduce the intervention of chance as much as possible. It might be argued that when we use the clinamen we fall back on inspiration, on chance. Yes, but we reduce to a minimum the zone in which chance can appear: we endeavor to control chance. And, above all, chance is not the basis for poetic creation, as the Oulipo conceives it. Obviously, it can intervene in spite of everything; it's up to us to avoid its consequences as far as possible, or at any rate to be altogether conscious of it and to channel its intervention into precise places in the text.

WM: Does the theoretical aspect of Oulipian work ever come into conflict with the practical aspect?

NA: Fundamentally, in Oulipian work there is no opposition between theory and practice, if one considers that theory, for us, is the invention and definition of new structures. In order for the osmosis, or interpenetration, of theory and practice to be still more manifest, we have for several years applied a principle elaborated by Jacques Roubaud, according to which the definition of a constraint must be written according to the rule that constraint expresses.

WM: To return once again to a historical perspective, to what degree has the Oulipo remained faithful through the years to its founding principles?

NA: I think that in spite of all the temptations which each Oulipian individually and the Oulipo as a whole has been subjected to, the Oulipo has remained sufficiently faithful to its founding principles. For many years with Raymond Queneau, longer still with François Le Lionnais, we had people who wouldn't permit the slightest deviation from the principles established at the Oulipo's foundation. And it turns out that since Le Lionnais's death we have remained under the absolute ascendancy of these principles.

WM: Oulipian writings seem to be, for the moment at least, a

more or less apolitical corpus. Is there any political dimension in Oulipian work?

NA: No, no, actually politics, even in its noble sense, has never been discussed in the Oulipo. Between the two of us (I'm commiting an indiscretion here which contradicts what I just said), I can say that the political preferences of the members of the Oulipo range from the far left to the right—I'm certain there are no Fascists among us—without counting the people who are indifferent to the question. There has never been any political discussion in the Oulipo, in spite of the diversity and apparent opposition of opinions. Certain people among us have known certain others for many years, and we also know the political positions that we took at different times; in spite of that, there has never been any political discussion.

WM: Twenty-five years is a long time: what explains this longevity, and what guarantees the Oulipo's continued survival?

NA: That question allows me to clarify my answer to the one which preceded. One of the reasons for the Oulipo's longevity is surely its refusal to take any position whatever in political debates, each member being free, of course, to act politically as he wishes apart from the Oulipo. And this again differentiates the Oulipo from the groups which preceded it and contemporary groups. That's also why we continue to be rather reticent about calling ourselves a "group." Another reason for the longevity you alluded to is that (it seems a bit ridiculous to say it) we have always respected the rules of *savoir-vivre,* among others, the respect of each member's personal life, his intimate life, the refusal to inject personal problems into our work, and still less to bind them up in the latter. And that too is something one rarely finds in collectivities of ten to fifteen members during twenty-five years. I was saying that we had always applied the rules of *savoir-vivre;* Le Lionnais once affirmed that to be a member of the Oulipo one must be kind, tolerant, courteous, and, granted that all members are named by cooptation, these social qualities, this sociability, count heavily when we choose new members to replace those who have died (for resignation doesn't exist in the Oulipo: a chair becomes vacant only when its titulary dies). The Oulipo is really a *workroom,* that is, a sewing circle where ladies knit socks for poor people and consequently don't fight among themselves (they may gossip, that's

another matter): they are of one mind concerning the socks. To be a bit more serious, the Oulipo is very similar to a salon—as the Académie Française was intended to be, moreover—where one has to be polite and agreeable. The refusal to introduce politics into the Oulipo's life and these rules of *savoir-vivre* explain in large measure its longevity. Now, as to the Oulipo's continued survival, that depends upon its collective and individual will, the upholding of its recruiting rules and, more importantly, the reserves of Oulipian potentiality, thus the faculty for renewing these reserves. And actually that depends upon each member in particular and upon the orientation which must be maintained.

WM: Is there a pedagogical vocation within the Oulipo?

NA: There is not and never has been a pedagogical vocation in the Oulipo. And it's all the more remarkable in that several of its members are teachers. What happened was that as soon as Oulipian structures, constraints, and processes were revealed and disseminated, teachers, openminded and conscientious about their work, saw in Oulipian methods (in some at least) possibilities for interesting their students in literature, all the more so because certain of our exercises and examples are amusing. Nevertheless, the Oulipo's vocation is not to teach reading and writing to children and adolescents. The Oulipo should not usurp the functions of the educational system. The Oulipo's self-imposed *raison d'être* is "the search for new forms and structures which may be used by writers in any way they see fit": those are Queneau's very words. Thus, we work for ourselves. Pure research is sufficient for us. If writers—let's be clear on this: writers—wish to use our structures, we shall be very satisfied. Our goal thus is not to teach reading and writing to children and adolescents, but if our structures nourish the taste for writing in some of the former, so much the better, we'll be delighted. Finally, just as structure cannot guarantee genius, the Oulipo cannot fabricate writers. These children and adolescents must affirm *themselves* as writers, with or without Oulipian structures.

WM: In your opinion, is the Oulipo beginning to get a bit long in the tooth?

NA: Yes, in fact, the Oulipo is as old as Eternity, to the extent

that we're not the first to deal with the problems which preoccupy us.
No, one thing is certain: chronologically, the Oulipo is the first
contemporary institution to pose the problem of the relations of
mathematics and poetry, of structure and imagination. And, having
been the first, the oldest, can sometimes give the impression of being
elderly, even to Oulipians themselves. Without a doubt, the Oulipo
has been widely imitated, but always partially. And it has been very
useful. Does this mean that it's old? In any case, concerning the age of
its arteries, of its members, it has integrated young people in recent
years who will be able to pursue the Oulipo's activity for (I hope for
their sake) at least a half-century.

WM: At the present time, what are the temptations that must be
avoided?

NA: There are several. The most dangerous, I think, has been
and still remains pedagogism. This is a result of having been drawn
into organizing and animating workshops at the invitation of various
cultural associations, many of these workshops being oriented toward
teachers. Certain Oulipians have acquired a taste for this sort of thing,
and as I have personally participated in many workshops, I don't
exclude myself from that category. What's most bizarre about it is
that it is the non-teachers among us who have been the most readily
seduced, as though they had some sort of repressed pedagogical wish.
To their credit, it must be said that after a long period of secrecy, of
cloistered life, it was pleasant to breathe a bit, to meet new people, to
test the effect of our methods on these new people we met in
workshops. Moreover, these workshops put us in contact with
sympathetic teachers who encouraged us to pursue our efforts. Thus,
one can easily understand that there was a certain attraction in seeing
these teachers, who were rather different from the ordinary sort. Now,
a certain weariness has resulted from these workshops. First of all,
several of our constraints are very widely used in the schools. Second,
we realized that these worshops, quite simply, took a lot of our time, to
the detriment of our research. And finally, we found that entirely new
processes, which we hadn't yet published, but which we generously
proposed to the participants in the worshops, were being divulged and
(I must say) in most cases very poorly used. It wasn't their divulga-
tion that bothered us; after all, from the moment an Oulipian method is
made public by Oulipians themselves, it belongs to everyone. No,

what bothers us is the poor manner in which these new processes are used, a premature use, as if a new medicine were put on the market without having been thoroughly tested, first on animals, then on patients in hospitals, and so forth (generally on individuals who are about to die in any case). That's what bothers us a bit: people use these processes before their interest, their efficacity, has been firmly established. It bothers us because an Oulipian who invents a structure or a constraint submits this structure or constraint to the Oulipo as a whole; the Oulipo analyses, criticizes, and tries this proposition out. When the structure or constraint has undergone many tests, like a medicine, it receives the label "Oulipo," its seal of quality; only then is it inscribed on the list of Oulipian processes and disseminated. In these workshops, we offer new processes which are then disseminated without verification. Our second temptation (in a desire to remedy these problems, precisely) has been to cut ourselves off from public life for three years, four years, or the time needed to prepare a new book, a new anthology of our work. Finally, we adopted a measure which might be called equivocal, but which resulted from much thought: from 1986 onward (because through 1985 we have committed ourselves to certain things), we will only participate in workshops designed around certain well-defined topics. For instance, we have been invited to organize a workshop on the short story, another on autobiography. If these invitations are confirmed, the Oulipo has decided to accept. Another reason for our acceptance, perhaps the most important: the Oulipo has never worked on the short story or autobiography. In these workshops, then, the Oulipo will be working for itself; we shall thus conciliate contradictory needs.

WM: A final question if you will. You have just returned from the Oulipian Congress which, apparently, was very productive; granted that the Oulipo will continue to produce, what will be the tenor of its future work, and to whom will the latter address itself?

NA: For the time being, without revealing any secrets, I can say that the Oulipian Congress which was just held, in May 1985, adopted the resolution I just spoke of concerning workshops. Another one, far more important still, was also adopted: that of publishing a third volume of its work. In that regard, we developed a plan and sketched out a table of contents which is wholly unlike that of our previous volumes. Our point of departure will no longer be constraints

and structures invented or reinvented by the Oulipo, but rather
literature itself. We shall revisit the latter through Oulipian
constraints and structures. There will be several chapters: history
revisited, that is, application of Oulipian scholarship and practices to
both literary history and history of science. And then there will be a
second chapter, provisionally entitled "Revivified Literary Forms,"
where the emphasis will be on forms and genres, rather than on
linguistic operations. Naturally, there will be a conclusion, which will
endeavor to establish a reckoning of twenty-five years of activity, an
assessment of the research, the literary practice which resulted from
the latter. Last but not least, the volume will include a glossary which
will closely define the Oulipian acceptation of selected terms. If we
can muster enough pluck, we'll make the glossary itself into a literary
work, like Michel Leiris's *J'y serre mes gloses;* if not, we'll define each
Oulipian term (and, I should say, all the terms of literature) as well as
possible. Fundamentally, this book will be a guide to literature,
dealing with all genres, all literary forms, and the entire history of
literature.

Translated by Warren F. Motte, Jr.