

Inspiration and the Oulipo

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Few writers these days claim to have been inspired. As Timothy Clark writes at the beginning of his recent book *The Theory of Inspiration*: “‘Inspiration’ seems a spurious and exploded theory of the sources of literary power” (1). The word “seems” is crucial, because, as Clark shows, the notion of inspiration, with its changing set of meanings, keeps returning to name a crisis in subjectivity that has been associated with literary composition from Plato to the present day. The theory of inspiration may have been exploded, but critics and philosophers keep reassembling it in different ways. If writers hesitate to speak of inspiration, it is not usually because they claim to possess a complete and self-sufficient method for literary composition. It is because of the term’s embarrassing associations. Many of these associations can be traced back to Plato, who, in the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus*, introduced a radical disjunction between inspiration and technique.

In the *Ion*, Socrates argues that poetry is not an art or craft (*techne*), as it does not have a unitary object of its own (like divination, arithmetic, medicine, painting, sculpture or music), about which poets could speak with special authority (531a-533c).¹ It is, he says, a divine gift (534b, 536d). But being possessed by the Muse completely deprives the poet of reason (535b-e; Canto 48-49). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates contrasts the merely proficient with the inspired poet:

But if a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he

and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman. (245a)

This passage was central to the Renaissance theory of *furor poeticus*, as elaborated by Ficino and other neo-Platonists, and subsequently to certain Romantic theories of inspiration, such as Shelley's (Murray 11). But, as Penelope Murray has shown, the *Phaedrus* as a whole is consistent with Plato's project of subordinating poetry to philosophy, and conquering Homer's central position in the Greek education system (11-22). This project is explicit in the *Republic*, where Socrates famously recommends that Homer and his fellow poets be banished from the ideal society (398b2-3, 401b1-3).

The attack on poetry in the *Republic* turns on the notion of mimesis, but what will concern me here is the disjunction between technique and inspiration, developed at length in the *Ion*. This disjunction continues to inform our talk about literary composition. While few contemporary writers claim to be inspired, many admit to having suffered writer's block and most would recognize that their composition proceeds by fits and starts that method cannot master entirely. This is not necessarily a source of anguish, even in a period that has seen the industrial value of productivity gaining ground in the literary field (Bourdieu 22). Some writers, however, refine and reflect on their methods in the hope of extending rational control over the process of composition. Such is the aim of the French collective known as the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, Workshop of Potential Literature).

Does it follow that the members of the Oulipo are latter-day Platonists, hostile to inspiration? I will be arguing that there is no single, simple answer to the question, since the members of the Oulipo have adopted a range of positions. For the radical formalists in the group (notably François Le Lionnais and Marcel Bénabou), the mission of the Oulipo is to develop a sort of literary artificial intelligence, and thus to prepare the way for the automated production of literary texts. They accept Plato's disjunction between technique and inspiration but argue, against Plato, that literature is a genuine technique. What is more, for Bénabou and Le Lionnais, literary composition can, in the long term, be entirely formalized by making its rules explicit and expressing them with mathematical rigor.

Jacques Roubaud, on the other hand, advocates a craftsman-like approach to potential literature, and has developed a poetics in which formalization is complemented by traditional imitation. This approach is strongly exemplified by Georges Perec, a virtuoso of writing under constraints, but also a tireless and subtle imitator of models. Both Roubaud and Perec reject inspiration in theory, but the kind of imitation they practice is not reducible to the formal procedures advocated by Le Lionnais and Bénabou. It has an important non-technical aspect. It can lead to a particular kind of inspiration, described by Longinus, which permits the writer to extrapolate a precursor's style.

Finally, for Raymond Queneau, co-founder of the Oulipo, the efforts and intentions of the writer must be confirmed by "the unpredictable" and "the unknown." In the late nineteen-thirties and early nineteen-seventies, he called this confirmation "inspiration," attempting to keep his distance from the term's habitual associations by using it in paradoxical formulations or placing it between scare-quotes. In texts from the intervening period, Queneau avoided possible confusions by opting for periphrasis. Nevertheless, in all phases of his writing, he pointed consistently to an indispensable factor in literary composition that exceeds both formalization and imitation, but is in no way inimical to either.

Comparing the positions of various members of the Oulipo on the question of inspiration reveals that there is no consensus. The tolerance of disagreement is one of the Oulipo's strengths. Its members do not have to commit themselves to a particular theoretical line, since the coherence of the group—proved by its remarkable longevity—is grounded elsewhere, in an amateur mode of functioning and a shared sense of fun. The comparison also shows, however, that when the radical formalists in the Oulipo appeal to the authority of Queneau in repudiating inspiration, they are distorting the poetic of the group's co-founder.

A recent book containing lectures on the Oulipo by members of the group is entitled *Un art simple et tout d'exécution*. This is a quotation from François Le Lionnais's second Oulipian manifesto, which opens with the claim: "La poésie est un art simple et tout d'exécution" 'Poetry is a simple art, all in the doing' (Oulipo, *Littérature* 23). Le Lionnais's manifestoes are light-hearted in tone, but

this claim is no joke. It is founded on the belief that abstraction and formalization will be enabling in literature as in mathematics. In “From Craft-Industry to Technology and Science (or Bhaskara, Hercule Poirot, Dick Francis and the Oulipopo,” he invites writers of crime fiction to embark on the “ascent towards abstraction and formalization,” which will open new perspectives for the genre (Oulipo, *Compendium* 261). When he mentions inspiration in his first manifesto, it is with a certain irony:

Tout œuvre littéraire se construit à partir d’une inspiration (c’est du moins ce que son auteur laisse entendre) qui est tenue à s’accommoder tant bien que mal d’une série de contraintes et de procédures qui rentrent les unes dans les autres comme des poupées russes. (Oulipo, *Littérature* 20)

Every literary work begins with an inspiration (at least that’s what its author suggests) which must accommodate itself as well as possible to a series of constraints and procedures that fit inside each other like Chinese boxes. (Trans. Warren Motte, Oulipo, *Oulipo Laboratory* XVIII)

For Le Lionnais, the inspiration still invoked by authors is a provisionally unformalized remainder. It may finally be eliminated by formulating new constraints at higher levels of abstraction. Marcel Bénabou agrees in “La règle et la contrainte”:

C’est donc le paradoxe de l’écriture sous contrainte que de posséder ainsi une double vertu de libération qui permettra un jour d’évincer la notion même de l’inspiration. (104)

It is thus the paradox of writing under constraint that it possesses a double virtue of liberation, which may one day permit us to supplant the very notion of inspiration. (Trans. Warren Motte, Oulipo, *Primer* 43)

On this view, inspiration is an illusion or a superstition to be dissipated progressively by science (in the form of constraints). Yet one does not have to invest the constraint with this historic mission to be convinced of its value. Jacques Roubaud, for instance, holds that the constraint is a “principle and not a means,” but does not claim that it is literature’s sole or fundamental principle (Oulipo, *Atlas* 55). He is a prolific inventor of constraints, but his writing is

also deeply informed by the traditional practices of memorization, imitation and oral composition.

In *Poésie*: Roubaud explains how over many years he selected poems to form a personal canon, copied them out by hand, learnt them by heart and repeated them to himself to maintain their mnemonic traces (38-40). In this way he incorporated a portable library, which constitutes the background against which his own poems have been composed. As a rule he composes mentally and orally, while walking (15). For him, poetry is, or should be, a bodily activity like playing a musical instrument:

Il paraît inconcevable à beaucoup de considérer l'art de poésie aussi comme un art de la main, de la bouche, qui demande exercices, entraînement, application. Apprendre à "jouer" de la poésie, c'est-à-dire mettre des poèmes dans sa tête et les restituer pour soi-même ou pour d'autres devrait être aussi naturel que de se mettre au violon, à la viole de gambe, à la guitare, au saxophone ou à l'ordinateur.

Many people have a great deal of trouble imagining the art of poetry as an art of the hand and the mouth, requiring exercises, training and application. Learning to "play" poetry, by which I mean lodging poems in one's head and reproducing them for oneself and for others, should be as natural as taking up the violin, the viola da gamba, the guitar, the saxophone or the computer. (Roubaud 228)²

Roubaud's "playing" of poetry is guided by a set of procedures, some of which were formalized by the arts of memory from antiquity to the Renaissance (37-49). But, like playing music, it is not simply a matter of technique. Since both kinds of playing are bodily activities, they are necessarily affected by desires, emotions, fatigue and habits beyond conscious control. Memorized models, for example, cannot always be retrieved intact at will, as Roubaud admits (47). Models may also be lodged in memory unconsciously.

Roubaud has little to say about how the physical performance of existing poetry conditions the composition of new poems. But clearly it does so in ways that cannot be reduced to the rule-based transformations practiced extensively by Oulipo, such as the S+7 method and other "homomorphisms" (*Atlas* 143-70). The memory-based imitation that Roubaud defends, alongside the formulation

of constraints, is an archaic practice that goes beyond re-processing a set of lexical items, grammatical structures, rhythmic patterns and so on. It is a quasi-dialogical activity, in which the precursor is felt to be present not simply as a corpus of texts but as a personal style that may be extrapolated to kinds of material figuring nowhere in the corpus.

This non-technical aspect of imitation was underlined by the author of *On the Sublime* when he stated that writers could be possessed and inspired by their precursors as well as by the Muses (Longinus 119). Georges Perec was adept at inducing such possession through what he called over-reading (“la lecture à outrance”) (“Pouvoirs” 36). When he was composing *Les Choses* Perec re-read *L'Éducation sentimentale* again and again, steeping himself in Flaubert's prose style and working verbatim quotations seamlessly into his own text (Perec, “Emprunts à Flaubert” 49; Bellos 290). *Un homme qui dort* grew out of the over-reading of Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Kafka's diaries (Perec, “Pouvoirs” 36). Perec's strategy of implicit quotation was built into the system of constraints for *La Vie mode d'emploi*. Most of the chapters contain two quotations from a list of 20 authors (Perec, *Cahier*, no page numbers). A græco-latin bi-square of order 10 determines which authors from the list are quoted in each chapter, while the constitution of the list and the selection of the particular quotations both reflect Perec's affinities and memories, which were, perforce, involuntary to a large degree.

The texts he quotes are not, or not only, the canonical models imposed by a tradition. They are the texts he went on re-reading with sustained pleasure:

je lis peu, mais je relis sans cesse, Flaubert et Jules Verne, Roussel et Kafka, Leiris et Queneau; je relis les livres que j'aime et j'aime les livres que je relis, et chaque fois avec la même jouissance, que je relise vingt pages ou le livre entier: celle d'une complicité, d'une connivence, ou plus encore, au-delà, celle d'une parenté enfin retrouvée. (*W, ou le souvenir de l'enfance* 195)

I do not read much, but I have never stopped re-reading Flaubert and Jules Verne, Roussel and Kafka, Leiris and Queneau; I re-read the books I love and I love the books I re-read, and each time it is the

same enjoyment, whether I re-read twenty pages, three chapters, or the whole book: an enjoyment of complicity, of collusion, or more especially, and in addition, of having in the end found kin again. (Trans. David Bellos, Perec, *W, or the Memory of Childhood* 143)

Sometimes the pleasure of re-reading was a guilty one for Perec. In an interview he said that for a long time he was convinced he would never become a real writer because he preferred Agatha Christie to Faulkner, Jules Verne to Martin du Gard, Gaston Leroux to Saint-Exupéry and Luc Bradfer to Virgil. He added that he also used to believe there was a lake under the Paris Opera ("Entretien" 7). He was, I believe, implying that as well as choosing models, a writer is chosen by them, and must, beyond a certain point, trust his or her own bad taste.

Roubaud and Perec re-appropriated the practice of imitation and rejected the doctrine of inspiration. No doubt they were reacting to romantic versions of the doctrine, in which inspiration is an attribute of genius. Perec and Roubaud see themselves more modestly, in materialist terms, as craftsmen at work on a language (Oulipo, *Littérature* 75). For them, inspiration is an outdated, elitist myth. In the epilogue to *La Disparition*, Perec defends his use of the lipogram, claiming that it stimulates imagination as well or better than the mysterious sources of creativity that authors have traditionally invoked:

lui, qui n'avait pas pour un carat d'inspiration (il n'y croyait pas, par surcroît, à l'inspiration!) s'y montrait au moins aussi imaginatif qu'un Ponson ou un Paulhan. (*La Disparition* 310)

I, as an author, having not an iota of inspiration (and, in addition, placing no faith at all in inspiration as a Platonic form!) was displaying in this book just as much imagination as a Ponson or a Paulhan. (Trans. Gilbert Adair, *A Void* 282)

Constraints may stimulate the imagination, but cannot be said to generate it. Sometimes, as common sense suggests, a constraint may prove inhibiting. On the other hand, Jacques Roubaud observes that intense and prolonged writing under constraint may bring the writer to a point at which he or she no longer feels constrained and

is borne along by a “second wind.” He cites the example of Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi* (*Oulipo Compendium* 41). This 600-page novel was written in less than eighteen months. Many chapters were completed in a day. Except in a few sections, the revisions of the first draft are minimal (Bellos 620-23).

Nevertheless Roubaud stops short of describing Perec’s “second wind” as a case of inspiration. He is hostile to the notion for reasons that go beyond the materialist outlook he shared with Perec. He began to write poetry under Surrealism, as it were, and soon found the powerful influence of Éluard, in particular, debilitating (*Poésie*: 104). The surrealist conception of inspiration was paralyzing for Roubaud because of its inverted Platonism. The Romantics had internalized inspiration; the Surrealists located it in the unconscious. Nevertheless they followed Plato faithfully in opposing it to technique. They resemble the rhapsode Ion at the end of the dialogue that bears his name, gladly accepting the qualification “divinely inspired” even though this entails being completely deprived of reason (542b).

For Roubaud, the Surrealist exaltation of the unconscious was threatening. The poetic project he formulated in the early sixties demanded sustained and intensive technical work precisely in order to keep certain thoughts in the unconscious: the memory of his brother’s suicide and the temptation of despair (*Poésie*: 109-10). He found analogical support for his rejection of inspiration in an idea implicitly underlying Bourbaki’s mathematics: intuition is dangerous and leads the mathematician astray; Hilbert’s axiomatic method is the only guide he or she needs (*Poésie*: 107). In line with this idea, he formulated the following “severe axiom”: “Je n’ai pas d’inspiration mathématique; je n’ai pas besoin d’inspiration en poésie” ‘I am not inspired in mathematics; I don’t need inspiration in poetry’ (*Poésie*: 107). He even converts the lack of mathematical inspiration into a literary advantage:

Et pourtant, quand je vois comment souvent des mathématiciens réellement créateurs (et beaucoup plus que je ne le fus jamais moi-même) parlent de l’opération mentale et matérielle de création en mathématique, je suis sûr que j’aurais été incapable de me séparer en poésie de l’idée ‘bateau’ d’inspiration . . . si j’avais déjà connu l’expérience de l’invention en algèbre, par exemple; car ils ont la même vision pauvre et

triste, et transmettent avec un bel enthousiasme les idées reçues les plus banales sur la CRÉATION qui transcendent largement les frontières des disciplines et comblent allègrement le fossé entre les “deux cultures” (scientifiques et littéraires).

And yet, when I see how truly creative mathematicians (much more creative than I ever was myself) often speak about the mental and material operation of mathematical creation, I am convinced that, as a poet, I would have been unable to part with the worn-out idea of inspiration . . . if I had known what it was like to come up with, say, algebraic inventions; for they have the same poor, sad vision, and, brimming with enthusiasm, hand on the most banal received ideas about CREATION, ideas that circulate unimpeded by interdisciplinary boundaries and cheerfully fill in the gulf between the two cultures (literary and scientific). (*Poésie*: 109)

Here it seems more important to Roubaud not to subscribe to a cliché about inspiration than to have made an inspired discovery. His position seems to be determined more by reaction to a commonly held opinion than by a conviction about the truth of the matter.

In the last two paragraphs, I have been suggesting that Roubaud's abiding hostility to the notion of inspiration is over-determined. It is due in part to a materialist outlook that he shared with Perec and many other contemporaries, but it also stems from a personal argument with Surrealism, specific psychological necessities and an aversion to received ideas.

No doubt Roubaud found support for his rejection of Surrealism in Queneau's critical writings and his novel *Odile*. At the end of the nineteen-twenties Queneau had to break with Breton's group in order to recover his freedom as a writer. He denounced the surrealist version of inspiration in vehement articles first published in the late thirties and later collected in *Le Voyage en Grèce* (1973). Given Roubaud's close association with Queneau, it is tempting to assume that the younger writer distanced himself from Surrealism for the same reasons as his master, and adopted the same position on the question of inspiration. But we need to tread warily, for recent studies and the publication of Queneau's journals have shown what an elusive and mercurial author he was.

In *Odile*, Queneau has Roland Travy say: “Le véritable inspiré n'est jamais inspiré, il l'est toujours” “The really inspired person

is never inspired: he's always inspired' (159; trans. Carole Sanders 101). This sentence has often been read as a formalist challenge to the doctrine of inspiration. Jean Lescure, for example, glosses it as follows:

Qu'est-ce à dire? Comment! cette chose si rare, l'inspiration, ce don des dieux qui fait le poète et que ce malheureux n'arrive même pas à mériter à tous les coups par les pires douleurs cardiaques, cette illumination venue on ne sait d'où, il se pourrait qu'elle cessât d'être capricieuse et que tout un chacun la trouvât fidèle et consentante à son désir? On n'a pas assez remarqué quelle révolution grave, quelle mutation brusque cette simple phrase introduisait dans une conception de la littérature encore toute livrée aux effusions romantiques et à l'exaltation de la subjectivité. En fait cette phrase impliquait la conception révolutionnaire de l'objectivité de la littérature et ouvrait, dès lors, celle-ci à tous les modes de manipulation possibles. (Oulipo, *Littérature* 32)

What does this mean? What? This thing so rare, inspiration, this gift of the gods which makes the poet, and which this unhappy man never quite deserves in spite of all his heartaches, this enlightenment coming from who knows where, is it possible that it might cease to be capricious, and that any and everybody might find it faithful and compliant to his desires? The serious revolution, the sudden change this simple sentence introduced into a conception of literature still wholly dominated by romantic effusions and the exaltation of subjectivity, has never been fully analyzed. In fact, this sentence implied the revolutionary conception of the objectivity of literature, and from that time forward opened the latter to all possible modes of manipulation. (Trans. Warren Motte, Oulipo, Primer 34-35)

For Lescure, the sentence from *Odile* heralds a democratization of inspiration, a revolution in literary composition giving everyone ("tout un chacun") access to what was once the preserve of an élite. Yet in *Odile* and the article "Le Plus et le moins," which repeats and develops Travy's argumentation, Queneau is not imagining a revolution so much as a restoration. In the manuscript of *Odile*, Travy, after describing the continuously inspired poet, says: "Mais j'avoue n'avoir jusqu'à présent rencontré un tel poète" 'But I admit that I have not yet met such a poet' (*Ceuvres complètes* II 1579). This admission is echoed in "Le plus et le moins":

Et si l'on prétend qu'un tel poète n'existe pas, je répondrai: ce n'est pas parce que les poètes modernes sont réduits à une inspiration discontinuë qu'il faut les consoler en leur disant que ce moins dont ils souffrent est un plus.

And if it is objected that such a poet does not exist, I will reply: the fact that modern poets are reduced to a discontinuous inspiration is no reason to console them by saying that the minus with which they are afflicted is a plus. (*Voyage* 127)

The implication of the word modern is that such poets have existed in the past, and in the long quotation from René Daumal's analysis of traditional Indian poetics that closes "Le Plus et le Moins," this implication is explicitly confirmed:

De tels poètes existent-ils? Certes, la Terre en a porté. Et si les poètes classiques de l'Inde post-bouddhique ne sont pas plus que les nôtres de tels poètes, c'est pourtant cette idée du poète qui a guidé et fécondé les efforts des meilleurs d'entre eux.

Do such poets exist? Some have certainly walked the earth. And if the classical poets of post-Buddhist India fall short of this idea of the poet, as ours do, it is nevertheless an idea that has guided and fecundated the efforts of the best among them. (*Voyage* 128; Daumal 77)

In the late 1930s, Queneau did not situate his ideal poet in a utopic future of formalized poetics. Nor did he follow Daumal in the attempt to graft his writing onto an ancient tradition with origins beyond Europe. His models were Homer and Dante, but also his near-contemporaries Marcel Proust and James Joyce (*Bâtons* 223-28; *Voyage* 130-35). Having exposed his ideas on inspiration in "Le Plus et le moins," Queneau went on, in his next essay for *Volontés*, to cite Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Work in Progress* as examples of the "continuous and transcendent inspiration" he had held up as an ideal (*Voyage* 133).

Contrary to Lescure's reading of the sentence from *Odile* ("Le véritable inspiré n'est jamais inspiré, il l'est toujours"), the continuous inspiration exemplified by Joyce is not a matter of formalization or technique. For the polemical Queneau of the *Volontés* articles, Joyce was not principally a technical innovator, but the legitimate

heir to Homer: “j’espère expliquer dans un article ultérieur comment son rattachement direct à Homère exprime la vérité dernière de la littérature occidentale” ‘I hope to explain in a further article how his direct link to Homer expresses the latest (or ultimate) truth of Western literature’ (*Voyage* 134). The “further article” was never published, but it is clear that for Queneau, during this phase of his writing life, inspiration was more a matter of transmission and tradition than of rupture and innovation. And “le véritable inspiré” was a rare specimen at best. There is no suggestion in *Odile* or in “Le Plus et le Moins” that true inspiration will soon be freely available to all.

To get a clearer sense of how Queneau conceived true inspiration we need to replace the sentence from *Odile* in its context:

Prenez cet autre exemple: l’inspiration. On l’oppose à la technique et l’on se propose de posséder de façon constante l’inspiration en reniant toute technique, même celle qui consiste à attribuer un sens aux mots. Que voit-on alors? l’inspiration disparaître: on peut difficilement tenir pour inspirés ceux qui dévident des rouleaux de métaphores et débobinent des pelotes de calembours . . . J’imagine au contraire que le vrai poète n’est jamais “inspiré”: il se situe précisément au dessus de ce plus et de ce moins, identiques pour lui, que sont la technique et l’inspiration, identiques car il les possède suré-minemment toutes deux. Le véritable inspiré n’est jamais inspiré: il l’est toujours; il ne cherche pas l’inspiration et ne s’irrite contre aucune technique. (158-59)

Take another example: inspiration. They see inspiration as the opposite of artistic technique and they aim to have a constant supply of inspiration by rejecting technique, even the technique that gives meaning to words. So what do we get? Inspiration vanishes: you can hardly use the word inspiration for people who roll off strings of metaphors and reel off puns by the yard . . . Quite the opposite, I don’t believe that a true poet is ever “inspired”: both the lowest and the highest denominator are beneath him, he’s above technique and inspiration, which comes to the same thing as far as he’s concerned, because he’s in full possession of both of them. The really inspired person is never inspired: he’s always inspired: he doesn’t go looking for inspiration and he doesn’t get up in arms about artistic technique. (Trans. Carole Sanders 100-01)

The first time Travy uses the word “inspired,” Queneau puts in

scare-quotes to make it clear that he is talking about the Surrealist (or Platonic) version of inspiration: a supposed surrender to the unconscious (or the possessing Muse). He imagines that for the "true poet" technique is a plus and this sort of inspiration a minus. Nevertheless the true poet possesses both "super-eminently." He or she does not reject the contributions of the unconscious but considers them from a point of view metaphorically above or beyond the Platonic opposition of inspiration to technique. When Travy says that the truly inspired poet is never inspired, he means that such a poet never abandons this point of view, never lets chance or the drift of subconscious thought determine the nature of the work. When he says that the truly inspired poet is always inspired, he is attributing a different meaning to the word. Inspiration in this second sense refers to decisions made from the point of view above or beyond the inspiration / technique opposition: decisions about the relative values of unconscious givens, about which techniques to use and when to depart from them. These decisions are intuitive by necessity: if the possibilities that open up at each step of composition all had to be tested and their merits compared, no text would ever be finished (Hart 172). For Travy, the truly inspired writer not only has more possibilities to work with (possessing technique and irrational "inspiration" to an uncommon degree), his or her intuitive decisions about which possibilities to realize are also consistently sound.

The soundness of such decisions can only be judged in retrospect, and by a community of readers and writers. This does not mean, however, that they have no basis in cumulative, comparable skills. In literary composition as in daily life, skill is not just a matter of technique. Sound decisions, in other words, are not always based on the application of rules. In their critique of artificial intelligence, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus distinguish five stages of skill acquisition: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, expertise.³ The novice applies pre-formulated rules to context-free elements, making analytic decisions in a detached fashion. The expert responds intuitively to a holistically perceived situation, which he or she relates to an immense library of situations built up over years of experience (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 19-32). Oulipian constraints are of the same nature as the rules applied by novices. This is why they have proved popular among teachers and students, both

in France and abroad. Of course, using constraints does not restrict a writer's performance to the novice level, since even the strictest formal rules do not determine all a writer's choices, and they may be "bent" on occasion (in which case the members of the Oulipo speak of a "clinamen"). Decisions about which constraints to choose and when to depart from them cannot, however, be rule-based, on pain of infinite regress (Dreyfus, *Computers* 57-62). They require sensitivity to the situation of writing and to the emergent character of the text being composed. They require expertise. Queneau's account of inspiration in *Odile* is compatible with expertise as described by the Dreyfus brothers in phenomenological terms.

It is important to note, however, that the passage from *Odile* may also be read through the prism of eastern metaphysics. Alain Calame's account of Queneau's poetic in *Le Voyage en Grèce* shows how this could be done, relating Surrealist irrationalism, rational technique and intuition to the three gunas of traditional Vedantic thought: *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva* (*L'Esprit farouche* 33-35). One could also point out that in affirming the compatibility of technique and inspiration, Queneau is returning to the integrated poetic that Plato challenged by introducing his radical disjunction in the *Ion*. Verdenius and Tigerstedt have shown that in Homer, Hesiod, the lyric poets and Pindar, "human invention and divine inspiration are complementary aspects of the same process" (Verdenius 39; Tigerstedt 64).

In Aristotle, the internalization of inspiration has already begun. Inspiration has come to mean the capacity to visualize and feel the scene one is describing as if one were actually there (55). Yet Plato's account of the inspired poet as divine madman is envisaged by Aristotle as only one of two possibilities: "poetry is the product of a man of great natural ability or of one not wholly sane; the one is highly responsive, the other possessed" (55). Like Aristotle, the author of *On the Sublime* undoes the Platonic opposition between divine inspiration and human skill (Verdenius 46). He argues that there is a technique of the sublime or the profound: it harnesses and stabilizes the sublime impulses, which are given by nature (Longinus 101). There is clearly no shortage of Greek antecedents for the anti-Platonic poetic of *Le Voyage en Grèce*.

Calame's interpretation of *Le Voyage en Grèce* turns on a peri-

odization of Queneau's writing. He argues that from the mid thirties to 1940 and from the late sixties to his death in 1976, Queneau's work was deeply informed by eastern metaphysics, mediated principally by the works of René Guénon. In the intervening period, says Calame, the work is characterized by scientific rationalism and a Hegelian approach to history. This division into antithetical periods has provoked heated debate among Queneau specialists. Rather than enter into the debate here, I will examine what Queneau has to say about inspiration in the period Calame calls rationalist, and compare this with the passage from *Odile* examined above, in order to see whether the notion undergoes a revaluation from one period to the next.

Here is a poem dating from 1946, originally entitled "L'Inspiration," and later included as part V of "Pour un art poétique:"

Bon dieu de bon dieu que j'ai envie d'écrire un petit poème
 Tiens en voilà justement un qui passe
 Petit petit petit
 viens ici que je t'enfile
 sur le fil de collier de mes autres poèmes
 viens ici que je t'entube
 dans le comprimé des mes œuvres complètes
 viens ici que je t'empapouète
 et que je t'enrime
 et que je t'enrythme
 et que je t'enlyre
 et que je t'empégase
 et que je t'enverse
 et que je t'enprose

la vache
 il a foutu le camp
 (*Œuvres complètes* I 107)

Good lord good lord how I'd like to write a little poem
 Hold on here's one right now passing by
 Come one little one
 here where I can lead you
 snap your lead onto the collar of my other poems

here where I can encase you
 in the compression of my complete works
 where I can enpaper you
 and enrhyme you
 enrhythm you
 enlyric you
 enpegasus you
 enverse you
 enprose you

oh you bitch
 you got away

(Trans. Teo Savory, *Pounding the Pavements* 47)

This is not just a joke-poem. It also makes a simple point: it is not enough to feel like writing a poem; poems can get away. It is implied that such an eventuality is more likely if the as-yet unwritten poem is treated as a kind of capital to be accumulated, or as a kind of prey. In 1952, Queneau made a similar point in a radio talk:

On n'écrit pas des poèmes pour en faire des chansons, on n'écrit pas des poèmes pour en faire des poèmes, on écrit ce qu'on peut—et ce qu'on doit. Ce qu'on peut, parce que là, comme ailleurs, les plus beaux efforts comme les meilleures intentions sont vains, si l'inconnu et l'imprévisible ne viennent, en quelque sorte, confirmer l'effort—et l'intention.

You don't write poems to turn them into songs, or even to turn them into poems, you write what you can—and what you must. What you can, because in this, as in other things, the finest efforts and the best intentions are worthless, unless the unknown and the unpredictable intervene to confirm, as it were, the effort—and the intention. ("Chansons" 169)

Effort and intention should be understood in a technical as well as a moral sense here. They are necessary but insufficient, and must be confirmed by that which escapes the rational control of the individual writer: the unknown and the unpredictable. How this happens is described in Queneau's preface to Faulkner's *Mosquitoes*: coincidences, intuitions and revelations multiply, putting flesh on the bones of the consciously elaborated plan (*Bâtons* 126).

Lecturing on the Oulipo in 1964, Queneau explained the

group's aim as follows: "inventer de nouveau procédés artificiels ou mécaniques, contribuant à l'activité littéraire: des soutiens de l'inspiration pour ainsi dire, ou bien encore, une aide à la créativité" 'to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures, contributing to literary activity: supports for inspiration, so to speak, or aids to creativity' (*Bâtons* 203). The terms used here—contributing to, supporting, aiding—in no way imply that the artificial procedures will do away with inspiration or creativity, even in the long term. The artificial or mechanical procedures are envisaged as tools rather than automata. The "rationalist" Queneau was not a radical formalist like his friend François Le Lionnais. Comparing the passage on inspiration in *Odile* with the three texts I have just quoted, dating from the forties, fifties and sixties, we can see that the vocabulary changes somewhat, but the theme of inspiration does not undergo a radical revaluation, as do certain recurring themes in Queneau's work, such as technical invention and personal sanctity (Souchier 170-72; Calame, "Chêne" 25).

In the foregoing paragraphs I have distinguished three positions among members of the Oulipo with regard to the notion of inspiration. I called Bénabou and Le Lionnais radical formalists because they anticipate a complete formalization of literary composition, which would put paid to the myth of inspiration. Perec and Roubaud also reject inspiration in theory, but in their writing they combine formalization with the traditional practices of memorizing and imitating models. These practices have a technical aspect, but they are also indissociable from the human body with its emotions and fatigue, its habits and history. Unchosen affinities and involuntary memory both play an important part in imitation. Perec's practice in particular shows how writing under constraint is compatible with the inspiration by a precursor approved by the author of *On the Sublime*.

The third position is that of Raymond Queneau. Even in its "rationalist" formulations, Queneau's poetic reserves an important place for "the unpredictable and the unknown," which, he says, must confirm the efforts and the intentions of the writer if his or her work is to have any aesthetic value. Queneau is not attempting to reevaluate the Platonic conception of inspiration, as Ficino and other neo-Platonists did during the Renaissance, basing their doctrine of

poetic frenzy on a selective reading of the *Phaedrus*. Refusing Plato's disjunction, he consistently affirms the compatibility of technique with that which exceeds it. In this he follows Aristotle and the major Greek poets before Plato. Without entering the domain of metaphysics, we may characterize "that which exceeds technique" as the sound intuitive decision-making characteristic of human expertise.

Notes

1 Paragraph numbers are used in the references to Plato.

2 Unless otherwise stated, the translations are my own.

3 In subsequent work, Hubert Dreyfus has added two further stages: mastery and practical wisdom (*On the Internet* 45-48).

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