

**Matthew Baker**

**Upperclassman Monroe Project Proposal**

**Le 11 novembre, 2012**

**Potential Avenues for the Oulipo**

**Section 1:** What do you propose to do / what question(s) do you hope to answer?

I aim to study, imitate, and expand upon the works and basic philosophies of the OuLiPo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, workshop of potential literature). Founded in 1960 by author Raymond Queneau and mathematician François le Lionnais, the Oulipo is a French-based interdisciplinary movement of writers, poets, and mathematicians. The creation of the Oulipo is attributed by some as a way to move past the tragedies of WWII, of which the founders were all deeply affected (cofounder François le Lionnais was even a survivor of Nazi concentration camps). The devastating war had caused many to gloomily question the ideas of pre-war literature and society, and new forms of music, architecture, and other arts were developing, independent of their predecessors' styles and goals. Thus, the constrained writing allowed an outlet for the joys and challenges of testing the potential of literary texts. This small-numbered group specializes in a systematic exploration and study of experimental literature, including both analytical studies of past works as well as the creation of new and revitalized literary forms. The most ubiquitous area of Oulipian expertise is constrained writing, a literary process in which either the text or writing circumstances are strictly controlled. For example, 1967 Oulipo inductee Georges Perec wrote a 300 page novel, *La disparition*, without a single use of the most common letter in French: "e" (the lipogram letter constraint). Other famous constraints include S+7, Jouet's metro writing, snowball poems, Queneau's combinatoric  $10^{14}$  poems in one book, etc... The Oulipo continues today with an increased public interaction as well as expansion into the potential of computer science for writing. It is my goal to discover the current extent of the Oulipo.

My proposed four-fold project is best illustrated graphically:

	Past works	Potential future works
Research	- Reading Oulipian texts - Reading past research/criticism of Oulipian Texts	-Researching constrained writing outside of the Oulipo and France/ <i>la langue française</i> . - Exploring uncharted constraints and experimental domains
Writing/experimentation	- Written imitation of several known Oulipian writing constraints	-Written experimentation with novel literary constraints and experimental domains (Potentially Oulipian texts)

Through this research and writing, I will attempt to shed light upon the following questions:

- What are the limitations of the Oulipo / what is its current scope?
- Which relatively unexplored channels offer potential for Oulipian expansion?
- How might the ideals of a literary group founded in 1960 be relevant in the year 2013?

**Section 2:** Explain why you want to do this research.

What are your goals in undertaking the project.

- The primary goals of this undertaking are to better understand the Oulipo and Oulipian writing and to search for extensions of constrained/experimental writing. With these extensions, constrained and experimental writing can be offered to a wider audience who may have never before heard of the French Oulipo. There have been several branches of *ouvroirs*, encapsulated by the title Ou-X-po, for non-literary potential workshops, but I will limit my study to experimental literature of the Oulipo, in this will mean

defining the Oulipo. In addition, I hope to produce novel examples of past writing constraints as well as unexplored experimental literature that remain under the umbrella of the Oulipo. Finally, in regard to the scope of this project, I do not aim to produce a definitive or fully-encapsulating study of the Oulipo as that would require years to accomplish; instead I will focus on the texts and not the members or history, finding a few possible literary avenues that seem to be absent or lacking in Oulipian works.

Why is the project you are proposing the best way of achieving these goals?

- This project encompasses both the analytical and synthetic sides of experimental literature: the study of the past (through readings of texts and criticisms) as well as the writing process itself. As a result, the project attempts to recreate the Oulipo movement on a small scale, which is the best way to understand the limitations which the Oulipo might have faced. Furthermore, by examining non-Oulipian-labeled experimental and constrained literature, I will be able to address possible solutions to the limitations that I may discover.

How will this research help further your academic / intellectual development?

- First, this intensive study will allow me to better advance my understanding of the Oulipo: its texts, authors, and philosophies. Second, as the vast majority of Oulipian texts were written in French, I will be able to develop my exposure to and competence of the French language. Third, I will be writing extensively in many diverse styles, gaining not only writing experience but also new perspectives through literature.

Why do you find the work exciting?

- The Oulipo is an incredibly fascinating organization; it simultaneously combines my love of French language and culture, my passion for the infinite intricacies of humanity's greatest tool – language, and my enjoyment in all that is cryptic, puzzling, and challenging. I am both excited to read Oulipian texts and thrilled to take a stab at constrained/experimental writing.

**Section 3:** Explain the relevance of this work in the greater scheme of things / to people besides you and your advisor. Do not use jargon.

- One of the goals of the Oulipo, to quote a translation of Oulipo founder Raymond Queneau's 1962 presentation, is to "furnish future writers with new techniques to dismiss inspiration from their affectivity." All sources of writing have the potential for meaning and thus a reason to be written. By prodding the foundations of the Oulipo for possible areas of expansion, I hope to explore ways to further open the scope and accessibility of constrained and experimental literature. In other words, the freedom and extraordinary engagement that are offered by constrained writing (a paradoxical truth central to the Oulipo) should be open to everyone regardless of nationality, social background, language, age, or initial literary confidence. This project will hopefully assist the outward growth of experimental writing, which is necessary for its continuation and responsible for its celebrated successes.

**Section 4:** What coursework or other experience have you had that has helped prepare you to conduct the research you are proposing?

A major part of this project is the comprehension of French texts. I first gained a foothold in the French language during high school, where I took French classes to the IB Higher Level and participated in a foreign language exchange program. By staying in France with a Toulousain host family and touring Paris, I was able to practice my verbal French language skills. I continued my study of the French language at the college of William and Mary. First, I took French 212 Cross Cultural Perspectives, which allowed me to study the importance of the French language in multiple countries and time periods. An especially useful course for this project is *The Craft of Writing* (French 305), which I am currently taking. *The Craft of Writing* has helped prepare not only my French expressive, lexical, and organizational skills but also the ability to analyze a text for style and structure. Next semester, I will take French 315: *French*

*Literature in Its Cultural Contexts*, which will provide French literary historical context and textual analysis skills which are valuable for my project.

**Section 5:** Discuss your methodology. What is your research plan? Where do you propose to conduct the research and why is it necessary to be there? Describe the timeline, making sure that the project lasts a minimum of seven full-time weeks.

The majority of my research will be done from my home in DC: either reading French texts purchased in advance or from internet Oulipo collections, or visiting the Library of Congress for resources on Oulipo criticism and other English constrained writing documentation. I also hope to travel to Paris for a week to attend one of the regular readings and discussions of Oulipo works by current Oulipians hosted at the French National Library (BNF), as well as study Oulipo texts which I cannot find in the U.S. in the large BNF collections. Additionally, while in DC, I plan to correspond with a current Oulipo member via email with questions about the current state of the Oulipo.

My projected timeline will run as follows:

2 weeks reading and taking notes on Oulipo texts and analyses of the Oulipo (such as *Genès de l'Oulipo*, *A primer of Potential Literature*, and *An Oulipo Compendium*)

0.5 weeks searching for non-Oulipian experimental literary movements and differentiating from Ou-X-po.

1 week traveling to France to attend an Oulipo event (par exemple: un *jeudi* le 30 mai ou le 20 juin; soit l'un, soit l'autre) and studying texts at the BNF

0.5 week planning specific forms to write,

1 week imitating known Oulipian written forms,

1 week experimenting with new forms,

1.5-3 weeks finalizing essay and written work

**Section 6:** Describe your final product. Consult with your Monroe project advisor on the format that is most appropriate to your project and discipline. While the final product may be an academic paper (written in accordance with the standards, expectations, and format of the discipline), it might also be something else such as a creative work (novel, painting, etc.).

- The final product will be a combination of a written essay which addresses my initial questions of limitations and potential avenues for the Oulipo as well as a collection of constrained Oulipian-style creative works from both past imitations and novel generations. I intend to write the analytical writing in English. The imitative works will be written in French as the vast majority of Oulipian texts were originally written in French. Additionally, it is my plan to write the creative works in any combination of French, English, or Spanish (the three languages with which I am most comfortable) with the hope of finding new literary avenues offered by different languages.

**Section 7:** Will this project lead to further work, such as continued lab work, an independent study during the academic year, a portfolio, or, eventually, an Honors project? Describe.

At this moment in time, I am unaware of where exactly the research project will lead me. There is the possibility of extended research of the role of France's history and culture on the foundation and continuation of the Oulipo as well as the possibility of extended writing with Oulipian forms (or others).