

Founders of Discursivity? A Foucauldian Glimpse of the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle

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What is an author? Michel Foucault unpeels the question skin by skin in his essay of the same name. Concerned with aspects such as the authorial function and the ideological status of this figure, Foucault defines the author, in an admittedly limited fashion, as “a person to whom the production of a text, book, or a work can be legitimately attributed” (Foucault 113). To acknowledge the narrowness of the definition, Foucault reserves a portion of his essay for authors “who are unique in that they are not just authors of their own works” (114) but rather authors of larger discursive possibilities who create a space and the tools for the creation of potential texts. The term “potential,” though not used explicitly by Foucault, captures the essence of texts yet unwritten for which the founders of discursivity have created rules.

The Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or Oulipo, created in Paris in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, conforms to Foucault’s initial definition of founders of discursivity, who produce “the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts” (114). The Oulipo, a workshop for the creation of potential texts, claims not to be a literary movement but rather a literary collective that both revisits existing textual constraints and creates new ones. In each case, the group enlists the creative energies of the reader/writer in the application of a given

constraint. Such an invitation extends the group's impact beyond its own texts and ensures its futurity in the production of texts to come.

Still, do members of the Oulipo wholly qualify as founders of discursivity according to Foucault's "What Is an Author?" He narrows his initial definition in the pages that follow and excludes certain types of authors who might erroneously fall under this rubric. By scrutinizing the Oulipo's autodefinition, its philosophy and its activities, I hope to determine if and to what extent the literary collective conforms to the Foucauldian definition of founders of discursivity and to establish why this is or is not the case.

From its conception in 1960, the Oulipians have had very specific ideas about the group's intentions. In what might be called their first manifesto, *La Littérature potentielle*, the group rejected the labels "literary movement," "scientific seminary," and denied that chance played any role in the creation of Oulipian texts. In an attempt to define the kinds of texts the Oulipians hoped to produce, Jacques Bens defined "potential" as "that which does not yet exist" (Oulipo, *Littérature* 32) thus implying that the group hoped to create the conditions necessary to produce what might be called eventual texts. Furthermore, they established a distinction between research of existing constraints (l'anoulipisme) and the creation of new constraints (le synthoulipisme). One example of an existing constraint includes the lipogram, a formal restriction which entails avoiding a particular letter, preferably an extremely common one, throughout a text. The prominent Oulipian, Georges Perec, wrote both a history of the lipogram and a novel without the letter "e" entitled *La Disparition*. The constraints created by the workshop tend to privilege form over content and extend to diverse types of literature including poetry, prose, and theater. As both theorists of literary constraint and writers, the Oulipians define new constraints and provide "model texts" in the group's collective publications, such as *La Littérature potentielle* and *Atlas de littérature potentielle*. The application of a single constraint by several different writers encourages comparison between the final texts and illustrates the diversity of results. The Oulipo also promotes a sort of democratization of literary production in that the group enlists readers to utilize provided constraints to create their own work. By simply respecting a given formal constraint, an often challenging but feasible undertaking, the common reader becomes poet, novelist, playwright, suggesting that constrained cognition results in highly creative output. This publicly visible collective organizes workshops and readings for the enjoyment and participation of readers and writers and has triggered the establishment of other potential

literature workshops throughout Europe and America. Simply and playfully put, the Oulipians define themselves as “rats who construct the labyrinths from which they propose to escape” (32).

Though the Oulipo applies constraints to literature, it draws influence from other areas such as Boolean algebra, algorithmic number theory, and combinatorics. Perhaps because of this acceptance of inspiration outside the literary scope, the group has inspired the participation of other creative fields in the art of constraint. Offshoots, such as workshops for potential music, cooking, comic books, film, history, and painting, respect the Oulipian principle of constrained creative production, proving that potentiality is not strictly about literature. Such a confirmation reinforces the Oulipo’s influence beyond its own texts and its adaptability to other disciplines. Does the group wholly correspond to the definition of founders of discursivity?

Citing Freud and Marx as prime examples, Foucault explains that these and other founders of discursivity “have established an endless possibility of discourse” (Foucault 114) with their foundational texts and theories. Foucault anticipates the objection that any author whose work proves to be of wide or lasting appeal will surely influence other authors to adopt certain aspects of the text, to imitate it, to emulate its author. Ann Radcliffe, he explains, might qualify as a necessary catalyst for the appearance of the nineteenth century Gothic horror novel. Though her influence extends beyond her own text, she does not qualify as a founder of discursivity for the fact that her novels only paved the way for analogous or imitative novels. Marx and Freud, on the other hand, opened a space for concepts divergent from their own that would still fall under the rubric of Marxist or psychoanalytic discourse.

One might argue that texts resulting from the application of Oulipian theories are hardly analogous or imitative. Though many writers share a given constraint, the results are largely heterogeneous. Again taking the lipogram as an example, this constraint might produce any number of literary products, such as a sonnet, a novel, or a play. The content remains at the discretion of the writer while only one relatively small aspect of the form is limited. In another respect, the members are relatively free to create any constraint that they judge will produce a desired aesthetic effect or will be particularly challenging. Furthermore, Oulipian theoretical discourse regarding the constraint and its applications extends to domains outside of literature and literary theory. “Constraint theory,” as the science might be called, invites the participation of other disciplines.

One could equally argue that the Oulipians provide little room for divergence. The constraints they propose are to be respected, with an occasional writer interpreting the constraints as flexible suggestions rather than hard and fast rules. The fact that all Oulipians construct what might be called artificial or arbitrary rules for their texts makes their work imitative. The interdisciplinary workshops remain analogous offshoots of the original group. For example, a restriction on the type of ingredients used in a culinary exercise at the Workshop for Potential Cooking would be analogous to a restriction on the letters used in an Oulipian literary exercise. A true divergence from Oulipian applications and theory might be reliance on chance or a rejection of analytical restrictions. The Surrealists perhaps differed most markedly from the Oulipians in this respect with an emphasis on chance and the subconscious in their theoretical writings and approaches to literary and artistic creation. The Workshop for Potential Literature did not create a theoretical framework that would provide for conflicting viewpoints of this type. Instead, the group simply asserted its own position *vis-à-vis* the functions of constraint and put its theories into practice in illustrative texts.

Still, to say that the Oulipo's literary influence roughly corresponds to Ann Radcliffe's influence on the nineteenth century Gothic novel seems highly reductive. First, the group touches domains beyond literature. Second, Oulipian activities and theory have broadened discourse on what might be called the "science of constraint." Jean Ricardou in particular has actively researched this area and has contributed heavily to *Formules: Revue des littératures à contraintes*, a French-language journal dedicated to the exploration of the constraint in literature.

Though Foucault's "What Is an Author?" provides only a brief definition of "founders of discursivity," one may conclude that the limited nature of the Oulipo's discursive contributions disqualify it. The group's theoretical framework does not allow for divergence and its constraints and applications are largely imitative or analogous. Regardless, the Workshop for Potential Literature occupies an intermediary space between founders of discursivity and writers who are simply influential. The literary collective's extension to other creative fields and its growing contributions to the science of constraint guarantee its futurity and impact on larger textual discourses.

Works Cited

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