Serious Play:
Formal Innovation and Politics in French Literature from the 1950s to the Present

by

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Abstract

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     Serious Play: Formal Innovation and Politics in French literature from the 1950s to the present investigates how 20th- and 21st-century French authors play with literary form as a means of engaging with contemporary history and politics. Authors like Georges Perec, Monique Wittig, and Jacques Jouet often treat the practice of writing like a game with fixed rules, imposing constraints on when, where, or how they write. They play with literary form by eliminating letters and pronouns; by using only certain genders, or by writing in specific times and spaces. While such alterations of the French language may appear strange or even trivial, by experimenting with new language systems, these authors probe into how political subjects—both individual and collective—are formed *in* language. The meticulous way in which they approach form challenges unspoken assumptions about which cultural practices are granted political authority and by whom. This investigation is grounded in specific historical circumstances: the student worker-strike of May '68 and the Algerian War, the rise of and competition between early feminist collectives, and the failure of communism and the rise of the right-wing extremism in 21st-century France. Analysis of pronominal subjects in Perec and Wittig shows how they interrogate power struggles during May '68; both authors imagine shared textual production as the bedrock of new political communities. Moving into the 21st century, Jouet stages various "bad" communists, in order to pay tribute to dying communist communities and to unpack the ongoing legacy of communism's collapse. In the end, formal play offers an antidote to 20th- and 21st-century crises of community by creating virtual communities through the text itself.

For Ingrid and Tom

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Introduction:

Serious Play: Formal Innovation and Politics in French Literature

from the 1950s to the Present

In a 1980 interview in *Jeux et stratégie*, Georges Perec describes literature quite simply, as the practice of reorganizing the words in the dictionary:

> Ecrire, pour moi, c'est une certaine façon de réorganiser les mots du dictionnaire. Ou les livres que l'on a déjà lus. Vous voyez que c'est assez banal! […] Au départ, cela met donc en jeu une certaine disponibilité à l'égard d'un ensemble. D'un catalogue, d'un corpus. On dispose d'un certain nombre d'éléments et l'on doit, avec eux, construire quelque chose. Le premier travail que cela implique, c'est une redistribution, une réorganisation, donc une disponibilité. (Perec, Entretiens 115)

Indeed, it is harder to imagine a more *banal* definition of literature: one begins with a set ("ensemble") of words or texts, one reorganizes this corpus, and voilà, literature. The act of writing is no colossal feat of the spirit or the intellect. It does not involve long hours of arduous work, or sleepless forays into the midnight hours in wait of inspiration. It is simply a game of scrabble. (Just don't forget the tiles!) This definition of literary work is almost comically boring and modest, especially for an author known for his artistic *tours de force*. Could we really describe an entire novel written without the letter "e," texts assembled using Latin bi-squares and rook's moves, or enormous palindromes as mere "redistributions" of words? We should be careful not to take Perec entirely at his word; his definition of literature is deceptively simple and purposefully downplays the implications of literary production. Nevertheless, Perec does express a fundamentally different relationship to literary production. Literature is not the work of genius, nor does it serve a higher purpose. It does not seek to radically change the world, politically or metaphysically. Its purpose, on the outset, is neutral and undefined; its destiny is only determined by the number of "h's" and "a's" left in the pile.[1]

It is hard to underscore just how fundamentally different Perec's notion of literature and literary practice is from that of many French authors of his time. Perec is writing in 20th-century France, the heyday of *avant-gardisme*, with its critique of aesthetic production, its active involvement in the political sphere, and its drama, fueled by so many public squabbles and debates. More particularly, Perec came of age at a moment when the literary field had become particularly fractured. As May '68 and the Algerian War would later reveal, the decade after the war was riven by competing political agendas and literature followed suit. From the immediate postwar period well into the *Trente glorieuses*, French literature was also dominated

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[1] *Jeux et stratégie* was a magazine edited by Excelsior Publications that ran from 1980 to 1990; it was dedicated to gaming of all sorts (including board-gaming, video games, strategy games, etc.). It is unusual for an author to write about literature in a gamers' magazine, given that emerging media (like video games) often have less cultural status than literature. This choice of publishing venue already challenges certain assumptions about what qualifies as art and highlights the extent to which playing and gaming were essential to Perec's work.

by the politico-literary construct of *littérature engagée*. In the engagement paradigm, literary work and political practice are inextricably linked. The engaged author is not only subject to the media spotlight, but beholden to it. His intellectual authority comes with external obligations to both the political and literary fields. In this "hyperpoliticized" environment, every literary gesture is infused with meaning.[2] Every act of the author is calculated or criticized. Being an author requires not only a public face, but a political identity—a commitment to a larger cause, political party, or agenda.

Even in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as literature seemed to withdraw from politics, the author continues to be an important figure in French society. With the growth of far-right extremism and the collapse of communism and industrialism, French literature—and France at large—is undergoing a political crisis. While many wonder if and how literature can continue to influence politics, it nevertheless continues to be a means of reflecting on the relationship between individuals, groups, and communities. Regardless of whether one speaks of literature before or after this political crisis, one thing is clear: literature in 20th- and 21st-century France is a *serious* enterprise. In the life of the author, there is simply no room for *play.*

Play and game nevertheless remain important conceptual frameworks through which Perec understands literary practice.[3] Unlike *engagement* or *avant-gardisme,* however, literary play is hardly a cohesive force in 20th- and 21st-century French literature. Playful literature does not constitute a singular group, movement, or trend. At best, it is a loose amalgam of like-minded thinkers, who privilege form as a locus of literary innovation. My corpus tracks the work of three generations of the literary group Oulipo (Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and Jacques Jouet) from the 1950s to the present, but it also includes the work of a non-Oulipian, Monique Wittig. While Wittig had limited ties to Oulipo, she engaged in similar play with literary form.[4] Literary play was most notably theorized by Oulipo, but it was hardly limited to the group, and I will demonstrate that echoes of Oulipian formal play can be seen elsewhere in France, even today. While the authors I study are diverse, and circulated in (sometimes wildly) different political venues, they nevertheless share certain interests in form and pose similar questions about the relationship between form and collective practice. These authors often treat the practice of writing like a game with fixed rules, imposing constraints on when, where, or how they write. They play with literary form by eliminating letters and pronouns; by using only certain genders; by writing in specific times; and so on.

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[2] In *La guerre des écrivains,* Sapiro explains that this "surpolitisation" of literature originates in the progressive politicization of literature. After the defeat of France in 1940, literature was increasingly subject to repression and censorship, particularly by the Vichy government. These changes shifted the mechanisms of interpretation in the politico-literary field more generally. Publishing itself becomes an act with strong political valences, as various publishing houses and journals came under collaborationist control. See Sapiro 21-25, 47.

[3] Perec includes play ("le ludique") among the four primary veins of his research, alongside sociological, novelistic ("romanesque"), and autobiographical concerns. See Perec, *Penser/Classer* 10.

[4] Wittig was an acquaintance of Perec's and contributed a passage to *La Disparition.* See Chapter 2.

While such alterations of the French language may appear strange or even trivial, I argue that they are profoundly serious. In *Serious Play: Formal Innovation and Politics in French Literature from the 1950s to the Present*, I investigate how 20th- and 21st-century French authors play with literary form as a means of engaging with contemporary history and politics. By experimenting with new language systems, these authors probe into how political subjects— both individual and collective—are formed in language. I argue that the meticulous way in which they approach form challenges unspoken assumptions about which cultural practices are granted political authority and by whom. I ground this investigation in specific historical circumstances: the student worker-strike of May '68 and the Algerian War, the rise of and competition between early feminist collectives, and the failure of communism and the rise of the right-wing extremists in 21st-century France. My work on pronominal subjects in Perec and Wittig shows how they analyze power struggles during May '68; both authors imagine shared textual production as the bedrock of new political communities. Moving into the 21st century, I argue that Jouet plays the "bad" communist, to interrogate the ongoing legacy of communism. Overall, I consider how formal play indexes 20th- and 21st-century crises of collective organization, but also offers an alternative, creating virtual communities through the text itself.

Each of my chapters speaks to the political potential of playing with form. Form makes available new perspectives with respect to the historical experience of politics, the effects of political discourse, and modes of political subjectification. By playing with form, these authors analyze how language conditions political identity and allows individuals to situate themselves in, or claim jurisdiction over, larger groups. These authors couch the experience of political life in the very linguistic forms by which we convey it. In other words, playful literature uses the game of literary practice to enact a critique of the many games of political communities. It also offers a glimmer of political potential, by gesturing towards the virtual communities that only the text can create.

In Chapter 1, "Not So Secret: Queneau's *dégagement* and Oulipo as an 'Open Secret,'" I offer a new history of *dégagement* and of Oulipo as a "post-avant-garde." The chapter centers on the paradox of Oulipo's "open secrecy," or the fact that Oulipo consistently drew attention to its secret status in public settings. By drawing on critical definitions of the "open secret," I argue that Oulipo's secrecy can be read as a rhetorical gesture and a speech act. Oulipo's secrecy originates in the evasive modesty of Oulipo's founder, Raymond Queneau. Queneau's secrecy hides a critique of his contemporary political moment, replicating critiques of *engagement* established by thinkers of *dégagement.* Being secret allowed Oulipo, on the other hand, to assert its apoliticism and to withdraw from presumed political practice of an avant-garde. Secrecy also helped the group to negotiate its relationship with respect to marginal intellectual groups, notably Bourbaki (which I will discuss shortly) and 'Pataphysics. More broadly, Oulipo performed its secrecy to play with its public identity. By building a shared identity around the theatrics of secrecy, Oulipo asserted its autonomy from the literary and political spheres. Oulipo "came out" several times, however, suggesting that this autonomy was always in part deferred, as Oulipo inevitably found itself projected into political and aesthetic

debates. The changing nature of the group today asks us to reconsider what it means to be secret over 50 years into the group's existence.

In my second chapter, entitled, "*Marxistes, Tendance Groucho*: Perec's *La Disparition* as Collective History," I demonstrate that Perec's *La Disparition* can be read as a collective history of two presents: the "present" of May '68 and the Algerian War and the "present" of Moulin Andé, the community in which he was living. *La Disparition* is a lipogram, or a novel written without the letter "e." Most scholars contend that the absent "e," with its homophonous evocation of "eux," gestures towards those lost during the Holocaust and their phantom presence in the lives of survivors. Without challenging this narrative, I demonstrate that Perec also used the lipogram to represent May '68 and the Algerian War in absentia—without participating in protests and without taking on the role of the committed writer or *soixante-huitard*. Perec underscores the affirmative side of "not saying," by playing with the representational and non-representational aspects of the constraint. Intradiagetically, *La Disparition* is filled with references to the cyclical nature of history and to May '68 and the Algerian War. Perec's obsessive use of the pronominal "on" is not merely a means of satisfying the constraint, but an investigation of collective political identity. With its ambiguous referentiality and its erasure of subjective intention, "on" becomes an indictment of our political anonymity and our unwillingness to claim responsibility for historical violence. I pair this intradiegetic narrative, however, with extensive archival research into the collective production of *La Disparition.* Perec not only made a collective game out of the lipogram, by enlisting the aid of his friends at the Moulin Andé, but also asked several collaborators to contribute excerpts to the final text. By examining these non-representational traces of *La Disparition's* communal production, I argue that the novel creates a virtual community of collaborators. The experience of writing under constraint allows Perec and his collaborators to share the burden of history.

My third chapter turns to the only non-Oulipian in my corpus, Monique Wittig. Like Oulipians, Wittig employs writing procedures and is deeply invested in the political implications of form. "Stumbling Sheep: Political Education and History in *Les Guérillères* and *Paris-la-Politique"* considers two formally innovative texts written before and after the most politically active time in Wittig's life. While the two texts were written thirty years apart, they were conceived as part of the same formal and political project of feminizing the French language. Wittig renders the feminine the default neutral linguistic form, by using only feminine personal pronouns and referents. While this feminization is well known, I demonstrate that Wittig's writing, in tandem with her political project, involves other formal practices. For instance, Wittig approaches the process of writing as a dialectical operation on history; she operates on history by dismantling and cannibalizing a series of intertexts. Her appropriation of intertext reveals that Wittig wishes to instruct her readers in the texts of popular, Maoist warfare. More broadly, Wittig establishes her own "textual reality," or a virtual community of texts and authors that exist together in the transcultural and transhistorical space of her text. While Wittig's process of writing bears much potential for the creation of virtual communities, the

narratives of her texts tell a very different story. These novels operate in opposition to one another: *Les Guérillières* approaches history from the macro perspective of the experience of a collective "elles," while *Paris-la-Politique* represents the micro perspective of an individual "je" or "elle." Via this dialogue between "elles" and "elle," Wittig stages not only *le politique,* or the theoretical possibilities of political education, but *la politique,* the real-world experience of politics. She positions her optimism before politics against her actual experience of politics, her disillusionment after.

My fourth and final chapter, entitled "Jacques Jouet's 'Bad' Communists: Worksite Poetics in *Le Cocommuniste,*" turns to third-generation Oulipian Jacques Jouet. Jouet's multigeneric novel, *Le Cocommuniste,* approaches the history of communism from the perspective of the 21st-century convalescent. The convalescent subject must come to terms with 20th-century communism's collapse and the many communities it destroyed or left behind. The convalescent narrates this collapse via the gaze of "cocos," or "bad" communists, those who fail at the communist ideal or lived on the margins of mainstream communism. I characterize Jouet's project as a "worksite poetics," or a formal aesthetic that is always provisional—one that lays bare the seams of its construction. While *Le Cocommuniste* is made up of seven sections, each representing a different moment in communist history via a different generic mode, I restrict my gaze to those sections of the novel that focus on French Communist history. The open and closing sections of the novel, both entitled "chiens pavillonnaires," use parables of dogs to narrate political experience in the Parisian *banlieue*, before and after the collapse of communism. While the first "chiens" offers a critique of the militant communist venues in which Jouet circulated, the final "chiens" grapples with gang violence in 21st-century postindustrial spaces. I juxtapose these narratives with an analysis of the procedural methods Jouet used to write another section called "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre.*" Jouet conducted interviews with ex-communists living in the banlieue of Paris and used these interviews to construct theater and poetry. These poems are testimony to the lost political discourse of unionization (with its reliance on acronyms, for example) and the disappearing communist micro-communities of modern-day France. In the end, Jouet creates a virtual community through *Le Cococommuniste,* by representing people who were united by the experience of communism, but circulated in different spaces, institutions, and organizations.

Play, Game, Form and *Engagement*

Play can indeed be a serious undertaking, but traditionally, it is understood to be the very antithesis of work. Playing is presumed to be an inherently frivolous activity. It falls under the realm of leisure or recreational activities. It is a pleasure outside of the day-to-day grind; only children and those with the right class status can afford such a privilege. Unlike work, it is not extrinsically motivated, and it does not produce anything, materially or socially. It merely fills the gaps between the work hours and other serious intellectual endeavors.

Even in literature, this binary traditionally holds true to a certain extent. From DuBellay to Balzac, authors have distinguished between the more serious parts of their oeuvre and their

leisurely alternatives. Serious works are paid (often funded by patrons), use high literary forms, and are dedicated to subjects worthy of literary work. Their light-hearted counterparts are devoid of high forms and dedicated to something trivial or comical (like Ronsard going deaf or a lawyer's adulterous wife).[5] Historically, literature has continually redefined what qualifies as serious: in subject, form, and practice. Over time, play has been incorporated into certain kinds of experimental practice (like Surrealist games or Dada trials)[6], but overall, it is still positioned among lesser art forms. Our skepticism with respect to play continues to win out.

Of course, multiple disciplines—from anthropology and sociology, to child psychology, media studies, and philosophy —have challenged the work/play dichotomy. Ever since Johan Huizinga wrote *Homos Ludens* in 1938, scholars have come to the defense of play. They argue, as he does, that play is a fundamental facet of human (and animal) culture, pervasive in all aspects of society. Rather than seeing play as symptomatic of something else (like a biological or psychological reflex), Huizinga argues that play is important social activity in its own right. Children, for instance, use play to move between the subject and object realms and to construct their sense of identity.[7] Play also allows social groups to form, united around this shared activity. As a result, play is often a preamble to, or involved in, many serious practices, like law, war, and poetry.[8] In short, as Huizinga argues, "All play means something" (Huizinga 1). Playing is not a vacant gesture or an accident; it is another way that we make meaning.

Colloquially, we often make a distinction between "play" as a general term and "game" as the serious subset of "play." While play encompasses activities that are fun, freeform, and creative, game includes those forms of play that are cooperative, competitive, and strategic. Game is play harnessed by structure, made meaningful with organization and rules. Even in languages that only have one word for both concepts (like "le jeu" in French), this division between play and game holds true. In many instances, however, the work/play binary has merely been transposed, as play and game are also often assumed to be fundamentally at odds. The definition of game is skewed so as to absorb any intellectually stimulating aspects of play. Often, this play/game dichotomy is used to pit different cultural practices against one another, constructing transnational and transcultural hierarchies of high and low culture.[9] Labeling something "play" or "game" thus becomes another means by which we separate frivolous activities from real work.

Literary scholars and casual readers alike often assume that literary play is inherently unserious and solipsistic. When they allow it to be meaningful, they dismiss it as a game of

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[5] See DuBellay, *Divers jeux rustiques* and Balzac, *Contes drôlatiques.*
[6] For examples of surrealist games, see *Les Jeux surréalistes.*
[7] See Winnicott. Freud also argues that child's play can be revelatory of unconscious drives; he uses the repetition of child's play as evidence of humans' innate death drive. See Freud.
[8] See Huizinga 13, 76-104, and 119-135. For a more complete overview of critical notions of play, see Motte 1-15.
[9] Roger Caillois, for example, constructs a hierarchy of game types, spanning from competitive sports, to problem-solving games (like chess), or even frenzied dance; Caillois's perspective is inherently ethnocentric, as he hopes to demonstrate the superiority of European rationality over other forms of cultural practice. See Caillois.

limited value: it is *only* about form.[10] Otherwise stated, it is so deeply invested in form that it cannot be about anything else—especially not politics. This belief stems in part from the 19th-century notion of *l'art pour art* and its claim that literature should not serve anything other than itself; literature is self-justified and need not be subject to the whims of any external purpose. This dismissive attitude towards play also draws on the Sartrean division between poetry and prose (which I will discuss in more detail later). Sartre, too, suggests that unlike prose, poetry is too formally complex to serve as a direct vehicle for communication; it cannot convey any message and as such, simply is not suited for political content.

While the authors I study are deeply concerned with the relationship between literature and politics, and wary of literature's subservience to political parties and causes, they also never ascribed to such a purist vision of form.[11] On the contrary, Oulipo's very purpose was to divest form of its genre or any presumed subject matter and in so doing, neutralize it. In theory, any form could be used by any author for any purpose, whether it be work, play, or game.[12] But at the crux of *serious play*, one still finds readers and a literary field uncomfortable with the notion that playful forms could serve political purposes. Indeed, I juxtapose the work of Perec with that of Wittig because the two authors have usually been submitted to diametrically opposite readings; if his work was too formally playful to be political, hers was too political to be playful. I argue, however, that playing with form can indeed be fun or humorous, just as much as it can be serious and structured. Play and game are not mutually exclusive, nor are they incompatible with representations of contemporary history and politics.

While some critics restrictively define formal play, I understand play via a more heuristic definition, based in philosopher Jacques Henriot's notion of *le jeu* as well as the theoretical concepts of *disposition* and *disponibilité.* Henriot defines "le jeu" quite simply, as the combination of three attributes: the game in itself (with its rules or structure), the act of playing, and the attitude or state of being of the player (Henriot 15-16). Literary play also involves these three attributes, which I will describe in more detail as follows: the game structure, which I call *playing with form,* and the implications of the act of writing and the attitude of the author, which I call *playing at the author* and *gaming the system*.

Playing with literary form means treating literature like a game with strict rules. These rules can be something as simple as a textual constraint (such as writing a text without the letter "e") or more elaborate procedures that govern the conditions of writing (such as Wittig's practice of cannibalizing intertexts or Jouet's use of interviews to produce poetry and theater). This literary game demands, as Perec describes, a certain *disposition* with respect to form. Rules

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[10]As Alison James has pointed out, many well-respected critics—including Gérard Genette, Henri Meschonnic, and Laurent Jenny—cling to a bias against Oulipian formal play. They are especially wary of Oulipian forms that involve randomization, like "S + 7," in which each substantive or noun ("S") of a poem is replaced with the 7th substantive that follows it in the dictionary. James argues that "[m]ost dismissive (or even disgusted) reactions to the OuLiPo are based on instinctive distaste of the group's project rather than analysis of particular texts." See James 111.
[11] I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 1.
[12] For Oulipo's concept of literary form and the notion of *potentialité,* see Oulipo, *La littérature potentielle* 15-35.

and procedures "make available" ("*rend disponible*") certain forms and a process of writing that could not otherwise be possible. In turn, the production of these rules—or the redistribution of these forms—necessitates a certain attitude, or *disponibilité*: a radical openness to form and all of its subsequent possibilities. In this respect, *playing with literary form* entails both play and game. It is the union of play's openness and availability and game's rational structure.

Historically, *disposition* and *disponibilitié* bear resemblances to Oulipo's use of Bourbakian mathematics and the Oulipian notion of *potential*. Oulipo's project was to make forms available to authors by applying Bourbakian mathematics to literature. Bourbaki, a mid-20th-century mathematics collective, sought to fundamentally revamp the mathematical field. Bourbaki's project was to rebuild mathematics from the ground up, following an axiomatic method. They wanted to reorganize mathematics and see what this reorganization might produce. Oulipo hoped to translate this idea of axiomatics into the literary field, by producing a transhistorical catalog of extant literary forms and by creating new forms. Like Bourbaki, Oulipo sought to fundamentally alter the literary field, challenging expectations and possibilities with respect to form. Form, while it was at the heart of literary practice, was only a tool and should be used as the author pleased. When Perec describes his literary process as one of fostering a new disposition with respect to a set, he is thinking of Bourbaki.[13] The literary game involves creating new "sets" of words, which garner new meaning when they are brought into contact with one another in the text.

For Oulipo, cataloging and creating forms also means being attentive to *potentialité,* or the seemingly infinite possibilities that imbue a given literary form. A form has *potential* to the extent that it might become the building block for a diversity of possible literary works; it can be manipulated differently by each author, to different ends, successfully or unsuccessfully. Based on a given instantiation, a form can also be understood differently, thus inaugurating a collective game between an author and a reader, or an author and a larger community.[14] One of the key implications of Oulipian *potentialité* is that form is divorced from its assumed cultural value; it is unmoored from its historical baggage or any *a priori* content. Forms are no longer tethered to strict generic hierarchies. A medieval *sestina* is suddenly the social and aesthetic equal of sonnet in *alexandrins*. Both may be applied to write about any particular subject. No form is unavailable or out of fashion.

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[13] See the excerpt from Perec's *Jeux et stratégie* interview, cited above: "[…] cela met en jeu une certaine *disponibilité* à l'égard d'un ensemble […] Le premier travail que cela implique, c'est une redistribution, une réorganisation, donc une *disponibilité*" (Perec 115, my emphasis).

[14] For literary scholars like Picard, gaming, or "le jeu," is an inherent feature of the process of reading: it is a game of communication between author and reader, in which the reader must decode the text in search of its original meaning. Bohman-Kalaja, on the other hand, argues that game is central to a genre of writing she calls "Play-Texts." Emblematized by Beckett, O'Brian and Perec, these texts are an extreme example of reading as game; they explicitly emphasize reader reception and the process of reading. Of course, the genre of detective fiction at large understands reading to be a game of deception and revelation. See Picard and Bohman-Kalaja.

In turn, every form also has potential to the extent that it can be understood differently in the hands of the reader. Readers not only infuse texts with new meanings, but they alter its "uptake": the way that it is understood as a speech act, integrated into various discursive genres, and given authority in various institutional contexts.[15] Altering a form's uptake is a fundamental part of conceiving of its political potential. When forms are no longer tied to specific institutional values and acts, they can be harnessed by the writer in the service of a community or a project. A form can act on behalf of a group with which it might previously have been at odds. Form, like play, can create new *ensembles,* or social groups.

Oulipo's reconsideration of form—and the societal values ascribed to form—thus functions similarly to what sociologist Jean Duvignaud calls the *intentionnalité zéro* of play*.* Duvignaud conceives of play as an "activity without an endpoint [*but*], detached from any semblance of efficacy," or even "the very possibility of an act without social purpose ("*finalité sociale*")" (Duvignaud 13, 24). Play is not devoid of any larger purpose or content, but it is "useless on principle," in so far as it has no predetermined or *a priori* intention. As a kind of "zero intentionality," it can foster to a state of *disponibilité* ("un état d'égarement ou de disponibilité"), or a radical openness. The subject's openness to the possibilities of play in turn creates "ludic explosions" ("éclatements ludiques"), or radical transformations in aesthetics or culture at large (*Ibid* 14-17). Perec was a friend and student of Duvignaud's, so it is very possible that his notion of "disponibilité" draws not only on Bourbakian mathematics, but Duvignaud's notion of play. While in some respects Duvignaud's definition of "zero intentionality" takes playing too far, his assertion that play lacks an a priori purpose also seems in keeping with Oulipian potentiality.[16] That is, a given form is not in itself purposeful, radical, or transformative, but if an author is open to its potential, a form's implementation and uptake are full of such possibilities. A form is not in and of itself political, but it can be politicized in the right hands.

This playful, formal potential certainly runs against the grain of mid-century notions of *littérature engagée*, most notably Sartre's distinction between poetry and prose. In "Qu'est-ce que la littérature," Sartre establishes an essential binary between poetry and prose, suggesting that the two modes of writing do not have the same relationship to the sign and thus, do not have the same value as a mode of writing. According to Sartre, poetry is "representative," that is, it refuses to make use of (*s'en servir*) or to utilize (*utiliser*) language as a tool, but rather, treats words like things, images, or substance. Prose, on the other hand, is by nature "expressive" or communicative, deploying words as tools in service of a message (Sartre,

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[15] For more on this notion of "uptake," see Freadman.

[16] Duvignaud would argue that play, as an "unproductive activity," is a *remise en cause* of capitalist economies and their market-driven culture. Duvignaud also sees play's uselessness and meaninglessness as an affront to what he deemed the "hyperrational" intellectual movements of the time. (He targets, in particular, semiology and structuralism). See Duvignaud 13-15.

Situations II 63-69).[17] Poetry is medium-oriented and prose, message-oriented. As a result, prose is better suited to the articulation of a political message. Committed or engaged literature, as a prose form, is directly inserted within the political field, unlike prosody, which is fully autonomous from the political sphere.

Playful authors reject this understanding of poetry and prose in favor of the ambiguity and malleability of the literary sign. For example, throughout his career, Perec insists upon the interrelationship of *forme* and *fond*; meaning is always derived from form and vice versa. Wittig, for her part, understands writing as a dialectical engagement with history (a problem far more complicated than poetry versus prose). Much of the formal innovation I investigate also involves blurring generic boundaries. Playing with form can entail, for instance, applying ostensibly poetic forms to prose; submitting a novel to an external constraint is already to treat prose like poetry. In the case of Jouet's work, blurring generic boundaries is central to formal innovation, as he not only incorporates theater and poetry into the novel, but theorizes novelistic practice via the gaze of popular theater. Forms and texts can also be fundamentally altered by collective practice or communities of readership; they are hardly transparent signs. In this light, no form—but especially the strange forms my authors choose—can merely service any particular political message. In another sense, by drawing attention to the opacity or strangeness of literary forms, these authors challenge the assumption that literary signs are ever self-explanatory or easily legible *as* political practice.

The authors I study not only objected to this division between poetry and prose, but to the presumed politico-literary identity that went along with it: *l'auteur engagé*. In other words, these authors were concerned about the roles the author was expected to play, or what it meant to be an author and what this might entail. They turned to opaque or apparently meaningless forms as an implicit critique of the political sphere in which they were embroiled. In Chapter 1, for instance, I contextualize formal innovation with a short history of *dégagement.* Queneau and other intellectuals of his time, notably Jérôme Lindon, Etiemble, and Roland Barthes, shared an interest in *dégagement,* which was not a call for literature to be apolitical or *dégagé*, but a critique of *engagement.* They found the paradigm of *littérature engagée* problematic for several reasons. It not only assumed that the author had a privileged voice in the political sphere, but also presumed that literary texts—especially prosaic forms like novels—were *a priori* political forms. These thinkers of *dégagement* balked at the idea that an author's politics would become a yardstick for their literary practice; they were also wary of the idea that a text must serve a political cause or party, especially the French Communist Party or Marxism at large.

While the politico-literary paradigm of *engagement* reached its height in the 1950s, it continued to be influential throughout the 1960s and '70s, affecting authors like Perec and Wittig. While the French Communist Party's influence began to wane, it continued to be

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[17] This only represents Sartre's thinking on genre at a particular point at time; his ideas will evolve later in his career. In his own novels, Sartre did experiment with form, see *Le Sursis,* for instance.

influential in the political sphere, and as those historical flashpoints approached, authors were still pressured into a public political presence. The authors I study questioned not the fact that the author could be involved in politics, but that the author would be always "affiché," always beholden to the political sphere or "haunted" by engagement.[18] These writers were concerned that literary texts would become interchangeable with an author's political practice, reduced to mere propaganda, or assumed to be of a singular political agenda. While Queneau objects to talking about his politics at all, Perec became disillusioned with being labeled a Marxist. Wittig disliked being reduced to a singular political agenda, like being a "militant feminist" or "lesbian" writer. The double-bind of politico-literary practice led some playful authors to fantasize about a world in which the text could have its own voice, separate from that of the author, and in which the author could participate while effectively opting out.

Language play thus implicitly entails an investigation of what it means to *play the author,* of how authorship is staged as a performance of political and literary identity. By experimenting with new relationships to form, these authors are also developing new modes of intervention within the political and literary fields. Often this means playful authors approach authorial identity with a sense of humor (or even bitter irony). This self-conscious distance allows them to question the social and political status afforded the author, but also to perform authorship and group practice differently, coming up with new *façons d'être*, or "ways of being" in the literary field.[19] Perec, Wittig, and Jouet all display, to varying degrees, a kind of bitter humor with respect to politics; this playful attitude allows them to investigate certain realities of political experience. It also allows them to gesture to their outsider-status and attempt to distance themselves from the political field—all the while offering a brutal, biting critique. While I will argue that this attempt at escape is ultimately in vain, I will show that this attitude, this humorous *playing at the author,* is a means of *gaming the system.* These authors are challenging expectations for authorial practice. They are also covertly representing contemporary history and politics and developing new modes of communal identity and collective practice. In this way, they are gaming the linguistic, literary, and political systems all at once.

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[18] In *Le Degré zéro*, Barthes describes the public face of the engaged author as being "affiché" or "posted": always having to publicly address or state one's politics. As a "poster," political identity becomes a self-sufficient sign, or a "signature" (Barthes 187). It designates something or someone in a flat, uncomplicated way: this is a "Marxist" author or an "engaged" text. Barthes worries that such a sign may not coincide with an author's political activity. Or the reverse problem may be true: only authors with active political agendas would be able to write political texts. Barthes calls this phenomenon "la hantise de l'engagement," or engagement's phantom presence (*Ibid* 187). Without the author's external political practice, the text is deemed void of political content. For more on Barthes's understanding of political practice, see Chapter 1.

[19] Bloomfield uses the term "façons d'être ensemble en littérature" to refer to the particular features that distinguish one mode of group practice from another, like a given group's sociological, geographical, or historical anchoring, or its collective discourse. I am expanding its use to include the practice of the individual author. See Bloomfield 31.

By redistributing words in the dictionary, playful authors are, in fact, considering language as the venue by which political identity is theorized, experienced, and expressed. They are approaching politics like a game of its own and attempting to rewrite the rules. As Roman Jakobson points outs: "[…] languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they can convey" (cited in Braun 33). By playing with form, the authors I study recalibrate the "must's" of language, or the structuring principals that fundamentally condition political subjectivity. They consider how basic linguistic forms—such as pronouns—are central to processes of political subjectification and the dynamics of political and literary groups. By altering what language *must* convey, these authors *game the system*. They open up new possibilities, using form to envision alternative political identities and new modes of collective practice. For instance, when Perec writes without the letter "e," he envisions a universe in which the first-person singular ("je") is difficultly expressed. By not saying "I," he must say "we," or experiment with first-person plurals ("nous" or "on") as primary subjective modes. Wittig, on the other hand, envisions a community in which the feminine must be the default, neutral form ("elle" or "elles"), challenging the presumed masculinity of the neutral subject.

Of course, Perec and Wittig's pronominal play serves as a reminder that political discourse is loaded with wordplay—whether it be a simple slogan (like "Obámanos!" or "Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands!") or any number of slang terms for political parties, groups, and legislation (i.e., dems, DOMA, POTUS, SCOTUS, Antifa, anti-vaxxers, anarcs, neocons, birthers, politickers, *etc.*). Wordplay is also inherently socially and culturally situated, and so to play with words is already to contemplate particular political realities and possibilities. One need only turn to the titles of the novels studied here to be reminded of this fact. Jouet's novel *Le Cocommuniste* is based on "coco," a pejorative word for "commie" or "communist," suggesting that Jouet will not be portraying any communist ideal, but rather, the failure of this ideal. Perec's *La Disparition* plays off of the many meanings of "disappearance": whether it be an individual murdered ("disappeared") or the *acte de disparition* (the legal document that was meant to replace those individuals lost in the Shoah). Wittig's *Les Guérillières* posits not just feminine warriors, but women guerillas; she conspicuously creates these *Guérillères* at the height of Maoist guerilla tactics and feminist activism. These playful titles already hint at the specific political crises that shaped each novel's production.

As we shall see, Queneau, Perec, Wittig, and Jouet had very different experiences of playful political discourse and political life, but they share an interest in what Jacques Rancière deems the gaps between *le politique*, or abstract political theory, and *la politique*, or the experience of politics (Rancière, Aux bords du politique. 13). *Le politique* designates "the political" as an object of study; this includes the "art" of governing and elaborating the principles of law, power, and community. *La politique,* on the other hand, refers to "doing politics" as an activity; this experience of political practice necessarily evokes the struggles between individuals and parties over exercising power (*Ibid* 13). *La politique* originates not in any idealized understanding of how a given political body (a group, a community, or a state) should be governed, but the very reality of living together ("la vie en commun") (*Ibid* 13).

Rancière argues that *la politique* is central to the process of political subjectification. Doing politics is the very means by which individuals become political subjects (*Ibid* 15). Experiencing politics, as a victim or perpetrator, as a subject of history, is the means by which we become subjects within larger political communities. In this way, *la politique* is how individuals arrive at "being together" ("*être-ensemble*"), or existing alongside one another and understanding their relationship to others (*Ibid* 122).

Playful authors analyze how linguistic forms both enable and restrict *la politique,* political subjectification, and collective practice. They approach politics as a formal problem, or the need to negotiate between linguistic forms, discursive modes, and various speech acts. This formal negotiation enables them to understand the place of individuals and groups within larger political communities. Pronominal play, in particular, becomes a venue by which formally innovative authors interrogate the process of political subjectification and the creation of communities from political subjects.

Pronouns are a means of investigating what Bourdieu deems the problem of the "*porte-parole,*" or who can speak for whom and in which contexts (Bourdieu 111). Only certain subjects are given the institutional power to speak for others, or to have their speech function as an institutional act. Bourdieu calls this "jurisdiction," or the power of a given speech act, spoken by a particular individual, to be granted institutional authority (the priest can speak for the Church, or the politician for the party, etc.) (*Ibid* 111). Wittig uses the feminine plural "elles" to challenge not only the presumed jurisdiction of men over the French language, but to stage fights over jurisdiction within feminist circles, as individuals compete for the power to speak for "feminism" at large. Perec, on the other hand, contemplates the neutral third-person pronoun "on" as a problematic political identity. It is a pronoun that often refers to an anonymous group, with no specific referents or speakers, nor any obvious jurisdiction. "On" thus stages the problem of the nameless masses, or a political identity or community that is nevertheless devoid of subjectivity—a "we" with no one to speak for it.

From battling "elles" to a nameless "on," at the center of playful literature, one ultimately finds the problem of collective organization and communal life. Perec and Wittig's interest in pronouns and jurisdiction anticipates many discussions surrounding the crisis of community in the 1980s. For thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, communism's failure can also be related to the ubiquitous sentiment that community has failed.[20] For Nancy, finding a community is no longer possible in modern-day France. Indeed, after all the important political crises of 20th-century France—from the "failure" of international communism to wars of decolonization to the collapse of industrialism—many thinkers have come to lament the 21st-century as the century "after." This is a time that is postindustrial, postmodern, post-Marxist,

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[20] Nancy links this crisis of community to the loss of the communist dream of a "community for all," in which every individual would find a place, above and beyond social divisions and political turmoil. He relates this loss of community to the loss of what he calls "communion," or the notion that all individuals are ultimately united in the experience of mortality. See Nancy 11-12, 32-33.

postcolonial, post-avant-garde… so why would it not be post-community?[21] In light of the growth of far-right political groups and the division of French political groups into extremes, the 21st-century is understood to be the moment when leftist politics—and whatever communities they may have forged—have failed. In the midst of this political and communal crisis, literature is no longer seen as having any political import.

Jouet writes in this century "after," as he tries to negotiate what it means to write political literature in the modern era. He tries to understand, not only what has become of fading communist communities, but what has become of literature as a political act. It would be ahistorical to call his work *engagé,* but he is certainly grappling with the aftermath of committed literature. He may be more comfortable with his public and political role than Queneau, Perec, or Wittig, but his work still bears traces of their skepticism. His humor still retains their critique of political experience. The most substantial difference, however, is that his work cannot reproduce what remains of their optimism; in the century after communism, one can only make sense of communism's failure. There is little hope for its future.

But if playful literature can *game the system* by offering a fervent critique of the contemporary politics and new modes of intervening in the political field, it also attempts to renegotiate how communities are formed and what it means to be a community. For playful writers, investigating community means considering *la politique* of groups and voices competing for ownership over authority, but also the shared language that animates this political practice. It means narrating the struggles of communities in crisis and documenting those now forgotten. But it also means creating new relationships to political experience and new communities through group textual practice. This group textual practice is itself another aspect of formal innovation, given that it can also take many forms. It might be a shared identity or a shared performative practice. It may be the collective authorship of a text, or the collaborative collection of words. It might even be the intervention of non-authors, real people who find their voices as intertexts. One of the greatest testimonies to the *potential* of formal innovation are the communities forged by this group practice. More often than not, these communities are inherently virtual.[22] They are *ensembles* that can only exist through the text and that would not exist otherwise. Whatever form they may take, these virtual, textual micro-communities are play's antidote to the collapse of communism and community.

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[21] I borrow this listing of "post-X" (with some of my own additions) from Susan Suleiman's description of *Tel Quel.* See Suleiman.

[22] Kaufman suggests that group practice is animated by an aesthetics of community, in which realizing a shared project becomes a means of creating a shared reality. For Kaufman, this shared project is a feature of works produced in a collective setting, especially those written by 20th-century avant-garde groups and published under a collective name (Kaufman 4). Kaufman nevertheless cautions that this shared reality is always a "virtual community." Avant-gardes are always more about the "possibility of sharing" than they are about the actual creation of community (*Ibid* 4). For playful writers, this virtual community is not the result of the failed project, but the end goal. They hope to create communities that are inherently virtual.

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Chapter 1

Not So Secret: Queneau's *dégagement* and Oulipo as an "Open Secret"

In September 1960, at the *Foyer Culturel International de Cérisy-la-Salle*, future Oulipian Jean Lescure organized a conference in honor of Raymond Queneau. As it was described in the *Mercure de France*, this was an exceptional event for Queneau and his friends because the notoriously tight-lipped author was finally, and inevitably, going to "s'exprimer librement sur lui-même"—and in public nonetheless.[23] The event, itself provoked by the enormous success of *Zazie dans le métro* the previous year, was important in solidifying his standing as an author. But, if this was to be Queneau's official "coming out" in the literary scene, it was rather belated at best—almost thirty years after his first published novel.[24] The event-worthy nature of his long-awaited coming out is only heightened retrospectively, given that this conference would be the future birthplace of Oulipo (which began only two months later). While secretive or reclusive authors are by no means exceptions in literary history, Queneau's silence was relatively unique among his aggressively outspoken and mediatized contemporaries in the post-war era. The 1950s and 1960s were, after all, the heyday of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and *engagement*: the moment at which French intellectuals were not only increasingly visible to a wider public, but were accruing authority and influence in cultural and political spheres. Almost any French author of note was *engagé* and made this engagement known—on the radio, on TV, and in the streets. More often than not this engagement was in support of the French Communist Party proper, but over time, it began to include an ever-expanding list of political causes. These were also the last golden years of Marxism, leading up to the reevaluation of the PCF and the turn to Maoism and Trotskyism in May '68. The increasing spectacularity of French society and political culture led Guy Debord and the Situationists, among others, to conclude that reality was indistinguishable from the high-octane spectacle of its performance and representation. In this sociopolitical context, Queneau was very much an outlier.

Despite the lofty significance of such a *début*, Queneau's inaugural address is terribly modest and surprisingly elusive in its content and aims. Unlike some of his attention- and adulation-hungry contemporaries (notably Breton), Queneau reveals his discomfort with speaking at length about himself—especially during a conference in his honor. While he reluctantly rehearses his authorial coming-of-age, he offers few if any autobiographical tidbits and little political fodder to his expectant audience (or to future Oulipo scholars). But, it is not the content, but rather the tone of the autobiography —the need for "delicacy" as Queneau puts it—that is relevant to the future Oulipo. Throughout the transcripts of the conference proceedings, Queneau adheres to an ironic mode of self-presentation. Rather than basking in his fifteen minutes of fame, Queneau gives us running metacommentary on playing his role as

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[23] A newspaper clipping of the event (entitled "Queneau et ses amis," from the October 1960 issue of *Mercure de France*) can be found in the special issue of *Temps mêlés* dedicated to the conference. As the journal had fairly limited publication and distribution, it can be difficult to access, but an archival copy can be found at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. See Blavier 5-6.

[24] The attendees of the small conference included several academics (Sorbonne grammarian Gérald Antoine, Sorbonne philosophy professor Maurice de Gandillac, and EHESS sociologist Albert Memmi), as well as a few future Oulipians (including André Blavier, Jean Lescure, and François Le Lionnais).

an honored writer: "Je suis dans une situation assez ridicule… et obligé de jouer à un jeu particulièrement délicat… de jouer au colloque; mais il faut bien que j'y joue" (Queneau, Interview 9).[25] Eschewing conference conventions, Queneau refused to perform his authorial status, tiptoeing around any polemical questions about his life or his work.

One particular question, posed to Queneau by someone in the audience, however, brings to the fore the inescapability of playing the role of an author. Or rather, it demonstrates how being a French author in the 1950s and '60s meant necessarily coming to terms with engagement. While the question itself is not recorded in the conference proceedings, Queneau's lengthy response—which touches on notions of authorial political practice and the political import of literary works—implies that he had been asked about his politics. Initially, he refuses to answer this question directly:

> La question que vous me posez... il est strictement impossible d'y répondre, c'est une impossibilité totale. Mais on peut répondre deux choses quand même: primo, il n'y a rien à répondre, secundo, il y a quand même quelque chose à répondre. (*Ibid* 12)

Queneau's delicacy surfaces in the guise of humor, but somehow his joking elusiveness, his *maybe I'll answer or maybe not,* makes his discomfort ever more palpable. While Sartre and others are vociferously offering up their allegiance to the PCF, Queneau is playing coy: *Are you engaged or aren't you, Monsieur Queneau? Primo or segundo?* Queneau's elusiveness is ambiguous: is he being modest or is he trying to cop-out of political engagement? Or both?

As Queneau continues, it becomes clear that he is answering the question in spite of himself, revealing his discomfort with the heated political scene and the very notion of Sartrean engagement.[26] Queneau naively hopes to hark back to an era when literary politics were regulated by an implicit code of *politesse* among honest men—a moment when authors could respectfully disagree about political questions. He expresses his desire for a détente between political "actors" and "spectators": between those who act honestly ("qui s'agitent sur le plan politique d'une façon honnête") and those who do not act, but nevertheless treat those political actors with respect ("ils les considèrent avec respect, sans que pour cela eux soient concernés") (*Ibid* 12). Some authors could be active ("agir") in literary debates or political parties, and others could be uninvolved ("pas concernés"), but both would keep their reputations unscathed.

While such a desire might seem fairly anodyne, in the heated environment in which he is speaking, it could be tantamount to "outing" oneself as against *la cause communiste.* As Gisèle Sapiro explains, the increasing politicization and even hyperpoliticization ("surpolitisation") of the French literary field in the 20th century resulted in a wartime and post-

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[25] Queneau's entire speech can also be found in the special issue of *Temps mêlés* dedicated to the conference. See Queneau, Raymond. "Interview" 9-12.

[26] This evasiveness with respect to politics was not always Queneau's default. In fact, Queneau was not only forthcoming in his critique of Surrealist politics, but would briefly join Boris Souvarine's journal *La Critique sociale* in the 1930s; Souvarine was a member of the *Cercle Communiste Démocratique*, a fringe anti-Stalinist group within the PCF. See Jouet 16-18.

WWII politico-literary environment that was extremely polarized. Even the most apolitical attitudes could be interpreted as having political valences. [27] Implicitly, Queneau's very reluctance, his desire to not talk about *his* engagement, discloses information about him; namely that he, too, falls into the category of a political spectator. Queneau's suggestion that the mere notion of *être de gauche* is outdated and must be reconsidered, further outs him (*Ibid* 12). He not only fails to state his allegiance to the Left or the PCF, but criticizes them outright. In this light, Queneau is very much an open secret. No matter how much he denies having political or authorial authority, he nevertheless reveals his attitudes towards contemporary political movements.

But, by claiming that no one has "really talked" about political questions in the current moment, Queneau is delicately making a rather bold statement (*Ibid* 12). He suggests that authorial declarations of allegiance to the Left are vacant at best, and that authors, in all modesty, should know when to shut up. Tellingly, it is immediately after this bold statement that Queneau himself quiets down, shying away from claiming any political authority or voicing any particular political aims. When Queneau displays the modesty he calls for, his discussion of politics becomes one of performative disavowal. He has "rien à dire," or at least, "rien de valable, j'aime mieux me taire" (*Ibid* 12). He cautions that his silence is not because he is uninformed: "[…] ça ne veut pas dire qu'on les ignore; ça peut peut-être avoir l'air d'être un appel à une sorte de révélateur du monde actuel du point de vue de sociologie" (*Ibid* 12). Not speaking, not having anything to say, being silent or secretive, is a kind of choice. Being openly evasive or even secretive about one's literature or politics serves an implicit purpose: to challenge the performative and spectacularized behavior of contemporary authors and the politico-literary environment that required such behaviors of them. Queneau's open secrecy functions as a political speech act, with two primary functions: 1) it reveals his desire not to be engaged and in so doing, 2) implies a critique of engagement. It is a performative practice that critiques engagement as a mode of intervention in the politico-literary field—and posits, however vaguely, an alternative.

This saying-not-saying is all the more intriguing because Queneau is hardly alone in his assertion. Under his stewardship in the 1960s, Oulipo, too, would play with the dynamics of being vocally apolitical or not saying. They, too, would be openly secret, bending the rules of political performativity by turning not telling into its own kind of performance. Even today, over fifty years into the existence of the group, Oulipians are constantly taking this double-stance: *they're not involved in politics, but they're not ignorant or apolitical.* In this chapter, I argue that Queneau and Oulipo's investment in secrecy and apoliticism are far from accurate socio-historical representations of the group's practices, but rhetorical positions strategically and facetiously deployed by the group. While many Oulipo scholars take Oulipo's secrecy and apoliticism as historical fact, I argue that the group was never entirely secret, but rather, it strategically broadcasted its secrecy and its lack of politics. Queneau and Oulipo had many reasons to turn to this performative logic: to assert their autonomy from the literary field, to

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[27]See Sapiro 21-25, 47. See Introduction.

challenge expectations for authorial behavior, and to question the insertion of literature into the political field.

More broadly, both Queneau and Oulipo wanted to avoid the forms of public disclosure that were increasingly common in 1950s and '60s France. Under the politico-literary paradigm of engagement, authors and groups were obliged to play the role of the author whose personal and political life was always on display. Thus, rhetorical notions like "secrecy" allowed the group to negotiate their own "publicizing" or "rendering public," without being entirely beholden to notions of *littérature engagée*. Using D.A. Miller and Anne-Lise François' critical analyses of the "open secret" (which offer a continuum of terms from "non-disclosure" to "theatrical withholding of information"), alongside similar colloquial terminology that describes the public status of one's sexuality (terms like "out," "closeted," "coming out," "passing for," etc.), it is possible to analyze the effects of Queneau and Oulipo's performative practice of the open secret. Its ambiguity can be read as a performative practice and a (potentially political) speech act: is it defensive or protective? Critical or contentless? While Queneau's secrecy takes the form of a disavowal, Oulipo's, as we shall see, is more of a theatrical withholding of information. As a result of this formal difference, their open secrecy serves slightly different functions. Both Queneau and Oulipo hope to shelter themselves from political and literary squabbles. But while Queneau's disavowal rejoins contemporary critiques of engagement, Oulipo's theatricality allows them to negotiate their relationship to various individuals and institutions (like Jean Paulhan or the Collège de 'Pataphysique) within the literary sphere.

In the first section, I will claim that Queneau's performance of his public identity is a rhetorical or performative mode of non-disclosure, more specifically, of disavowal. This game of *cache-cache* works in tandem with Queneau's critique of the close ties between political allegiance, authorship, and the publishing industry. His views mirror contemporary discussions of *dégagement,* which, contrary to standard interpretations, does not mean being fully apolitical. Rather, it brings together intellectuals of all political shades who were anxious about the prevalence of engagement as a political paradigm. These thinkers—from Etiemble to Lindon to Barthes—critiqued engagement and asserted what was no longer possible in the postwar era: the autonomy of literature from the political sphere. As I will show, in arguing for the autonomy of literature, they often relied on self-contradictory and confusing ideological discourses.

Uncovering this history of *dégagement* reveals that Oulipo, while most famously a challenge to Surrealism, was also wary of other contemporary movements—most notably *littérature engagée*.[28] Scholarship on Oulipo tends to situate it within a larger history of 20th-century French literary groups or avant-gardes, beginning in Surrealism and Dadaism in the 1920s and '30s and continuing on to the New Novel, Tel Quel, and the Situationists in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Scholarship on literary groups tends to center around a few overarching

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[28] To my knowledge, Oulipians never openly stated that they were challenging engagement in the 1960s. This is, however, part of the way they narrativize their history today. Both Marcel Bénabou and Paul Fournel have stated that Oulipo wished to challenge Surrealism *and* engagement. See Bénabou "Quarante siècles de l'Oulipo" 21 and Fournel "50 ans de l'Oulipo" 17.

questions: why it is that group practice dominates the 20ᵗʰ-century French literary scene? What qualifies as an avant-garde? What distinguishes one literary group from another? Definitions of the "avant-garde" vary widely, but usually examine a few key traits: collective practice, formal innovation, political engagement, internal squabbles, a public persona or performance, a dominant leader or authority figure, an aesthetic and/or political program, etc.[29] Often, Oulipo is excluded from *avant-gardisme* on the basis of its lack of coherent political program. Oulipo was actively apolitical, but I will argue that this is a performative stance that is more complicated than it seems. Their apoliticism nevertheless distinguishes them from contemporaries like the Surrealists, the Situationists, or Tel Quel, all of which espoused some kind of political project. Whether or not Oulipo is defined as an "avant-garde," "an anti-avant-garde," or a "literary group," it is inevitably put into dialogue with this tradition of group practice. While variations on this scholarship attach Oulipo to more marginal literary groups, like the Collège de 'Pataphysique (or perhaps even the short-lived poetry journal, *Messages*), in most canonical histories, Surrealism remains Oulipo's primary antagonist. This has the effect of silencing other voices with which Oulipo was (and is) in dialogue.

With this in mind, Oulipo scholars typically identify the following traits as unique to Oulipians: their secrecy, apoliticism, longevity, formal innovation, lack of an aesthetic program, and the friendly relations between its members (the fact that one remains a member even after death, or that members are peacefully "co-opted" or inducted). While each of these traits certainly carries a kernel of truth, this description of Oulipo is dangerously close to Oulipo's own discourse of self-presentation. This means that much of the scholarship, rather than interrogating Oulipian discourse, stops short at ensuring its canonization.

For my part, I am less interested in proscriptively defining what qualifies as an avant-garde—or as uniquely Oulipian for the matter—and more interested in complicating the static terms used to understand the specificity of Oulipian practice. As my opening discussion of Queneau's inaugural address shows, terms like "secret" and "apolitical" are hardly fixed, but are defined performatively within specific contexts of use. As a group that has existed from 1960 to the present, Oulipo has been exposed to a variable constellation of opposing groups and discourses, and as such, even if certain terms are recurrent, the practices or historical moments that they describe are far from stable. In fact, Oulipo has not only shifted their position within the literary field over time: they have also retroactively repositioned themselves—recasting their history in different narratives, with different antagonists. This raises the question: what does it mean to call Oulipo "secret" and/or "apolitical" at different points in French literary history? Can Oulipo's open secret ever be read as a performative act invested with political content—like Queneau's in 1960? Or is their version of secrecy always a contentless challenge—all bark and no bite? I will demonstrate that Oulipo's secrecy certainly

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[29] Kaufman, for example, uses "literary group" and "avant-garde" interchangeably and showcases their collective practice and formal innovation—not political engagement. Kaufman argues, however, that the term "avant-garde" is overburdened with political connotations; he does not want to reduce Surrealism to bourgeois *individualisme* or characterize it as an exclusively Communist endeavor. He instead suggests that literary groups are hoping to recuperate some kind of shared experience, in light of the impending failure of French Communism and Catholicism. See Kaufman 4-10.

functioned as a performative speech act, or a mode of intervention within the literary field, but that its political valences are weak or uncertain at best. More broadly, the question of the efficacy of speech acts—as political and literary interventions—is something that looms over both Queneau and Oulipo. There is often a significant gap between what their secrecy *intends to convey* and *what it actually does.*

In answering these questions, I situate Oulipo as a "post-avant-garde," or a group that has, as Oulipo scholar Camille Bloomfield says, "mastered perfectly the tools and modes of representation invented by the avant-garde," but only reproduces the form of the avant-garde and not its theoretical or artistic content (Bloomfield, L'Oulipo 41). The term "post-avant-garde" encapsulates nicely the belatedness of Oulipo. This is, after all, a group initiated not by fiery, forward-thinking youths, but by established, aging, white Parisian men. Bloomfield's notion of a "post-avant-garde" also allows us to describe Oulipo's double-stance: as a group that is positioning themselves against, but nevertheless grappling with, the legacy of *avant-gardisme* that preceded them. They thus display aspects of an "avant-garde *habitus*" in spite of themselves—in their use of manifestos, for example (Bloomfield, Les manifestes à l'Oulipo 35).

But while Bloomfield uses Oulipo as a case study that reveals changes in the literary field (like the disappearance of the avant-garde and the manifesto form itself), I hope to track how Oulipians themselves have changed. By narrating moments at which Oulipo "came out" or "was outed" or "outed themselves again," I demonstrate that Oulipo's secrecy was paradoxically unveiled several times. It is a recurrent performative structure. Oulipo's "failed coming out" in the *Cahiers de 'Pataphysics,* however, shows that their secrecy did not isolate or protect them. On the contrary, their secrecy allowed them to be integrated into contemporary political and literary debates—most notably debates surrounding structuralism. Queneau and Oulipo's failed struggle to maintain authority over their public image further underscores the increasingly polarization and mediatization of French politics in the late 20th- and 21st-centuries. In the panoptical age of the radio and TV, the Internet and NSA, is anything truly secret?

Open Secrecy as a Speech Act: Disavowal or Revelation?

When I insist upon the rhetorical nature of Oulipo's secrecy, I am writing against a long tradition within Oulipo scholarship of routinely evoking Oulipian secrecy as a historical reality, beginning with Oulipians themselves. Talk of Oulipo's Masonic practices, their clandestine nature, or their sibylline existence has become a rhetorical commonplace in almost any history of the group, to the extent that secrecy has become a defining feature of Oulipo's group practice. What exactly is meant by "secrecy" is a complicated question. Some scholars claim that Oulipo had no real public presence and was virtually unknown until the mid-1970s—a fact contradicted by their publication history (outlined below).[30] Others have claimed that Oulipo was secret for flouting the conventions of the avant-garde: their public squabbles, self-promotion, and exhibitionism. Instead, the group limited their practice and experiments to a

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[30] Consenstein claims that between 1960 and 1973, there were "few indications of [Oulipo's] existence" (Consenstein 7, note 1).

tight-knit circle, refusing to share their ideas with the outside world.[31] This is closer to the truth, but still fails to account for Oulipo's many forays into the public sphere, as well as the group's pedagogical tendencies, or their desire to share their ideas with a larger public. Many scholars actively freeze Oulipo's group practice in time, adhering truthfully to the group's original rhetoric and self-characterization, without accounting for how these changed over the group's long history. What does it mean, for example, to refer to Oulipo in the 21st century, when the majority of the group's founders and most famous members are dead? Or to call Oulipo a "secret" group, long after it has become a mainstay in French high school classrooms?

If early on the group was resistant to the idea of becoming a public spectacle, in the 21st century, it has become a prominent fixture in the public literary sphere. As Oulipo's current president Paul Fournel explains, "L'Oulipo est entré dans le public et sa vie extérieure a pris une ampleur qui ne ravit pas tous les 'anciens' mais que personne ne peut plus nier" (Fournel, 50 ans de l'Oulipo 20). A short history of the group and its publications confirms that Oulipo has indeed entered public life. In fact, Oulipo's publicly unknown existence was short-lived, but this did not prevent the group from coming out multiple times. Spurred on by the *Décade* discussed above, Oulipo began in December 1960. However, Queneau outed the group to a mainstream public early on, in an interview with Georges Charbonnier, which aired on *Radio Téléphonique Française* (RTF) from February 2nd 1962 to April 27th 1962. At this point, Oulipo had already published their first collective text in the *Dossier 17* of the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* in December 1961 (which included François Le Lionnais's "La Lipo") and a special issue of *Temps mêlés* in 1964.[32] After a period of relative silence, more widely distributed texts were published, including *La littérature potentielle*, in which one finds the newly christened "La Lipo (Premier manifeste)" and "Seconde manifeste" (Gallimard, 1973). While producing these mass-market paperbacks, however, Oulipo also published the *Bibliothèque oulipienne* (1974) in limited distribution (150 volumes total, with 50 reserved for Oulipians themselves).

Their early outing and productivity, contrasted with varying forms of public and private publication, complicate our understanding of Oulipian secrecy. Secrecy has little to do with public knowledge of the group, be it in the wider market of Gallimard or the RTF or in the more restricted readership of 'Pataphysics or Oulipo subscription-only journals. It also has little to do with the group's available publications or its many public appearances. Oulipo not only invited guests to, but kept records of their private meetings; these records were published in 'Pataphysical proceedings and in their own volume. Even if Oulipo did not present its work as avant-gardist ("La Lipo" was only retrospectively titled "Premier manifeste"), and even if their works circulated within more immediate circles, Oulipo was indeed read and debated (Bloomfield, Les manifestes à l'Oulipo 36-38). Major artistic figures of the time may not have "read their works as manifestos" as Bloomfield argues, but they certainly reacted to them by

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[31] Jean-Jacques Thomas notes that the group rejected the "exhibitionnisme racoleur" of interwar groups in favor of a "introversion productive" or a "travail confidentiel" (Thomas 166-7).

[32] Even these were preceded by a semi-public event in Verviers, Belgium in October 1964. Consenstein also mentions an article entitled "OU-LI-PO" in *Le nouvel observateur* 19 (March 25, 1965) and Paul Fournel's *Clefs pour une littérature potentielle* (1972). See Oulipo, *Atlas* 427-432 and Consenstein 7, 37.

taking sides; Jean Paulhan was famously "against" Oulipo and Marcel Duchamp "for" them (*Ibid* 36-38). Exactly which aspect of Oulipo was secret?

While much of the group's doctrine has remained constant, scholars and fans alike are reticent to admit that the group has intentionally become more marketable, pedagogical, or theatrical. By the 1970s, Oulipo's identity and methods were far from secret. They were event-worthy, to be shared with a larger public in a variety of ways. Oulipo began offering writing workshops, weekend retreats and readings both locally and internationally, at venues as reputable as Columbia's Reid Hall.[33] In a little over a decade, Oulipo shifted from a "secret-banquet-club" to an institutional powerhouse. From the 1970s on, Oulipo was publishing and reediting frequently—often drawing on the marketability of their former secrecy.[34] In 1987, they even began republishing the *Bibliothèque oulipienne* in mass-market volumes. Today Oulipo is consecrated, part of the heteronomous pole of the literary field.[35] With their proliferation of workshops and conferences, their monthly *jeudis de l'Oulipo* at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France,* and the popularity of Oulipian constraints in French schools, 21st-century Oulipo relishes in fame and spectacularity. They have a hard time claiming that they're *still* secret.

All of this leads us to reconsider what it means to be secret—or rather to be *known* for one's secrecy. By using critical notions of the "open secret," I will offer 1) an account of what secrecy might entail as a performative practice and a speech act, hinging on the paradox of *speaking one's secrecy out loud*; 2) an analysis of open secrecy as a critique or parody of engagement; and 3) a history of Oulipo's many "coming out's" and "failing outings." This history situates it with respect to marginal 20th-century groups, like Bourbaki and 'Pataphysics, and marginal counter-discourses, like *dégagement*.

In his analysis of secrecy in *David Copperfield,* D.A. Miller identifies a few formal characteristics of secrets. First, secrets are often not really secret, or rather, they are often "known to be known"—more "open" than "closed" (Miller, The Novel and the Police 206). If no one knows that person Y has secret A, its performative nature is erased; a secret cannot be a secret if no one knows a secret is being kept. Second, when secrets are revealed, they are often revealed to be quite banal. As a result, secret A is only meaningful if it is "known," but "kept" (*Ibid* 200). If Y has secret A that person Y does not know, he maintains our interest, but as soon as X knows A, Y is no longer mysterious. The secret is only interesting if no one knows what the secret is.

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[33] Oulipians participated in a recurrent *atelier* at the Festival de la Chartreuse de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon (in 1977, 1978, 1980); Oulipian Harry Matthews offered creative writing workshops at Hamilton College and Bennington College in 1979. Oulipians gave a reading at Reid Hall of Columbia University in 1973, contributed to Europalia 75 in Brussels, and held a *stage* at *la Fondation de Royaumont* in 1978. See Oulipo, *Atlas* 427-432.

[34] This is the case with a collection like *Voyage d'hiver et ses suites,* inspired by Perec's eponymous text, or any number of issues of the Bibliothèque Oulipienne inspired by the works of Queneau, like **Doukipleudonktan?** See Perec and Oulipo, *Voyage* and Oulipo, *Doukipleudonktan?*

[35] Oulipo now publishes an "Oulipian Agenda," or a calendar filled with weekly Oulipian exercises, and a version of their party game, "Chicago," in which one guesses city names based on homophonous words. See Oulipo, *Oulipo. Agenda 92-93* and Fournel and Roubaud, *Chicagos.*

In this way, Miller understands the open secret as an accommodation to power to the extent that it only passively challenges the workings of power and thus ensures power's efficacy.[36] By pointing to the fact that he has A, but not revealing it outright, Y is leaving us in the lurch as to A's importance. Y's non-disclosure of A reveals that 1) A is potentially worth public knowledge and 2) regardless of what A is, Y wants X to know that he has A. Paradoxically, openly rejecting a system of power—implying that one has secret A—reveals one's own enmeshment within the larger system—Y's desire for X to know he has A:

> In a mechanism reminiscent of Freudian disavowal, we know perfectly well that the secret is known, but nonetheless we must persist, however ineptly, in guarding it. The paradox of the open secret registers the subject's accommodation to a totalizing system that has obliterated the difference he would make—the difference he does make, in the imaginary denial of this system 'even so' (*Ibid* 207).

Secrecy's "openness" negates whatever authority the secret has, by gesturing towards its symbolic, and thus for Miller, inefficacious nature—its status as a denial 'even so.' If Y has secret A, and knows that X knows that he has secret A (and maybe even knows what A is), then Y knows A is not entirely a secret. The form of the open secret thus allows the subject to claim "radical inaccessibility" or "indeterminability," while foreclosing his ability to make good on this claim (*Ibid* 194). This is a minimal form of defiance—divested of any real political authority—a challenge to power that belies its powerlessness. It is a kind of *I know you know, but what am I?*

This leads Miller to identify a third formal feature of the secret: secrets are often more about the "theatrical withholding of information" than the content of the secret itself. As a rhetorical gesture, secrets draw attention to the act of disavowal. Regardless of what A is, what is important is that Y has A and is not going to tell X. The moment at which the secret is revealed, it is divested of the power of refusal. X cannot claim not to have A because A's entire functioning was premised on X's not knowing what A was. Miller's definition thus understands the secret as a theatrical disavowal that is potentially contentless. Above all, it is a speech act in the negative: a not-saying of nothing that is ineffective.

Anne-Lise François, on the other hand, underscores the open secret's status as a "practice of non-disclosure" (François, Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience 2). Rather than define the "open secret" as a defensive practice of withholding information, François deems it quite the opposite: it is "[a] nonemphatic revelation—revelation without insistence and without rhetorical underscoring" or "a self-canceling revelation [that] permits a release from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge" (*Ibid* xvi, 2, 4). As a "non-action" or a "recessive action," the secret allows the subject to reveal something without taking on the burden of revelation:

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[36] D.A. Miller understands power in the Foucauldian sense of disciplinary power, in which power is diffuse and impossible to locate. See Miller 17.

[It is a] denial that does not so much abandon as put its object in reserve—or as an ideological trick ensuring the neutralization, containment, and uneven distribution of the power supposed to come with knowledge. (*Ibid* xvi, 4-5)

The subject acquires some measure of protection by neutralizing the process of revelation and the power dynamic that revelation produces. By only hinting at A, Y has no need to function as if he has A; Y can acknowledge A without doing anything about I, neutralizing the saying of A as a performative act. The teller can also shift the burden of revelation to the recipient. By not performing the saying of A, Y potentially forces X to say A and to act upon it.

As a result of its neutralizing effects, the open secret challenges the value ascribed to revelation or more broadly, to speaking out loud. In particular, François points to the rise of bourgeois liberal individualism in Western capitalism and the importance it accords to an individual's subjectivity as well as the public articulation (the "speaking out loud") of this subjectivity.[37] Bemoaning this "overenjoyment" of articulation, François draws a distinction between the right to speak and the "compulsory duty to speak," or the self-congratulatory openness of "consciousness-raising" in which stating a problem (however vacantly) is equated with a political act (*Ibid* 22). This is a question of form versus content: is it more important that one have the right to voice an opinion (content) or to perform this right (form)? In Queneau's words, there is a difference between having ideas about politics and saying them out loud for an audience. François's definition thus provides a different interpretation of not-saying: rather than disavowing something, the subject unemphatically reveals; rather than theatrically withholding information, the subject chooses not to say his secret or act upon it.

This juxtaposition of Miller and François leaves us at an impasse, in which the open secret is either accommodating in its articulation or a revealing in its unarticulatedness; theatricality and conspicuous disavowal are at odds with non-rhetorical, but thoughtful reticence. For my purposes, what is important is that the open secret's structure and symbolic weight are attached to the way it is articulated in speech at a given moment and whether or not this articulation can be accorded the status of a speech act—which can in turn be deemed political. What is unusual about the open secret as a speech act is that it functions in the negative: something that is not said, only partially said, or left partially open. By not saying, Queneau and Oulipo implicitly challenge the required openness or performative revelation of engagement politics—and the literary field that requires such speech acts of them. But the question is not only whether the open secret can function as a speech act—but whether the speech act can act as a political act. Is saying or not saying, in whatever rhetorical form, ever the equivalent to doing?

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[37] François situates these reflections within a larger critique of Foucauldian analysis of the 1980s that focused on the constructed nature of inwardness. She refutes the claim that literary forms like Free Indirect Discourse yield to power by divesting characters of the responsibility to speak for themselves. Not only is this a misreading (given that FID often reveals things that character does not know about herself or thing that cannot be said), but that it is based in the Enlightenment values of "proprietary responsibility" and "public accountability." As such, this complicates the notions of the "liberal subject's claims to self-authorization," as this "authority" is already rooted in the diffuse workings of disciplinary power. See François 14-19.

In my analysis of Queneau's address and Oulipo's discourse of "open secrecy," I will draw on different aspects of these definitions to showcase an opposition between the speech acts of Queneau and Oulipo. While Queneau's Cérisy address is non-emphatic, defensive, and protective, Oulipo's outings are nothing if not a theatrical withholding of (mostly unimportant) information. While Queneau's address clearly falls in line with contemporary criticisms of *dégagement* by Etiemble, Lindon, and Barthes among others, it is difficult to ascertain if Oulipo's theatrical performance of its secrecy has any viable or readily legible political content. Otherwise stated, is not saying a viable critical gesture if you *actually* have nothing to say?

Disavowal and *Dégagement*: Queneau's Apoliticism

This description of the open secret offers an approach to Queneau's inaugural address. Not answering the question, whether *primo or segundo*, reveals not only his desire to be hidden but implies he has something to hide. In actively *not* discussing his politics, Queneau unmasks himself as indeed having something to say. But does his saying-not saying only drive home the fact that he has nothing to do? That his speech is not an act? He implies much about the post-WII politico-literary world in which he lived, namely that it was awfully rare for an author *not* to participate.

As Queneau elaborates on not participating, he hints that the problem with the aging Left is precisely the ever-lingering paradigm of engagement:

> […] penser que c'est un tort pour un intellectuel de ne pas être dans l'action, à l'heure actuelle, c'est supposer qu'il faut agir pour agir d'une façon désordonnée et ne pas se rendre compte qu'en fait tout est remis en question, d'une façon radicale [….] Il n'y a pas à avoir de culpabilité à ce point de vue-là pour, disons, pour celui qui a envie de vivre en dehors, en apparence, du monde social; parce qu'en plus de ça, je pense que quoi qu'on fasse, ça peut avoir une efficacité réelle sans que ce soit de l'agitation politique. (Queneau, Interview 12)

This model asserts that an author must be "dans l'action," part and parcel of collective political actions such as rallies or protests—a requirement albeit a vague one. While Queneau never uses the term "*engagé*" or "*dégagé*" in this address, his anti-engagement sentiment is clear. The transcript of his answers demonstrates in an oddly meta-way, how difficult it can be to be *dégagé* in an environment that presumes engagement is the default. For a French author in the 1960s, Queneau implies, not participating in politics is tantamount to a kind of writerly suicide. Contrary to what he said about political actors and spectators earlier, political spectatorship is simply not an option. Queneau's momentary stab at the inefficacy of unnamed political "happenings" ("qu'il faut agir pour agir") also belies a discomfort not only with the obligatory politics of the author, but the very kinds of political gestures an author is meant to undertake. What constitutes "political action" or "agitation," and the purpose it will serve, can be rather opaque. In the end, Queneau returns to the idea that writers should have the right to live outside ("vivre en dehors") of the social world (*Ibid* 12). Moreover, the *remise en cause* of the political field at large has paved the way for new modes of political activity, which themselves have yet to be defined.

Queneau's open secret thus displays different aspects of both Miller and François' definitions. On the one hand, it is more open than closed, revealing content he is trying to hide: a critique of the political field. On the other hand, it acts as a self-protective claim to radical inaccessibility (Miller's definition) and a non-emphatic revelation that releases him from the burden of revelation (François's); he is not saying and "living outside" of politics, in order to not have to act upon a political statement. I agree with Miller, however, that this claim to radical inaccessibility or freedom from burden is always a false one. Indeed, in the same breath, Queneau undercuts his own statement, claiming to "vivre en dehors, *en apparence*, du monde social" (*Ibid* 12, my emphasis). A desire not to participate or not to say can only fail if not participating and not saying count as acts of participation in and of themselves.

Queneau's call to the autonomy of the writer from the political field echoes that of other, lesser-known contemporary voices: writers interested in *dégagement*. In the early to mid-1950s, many older French writers or critics (many of whom had personal experience of WWII) were beginning to shy away from the Sartrean notion of engaged literature, even as it reached the height of its popularity as a conceptual term and literary identity. [38] Many of these thinkers posited the existence of its opposite, a *littérature dégagée*, although this term was probably not popularized until Jérôme Lindon, the editor of Minuit, used it to describe the Nouveau Roman. But unlike engagement*, dégagement* does not evoke a coherent political program or an affinity towards a particular political party; rather it is more of a reflection on the relationship between literature and politics in the second half of the 20th century.

As early as 1946, René Etiemble, a scholar of comparative literature at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, expressed his frustration with the overuse of the term "*engagement*" and its lack of specificity. In "De l'engagement," published in *Les Temps modernes*, Etiemble narrates reading an article in *Combat* and mockingly describes his confusion over what the term "*engagé*" means. Etiemble shows that historically "*engagement*" refers to many different authors and causes—from the Catholic Church to the Communist Party, from Genet's sexuality to Gide's pederasty, to Nerval and suicide. For Etiemble, *"engagé"* is a term so ubiquitous that it describes most "good" writers of his time. He also argues, like Queneau, that intellectual liberty has lost currency, particularly within the Communist party; most Communists require that one sacrifice intellectual freedom to the watchword of Communist leaders. Anyone who does not follow the party line is ostracized and pejoratively labeled "*dégagé*": "Tout scrupule prenant alors le nom de 'diversion', tout dégagement, de 'traîtrise'" (Etiemble, Hygiène des Lettres II: Littérature dégagée 1942-1953 15). Etiemble finishes his essay by claiming that there are many ways of being a politicized writer: one man risks his life while only writing love poems, another

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[38] While Queneau skips over his involvement in WWII, he could have mentioned that he was drafted in 1939 and demobilized in 1940. Perhaps he was reluctant to mention his activities during the war because although he was involved in the Resistance, he published at Gallimard while it was under ostensible German control (although many authors did). Many members of Oulipo were *engagés* during WWII: co-founder Francois Le Lionnais was part of the Marco Polo network, was captured and later interned at Buchenwald then Mittelbau-Dora (his story "La peinture à dora" is based on his life in the camps); Noël Arnaud participated in the Resistance; and Jean Lescure was involved in the semi-clandestine poetry journal *Messages*. They are representative of authors who were *engagés* during WWII, but would be *dégagés* after the war or later in the 20th century.

hates action but writes critical texts, another has equal interest in action and writing and is a party member—but all are engaged in some way (*Ibid* 17).

The term "*engagé*" is flexible enough in usage to accommodate a wide array of behaviors and political subjects, and this is exactly why it should be rejected as a marker of value. Etiemble borrows a citation from the philosopher Jean Wahl, in order to dismiss engagement, like existentialism, as a mere trend: "[…] le mot d'engagement est très vague. Il faudrait bien nous en dégager, de ce mot" (*Ibid* 19). While Wahl was interested in existentialism's complex origins in philosophies of existence, he considers "existentialist" a political label like any other (an "'ist' among many"). He cautions against the application of Hegelian-inspired philosophies to the political sphere: "Comment, de cette théorie, passer à la pratique?" (Wahl, Petite histoire de l'existentialisme. Suivi de Kafka et Kierkegaard commentaires. 49).[39] While Etiemble and Wahl's rejection of the word leaves room for an acceptance of the practice (it is not the engaged author, but the term "*engagement*" that is on trial here), neither is explicitly asking for *littérature engagé—or dégagée*—just the freedom from one particular paradigm of evaluating literature.

Jérôme Lindon, on the other hand, actively endorses *dégagement* as a political and literary practice, in a 1962 interview, "Littérature dégagée," in *New Morality*.[40] Like Queneau and Etiemble, Lindon does not want all literature to be evaluated in terms of engagement, or to be subject to the ideological demands of communists. Like Queneau, Lindon is making a claim for the autonomy of literature from the political field. The interviewer begins by asking him to explain how Minuit can publish both Le Corbusier and *Arguments* (a history and philosophy collective), or how it can be both "purement littéraire" and "moralement engagé" (Lindon, La littérature dégagée 107). Lindon responds by claiming that his role as an editor is not only to decide what to publish, but what can sell.[41] For that reason, what interests him above all else is quality, especially that of literary form. A beautiful work of art is "self-justified," he claims, and it does not need to be "recuperated" to prove its worth (*Ibid* 108).

Lindon is obviously aware that valuing literature for its form or beauty is somewhat old-fashioned, and he adopts the voice of his critics in order to preempt them:

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[39] The philosopher Jean Wahl wrote *Petite histoire de l'existentialisme* (1947) in response to Sartre's lecture "L'existentialisme est un humanisme," at Club Maintenant in 1945. Wahl's text traces the origins of existentialism in *philosophies de l'existence*, drawing on Kierkegaard, Hegel, Jaspers, and Heidegger. While Etiemble gives no citation for this particular quote, he does not misrepresent Wahl's ideas, as Wahl repeatedly equates existentialism with a passing fashion. Wahl does, however, offer a nuanced portrait of Sartre's existentialism, distinguishing between various literary incarnations of Sartre's thought (the Sartre of *la Nausée* or of *les Mouches*). When describing Heidegger's implicit influence on Sartre, Wahl points out that Heidegger's notion of taking responsibility for one's own destiny ("prendre sur soi-même son destin") is fairly open-ended and non-proscriptive; it thus creates a gap between theory and practice. See Wahl 49-57.

[40] The interviewer is not listed; it is published in the form of an anonymous Q&A.

[41] Jean Hippolyte argues that Lindon created much of the terminology to identify various groups or trends in Minuit fiction. For example, Hippolyte claims that Lindon invented the term "Nouveau Roman" for marketing reasons (Hippolyte 6). Lindon was obliged to play the market; when he became an editor at Minuit in 1953, the publishing house that had accrued significant debts and was on the verge of bankruptcy (Simonin 43, 45).

Il va y avoir des gens pour ricaner: 'Ah! je vois. Monsieur est un adepte de l'art pour l'art?' A quoi je répondrai: 'Et vous, vous [êtes] partisan de l'art pour quoi?' J'en ai assez, à la fin, de voir les gens utiliser sur le plan injurieux une formule dont, depuis longtemps, ils ont cessé de contrôler le sens: autrement, je veux croire qu'ils ne l'utiliseraient plus. (*Ibid* 109-110)

Lindon's response mirrors Etiemble's very closely: the term *"engagement"* is used too liberally to be a useful evaluative criterion, therefore literature need not be engaged in favor of any particular cause. If we were truly to evaluate authors by their engagement, Lindon claims, many important writers would never have been published, and more mediocre writers would have been simply for "voting well," or having party-sanctioned politics (*Ibid* 109-110). Using "*engagement*" as the sole yard stick for literary production means that literature must service something external to itself ("une littérature *pour*") or risk never being published.

While Lindon routinely undercuts the political authority of the editor, he nevertheless relies rhetorically on his own past and present political activities. Lindon begins by affirming that editors' declarations matter little, so the interviewer need not expect a one-liner ("une formule simple, objective") from him (*Ibid* 108). The interviewer, however, persists in suggesting that Lindon is an "engaged publisher," for having published *La Question* by "engaged writer" Henri Alleg. In response, Lindon reiterates that freedom, as indispensable as it is, cannot be an end in itself. The right to edit or publish texts free from governmental censorship transcends the question of which literary forms to endorse (*Ibid* 110). Lindon also insists that his decision to publish certain texts has not been without consequences:

Comme éditeur j'ai publié quelques ouvrages pour protester contre l'usage de la torture, qui m'ont occasionné en trois ans neuf saisies et quinze inculpations pour 'atteinte au moral de l'armée', à 'la sûreté intérieure et extérieure de l'Etat', pour 'provocation à la désobéissance, à l'insoumission, à la désertion', et pour 'diffamation de la D.S.T'. J'espère que cela me donne le droit de plaider en faveur de la littérature pure? (*Ibid* 110).

Has he not, as a former Resistant and a present-day critic of torture in the Algerian war, earned the right to publish whatever he likes? Paradoxically, Lindon deploys his political authority as an "engaged" publisher as a means of justifying his argument in favor of art for art's sake. In this way, his disavowal of political authority, as Miller cautions, is revelatory of his own enmeshment within the system. Lindon's desire to both depoliticize the editorial process and support *littérature dégagée* has the combined effect of reinforcing the political and aesthetic authority of engagement.

When the discussion finally circles back to *littérature dégagée* proper, Lindon acknowledges that literature does not exist in a vacuum: "*Une littérature dégagée?* Entendons-nous. Oui, dégagée des luttes idéologiques immédiates. Mais pas en dehors de l'époque pour autant […]" (*Ibid* 110). Lindon does not conceive of *littérature dégagée* as entirely apolitical or free from history at large. It is simply a literature that can step outside of more immediate

debates within the literary field. *Dégagement* is a rejection of a predefined literary agenda, or of ascribing pre-established, external values to literature (*Ibid* 110).

While Etiemble, Lindon, and Queneau would like to make *littérature engagée* into a literary squabble from which they must extract themselves, Roland Barthes continuously underscores that contemporary authors are embedded in engaged networks of production, or a literary field conditioned by the political field. Throughout his work, Barthes is careful to underscore that notions of literary engagement are historical, moving from a model of engagement that centered on the author's work in the 19th century, to a model that centers on the author himself today.[42] It is for this reason that Barthes refuses to make engagement a mere question of ideology, but a constitutive element of a work's functioning. Being embedded in an engaged field, however, does not automatically make literary works political, much less political acts. It only guarantees that the author is forced to contend with the political world.

In *Le Degré zero de l'écriture* (1953), Barthes defines "*écriture*," in order to contemplate whether engaged literature can function as a speech act, and therefore, as a political act. He describes "écriture" as a "total sign," or the moment at which language is transformed into act:

> […] l'écriture est une fonction: elle est le rapport entre la création et la société, elle est le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale, elle est la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l'Histoire. (*Ibid* 179-180)

A "total sign" is an act that functions *as* the political activity of the author, by connecting the author's writing to History at large. While François's open secret is meant to free the subject from the burden of revelation, crucially, this total sign is supposed to bypass the subject altogether. The speech exists as an act unto itself, without speaker or author.

Ecriture, however, is more of a fantasy than a reality. Barthes shares Lindon's concerns that the conditions of literary production and consumption lie outside of the author's control; the author cannot truly choose his public, since it is already determined by the literary market (*Ibid* 180). As such, *écriture* is "un choix de conscience et non d'efficacité," and the writer's liberty lies in his ability to write with "un langage librement produit" if not "un langage librement consommé" (*Ibid* 180-181). Art cannot escape its inscription within a field, or within history itself, given that even the writer's freedom to choose an *écriture* is historically situated.

Barthes is not unlike Etiemble, because although he can theorize writing-transformed-into-political-act, he acknowledges that in the current literary field, critics endorse a brand of *écriture* that borders on militant propaganda. Writing has become a throw-away gesture, "le signe suffisant de l'engagement," or an "alibi" that needs only be posted ("affiché") to function. It becomes a "signature" on a collective manifesto, whose intentions are taken for granted: "[…] c'est faire l'économie de toutes les prémisses de ce choix, c'est manifester comme acquises les raisons de ce choix" (*Ibid* 187). The political acts and opinions of the signatory are assumed; they do not need to be sustained by any particular act on his part. Writing has become

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[42] See Barthes's article "Ecrivains de gauche ou littérature de gauche?" published in *L'Observateur* in 1952 (Barthes 163-165).

institutionalized; it is a commodity for exchange within public discourse, an economic discursive unit: *une étiquette*. The reality of *écriture* is thus a denaturing of the total sign. Rather than transforming language into political act, *écriture* transforms politics into linguistic shorthand. Rather than becoming a fully realized political gesture unto itself, literature becomes a mere guarantee of political action—a stamp of approval that is so vacant as to be self-explanatory.

If *écriture* as a mode of political engagement can be misread or vacantly posted, the same follows for *dégagement*. *Dégagement* is, too, more a fantasy of divestment from the literary sphere, than any kind of realizable apolitical, "outside" stance. In the politico-literary environment that Barthes describes, there is no such thing as being apolitical because the act of writing is already embedded in an interpretative system that ascribes political values. All writing is assumed to be a choice, to which externally determined political explanations can be applied. Intentions have already been posted. Secrets are out or open.

Paradoxically, while literature is *supposed* to replace engagement with a "total sign," this alibi is only effective with the guarantee of outside political activity. It only functions with engagement's phantom presence ("la hantise de l'engagement") (*Ibid* 187). Engaged writing is once again an unattainable ideal, for in order to talk about engagement, or about *not* being engaged, one must always call to the authority granted to speakers with previous or continuing political activity. This is what is implicit in Queneau or Lindon's conversations with their interlocutors; their desire to remain "outside" is once again negated outright by the interpretive system implied in the question, "êtes-vous *engagé*?" Their legitimacy as writers—engaged or otherwise—hinges on previous political experience, which proves that this liberty had indeed been paid for in advance.

When Barthes finally locates Queneau within his typography, he places him into the category of exception: *écriture blanche.* Stemming from the Mallarméan tradition of the death of literature, *écriture blanche* marks a historical shift in linguistic possibilities. Free of any previously institutionalized writing, *écriture blanche* is comparable to the linguistic notion of the *neutre*: a linguistic form that is neither marked or unmarked, indicative or amodal writing (*Ibid* 217). This neutrality divests *écriture blanche* of literary history, returning it to its primal state as a communicative instrument. *Ecriture blanche* thus manages the impossible: temporarily escaping its own historical moment by becoming illegible. This writing is no longer at the service of a dominant ideology because it speaks differently, or rather, not at all. It momentarily shelters the writer from the outside by establishing a new state of being for the author: existing in silence (*Ibid* 218). When writing suddenly becomes illegible, it becomes a kind of white noise. It is sound that no longer acts as sound, language that no longer acts as language, or language that no longer functions as act. This writing exists—however temporarily—outside of its historical conditions, or outside of the echo-chamber of politics.

What we learn from this history of *dégagement* in Queneau, Lindon, Etiemble, and Barthes is that both those on the side of and against *littérature engagée* shared concerns about the transformation of literature into a flat, political sign or about the use of overly simplistic definitions of what is or is not literature. We also understand that *dégagement* can evoke the desire to be free of a number of things: of engagement as an evaluative paradigm for literature,

of superficial invocations of political activity, of literary debates and debacles, of language that bears a certain historical baggage. More often than not this desire to be free bumps up against a politico-literary field that infuses it with meaning. The desire to be *dégagée*—secret or divested—is always inherently embedded in a system which infuses such choices with meaning, transforming them into open secrets.

In the last section of this chapter and the chapters that follow, the inescapability of the political field and the desire to remain outside of it return incessantly. The writers I study, however, hardly engage in a neutral writing style. On the contrary, the texts I study by Perec, Wittig, and Jouet are all somehow formally marked, illegible due to the exceptional nature of the form at hand. They, too, aspire to a kind of silence. They hope to escape the bonds of posted signatures and alibis and stage a new kind of political language—and a new kind of political act. These texts were, understandably, met with varying degrees of comprehension in the literary field. The new language they aspired to was inevitably reintegrated into the politico-literary field, often at odds with the individual author's wishes. These texts also stage, however, the experience of the author as a political subject and the possibility of new forms of political subjectivity.

Bourbaki's Rhetoric of Secrecy

With this short history of engagement and the counter-discourse of *dégagement* in mind, I want to return to Queneau's inaugural address and, more particularly, the form of his response: its modest tone and its secrecy, or more specifically, its structure as disavowal. As I've already noted, his pseudo-philosophical way of *not answering the question* speaks to a desire to exist outside of the political sphere and escape particular demands of engagement. This desire is necessarily a failed one, revelatory of the subject's enmeshment within the politico-literary field and the impossibility of ever escaping the field within which one is inscribed—ever truly being *dégagé*. It is in light of this ineffective, symbolic rejection of—and not successful escape from—the social order that I would like to consider Queneau's secrecy, and Oulipian secrecy on the whole, as an open secret. But while Queneau's disavowal is necessarily failed, it is not without political content; it bears many similarities to *dégagement* in its critique of engagement. The same does not follow for Oulipo's secrecy, however, because as we shall see, the structure of the secret is not the same.

I will analyze how Oulipo performed its open secrecy over time, by examining the language of secrecy in a series of prefaces, manifestos, and meeting notes that establish the practice of the group. I will show that Oulipo conspicuously engaged in a theatrical mode of self-presentation, modeled after the secret mathematics collective Bourbaki. The theatrics of secrecy gradually became a defining feature of the group, distinguishing it from other avant-gardes. Unlike Queneau's disavowal, this theatrical withholding of information lacks any particular political content, although it served different purposes at different points in time. The question will remain, however, as to whether the theatrics of secrecy should be read as vacant apoliticism, as an accommodation to systems of power, or if it can be read as a challenge to the engaged subject and the liberal ideal of speaking out loud, or proclaiming one's political opinions in the public sphere. Are Oulipians crotchety old bourgeois men who hide in secrecy so

as to not be forced to contend with emerging notions of politics and political subjectivity? Or are they thoughtfully—if elusively—rejecting a system that they know they cannot conquer, offering up a partially disguised middle finger to their politico-literary contemporaries?

While secrecy is never directly mentioned in Le Lionnais's "First" or "Second Manifesto," the rhetoric of "being secret" and "coming out" comes up already in Queneau's RTF interview with Charbonnier, and routinely in later histories, manifestos, and reflections written by Oulipo members.[43] As manifestos are often a mode of putting a public face on the group and the group's aesthetic or political project, this official silence around its own secrecy implies that the group did not initially self-identify as "secret," and that the rhetoric of secrecy, while introduced by Queneau, would need to develop over time before being fully adopted as central to Oulipian particular group practice.

Noël Arnaud's preface to *Oulipo: 1960-3*, "Et naquit l'Ouvroir de littérature potentielle," can be taken as a representative example of the theatrics of secrecy and a point of comparison for earlier and later instances of this same rhetoric. Written by Jacques Bens, the group's *benjamin* and thus its default secretary, the 1980 volume collects *comptes rendus* of most of the group's early meetings, stopping just prior to the publication of the *Dossier 17* (Arnaud, Préface 18)*.* The meeting notes are a practice that continues today, functioning as "aide-mémoire à titre privé" for group members, but Bens nevertheless insists that Oulipo published them here for posterity (*Ibid* 18). After a brief overview of the group's work and early meetings, Arnaud narrates Oulipo's life in the public eye as a progressive unveiling, or a series of outings:

> Tels furent les débuts de L'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle. Il était encore une société secrète. Les entretiens radiotés de Raymond Queneau avec Georges Charbonnier (dont on découvrira plus loin des échos) levèrent un bon morceau du voile. Dès lors, des vocations oulipiennes se révélèrent chez les enseignants et leurs élèves (de la maternelle à la faculté), aussi bien que chez des non-professionnels de la distribution de la science. Des exercices oulipiens commencèrent à arriver, quelques-uns non dépourvus d'intérêt. Nous prenions conscience de notre utilité—et, suprême encouragement, nous savions désormais à quoi précisément nous pouvions servir: aider à comprendre le fonctionnement de l'écriture et, pour les plus doués, aider à la création littéraire. (*Ibid* 12-13)

One might assume that being outed can only happen once. The society is a secret; it is outed, and then the society is no longer a secret. But Arnaud tracks a series of discrete events that lead, each a step further in Oulipo's unveiling. Queneau's interview with Charbonnier would first "lift the veil," and the "distant echoes" of this first outing would bring the group and its practices to a wider audience. Suddenly, Oulipo had its own fan-base, or writers with "Oulipian vocations" in various educational institutions and fields, who in turn produced Oulipian

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[43] The first two manifestos, then, are about establishing the group's aesthetic doctrine in the absence of a mode of sociability. Le Lionnais's 1962 "Premier manifeste," puts forth the group's anti-inspiration stance and its project of uncovering literary "structures," or formal models by which literature can be produced. The second, 1973 manifesto, continues in this same vein, clarifying that the Oulipian notion of structure should not be conflated with "structure" in the sense of structuralism. See Oulipo, La littérature potentielle 17-19.

exercises. According to Arnaud, this outside interest revealed to the group its purpose ("utilité"), inspiring in them a desire to study literary forms for the public good. He then continues to track this series of outings—notably the *Dossier*, the *Décade*, and a number of published texts—that brought Oulipo to its present status as a public institution and completed its unveiling, throwing off its "déguisements de carbonari" (*Ibid* 13). This final allusion to clandestine, 19th-century Italian revolutionaries is replicated in the ornamental, quasi-Masonic design on the book's cover.[44] This Masonic secrecy would come to be Oulipo's standard mode of self-presentation. Oddly enough, Arnaud narrates Oulipo's outing as a seamless transition from secret society to public institution, as if clandestine practice was merely a point along the continuum towards becoming an established public good.

This notion of the secret as *already becoming* public, crops up even earlier in the group's existence. In fact, Arnaud likely pulls this idea directly from the June 4th, 1962 meeting, in which Queneau declares that the group needs to understand its own "utilité publique" (Bens 145). While in the notes Bens himself responds to this question ironically, claiming that it would be incompatible with 'Pataphysical "inutilité," the group nevertheless has a conversation about exposing itself to a wider audience, perhaps even by airing its meeting on the radio (*Ibid* 146).[45] This logic is also already at work in Queneau's February 1962 Charbonnier interview. After Queneau admits that *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* is "la première manifestation concrète" of a "Groupe de recherche" in which he is involved, Charbonnier presses him for more details:

> Est-ce qu'il est possible de demander quels sont les membres de ce Groupe de recherches? J'entends que lorsque vous dites Oulipo, il y a une volonté d'anonymat, mais enfin, on finit par savoir qui est Bourbaki... Alors, qui est Oulipo? (Queneau, Entretiens 115).

Queneau immediately ticks off a list of all of the group's original members, including the two members it drew from the Collège de 'Pataphysique, as well as its "correspondants étrangers," or unofficial, non-Parisian members (*Ibid* 115). Tellingly, Charbonnier immediately equates Oulipo's wish to remain anonymous with that of the clandestine collective mathematics group Bourbaki. He blandly notes that if Bourbaki's members were outed, so, too, will be various Oulipians. (Indeed, they likely will be outed, with Queneau as their secret-keeper!).

While Bourbaki is now a well-established model on which Oulipo based its practice, this allusion is significant, as it suggests that from the beginning Oulipo's secrecy was always understood to be partially fake. A brief history of Bourbaki demonstrates that it is known for its theatrical mode of self-presentation, as well as for its mathematical accomplishments.[46] Not

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[44] See Annex, Image 1.

[45] Even as early as January 13th, 1961, only one month into the group's existence and before it might even qualify itself as secret, Queneau asks fellow member Jean Lescure to publicize Oulipo at RTF, but Lescure refuses. By this account, Queneau wished to publicize the group a full year before the group had produced any written texts, even (*Cent mille milliards de poèmes* did not appear until September 7th, 1961). See Bens 31.

[46] "Analysis" at this point in time was more or less synonymous with differential and integral calculus. Bourbaki aspired to create new materials for teaching analysis, given that the available French-language textbook materials were relatively out of date—especially with respect to the work of German mathematicians. See Beaulieu 28-30.

only was its existence always a tongue-in-cheek open secret, but the group's secrecy was often equated with its apoliticism. Bourbaki began as a group of young *normaliens* in Paris, who, frustrated by the paucity and poverty of textbook materials on analysis, began organizing mathematics seminars (between 1933-1939); in July of 1935, during its first summer retreat (called "congrès"), the group formalized a project to create a collectively written textbook or treatise on analysis (Weil, Souvenirs d'apprentissage 100-1, 109-110). While the book was projected to treat a panoply of subjects (including integrals, differential equations, set theory, typology, etc.), the project continued to expand, leading to several pre- and post-war volumes. Even today, the group continues to publish widely.[47]

Bourbaki's legacy—its intellectual and social impact on the field of mathematics—is still very much a subject of debate today, but clearly, it is its active self-mythologizing and infamous open secrecy that has captured the most public interest. *The Mathematical Intelligencer* alone published fifteen articles on Bourbaki from 1980-2011, the great majority of which rehearse or analyze the group's notorious beginnings. In fact, as a historian of the group, Maurice Mashaal, explains, several competing mythologies have been recounted surrounding the origins of the group's name: one claims the name originated at the founding *congrès* at Besse-en-Chandesse, Auvergne, during which several members jumped into a lake, spontaneously producing the exclamation "Bourbaki"; another suggests they are named after General Bourbaki, who served under Napoleon III in the Crimean War (1854-6), in the French campaign in Italy (1859-60), and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1) (Mashaal, Bourbaki 22-34).

Such rampantly mythologizing etymologies (which trickle into the domain of academic fan fiction) are not without some basis in reality, given the group's desire to "pass" for a single man, and the public theatrics they undertook to maintain this illusion. According to Bourbakian André Weil, for example, the group owes its name to an ENS *conférencier,* Raoul Husson, a statistician, who gave a facetious lecture on a fabricated "Bourbaki's theorem," equipped with a fake beard and an "undefinable accent" (Weil, Souvenirs d'apprentissage 105). Along with a friend of his at the University of Aligarh, D. Kosambi, Weil published a "burlesque note" on the matter, entitled "On a Generalization of the Second Theorem of Bourbaki," and written by one D. Bourbaki in the bulletin of the Academy of Science of the Agra and Oudh Allahabad, in 1931-2.[48] Later, Weil would ask mathematician Elie Cartan to present the article to the *Académie des Sciences*, and Cartan agreed, presenting a short article alongside a fake biography of the article's author, Nicolas Bourbaki, on November 18th, 1935 (Weil, Souvenirs d'apprentissage

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[47] The first volume of their multi-volume treatise "Eléments de mathématique," was not printed until 1939, followed by three more volumes during World War II. After the war, from 1940-1970, Bourbaki's publications slowed, in part due to the parting of André Weil, a dominant figure who was forced to leave for the US in 1941. That said, Bourbaki published 21 volumes by 1958, and today, it regularly writes articles for "Archiv de Mathematik," holds a regular *Séminaire Bourbaki* in Paris, as well as a conference at the *Institut Henri Poincaré* three times a year. Many have, however, been predicting the death of Bourbaki for some time now, blaming a long legal battle with its publisher (which was finally resolved in 1980), as well as the group's loss of direction since the 1980s. See Mashaal 8-16, Cartan 175-180, and Senechal 22-28.

[48] D. Kosambi had been having troubles with a colleague, and Weil suggested inventing the mathematician in order to refute the colleague's claims. The group's name first appeared (or was first outed) with this publication, three years before the group officially existed. See Weil 66-69 and Mashaal 26.

107).[49] At this point, incredibly enough, a real Nicolaïdes-Bourbaki (a diplomat for the Greek embassy) heard of and contacted the group, concerned that there were no known mathematicians in his illustrious family tree (although he did agree that the Bourbaki had descended from Napoleon III's general) (Mashaal, *Bourbaki* 29-30).[50]

Clearly, this dose of self-mythology was one manner in which Bourbaki negotiated its "coming out" as a kind of "not coming out" or "staying secret" in the mathematical field. As Mashaal notes, originally, no one was supposed to know "[...] who the current members [were], what the group [was] working on, or when and where the conferences [took] place," and members were expected to lie about the existence of the group (*Ibid* 14). To this day, members are only allowed to "break the silence," after they have resigned from the group's day-to-day activities. After the group's silence was (easily) broken, Bourbaki continued, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to propagate its fabricated existence as a single man.

Bourbaki's "feud" with American mathematician Ralph Boas shows that this existence was more or less an open secret. In the 1950s, Boas wrote an article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* outing Bourbaki as an anonymous mathematics collective rather than a single man. In response, Boas not only received a letter from the quote-unquote "real" Nicolas Bourbaki, but this person also contacted the encyclopedia*,* leading to an almost ridiculous comedy of errors, which ended with a rumor that Boas himself did not exist (*Ibid* 33).[51] In 1960, 25 years into its existence, the group wrote another *notice* reiterating this fake biography (later republished in Judith Friedman's 1977 thesis on Bourbaki) (*Ibid* 33-34). Finally, in October of 1988, *France Culture* formally announced the death of Bourbaki, due to "non-removable pathological singularity" (Pekonen, *Bourbaki* 69).

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[49] The *Académie* required each new presenter to have a sponsor at the time. In D. Bourbaki's original article, Bourbaki was identified as a Russian mathematician poisoned in the revolution. Later, "D" Bourbaki was rebaptized "Nicolas." According to Weil, Nicolas Bourbaki was *poldève*, from the invented country of *Poldévie*—a joke that had its origins in *canular normalien.* In 1910, a number of students began an awareness campaign concerning the suffering of the people of *Poldévie*. This eventually lead to a public meeting. The keynote speaker, a *poldève* man, concluded his speech by claiming that he was so misfortunate that he did not even own a pair of pants, at which point he revealed that he was not wearing pants. See Weil 106-7 and Mashaal 26.

[50] This speculation surrounding Bourbaki's name continues today in mathematical as well as literary circles. Even Anne Isabelle Queneau, the editor of Queneau's journals and his daughter-in-law, assumes that the name comes from a statue in Nancy of the late general, Charles Bourbaki (1816-1897), seeing as several members of Bourbaki lived in Nancy. See Queneau, Journaux. 1914-1965 475, 731.

[51] After Boas wrote the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article*,* he received a mysterious letter, signed by Bourbaki, stating only: "You miserable worm, how dare you say that I do not exist?" This same "Bourbaki" also wrote the editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* Walter Yust, claiming that Nicolas Bourbaki existed, but that Boas, on the other hand, was actually B.O.A.S., or "an acronym of the names of the editorial board of *Mathematical Reviews,*" of which Boas was a member (Mashaal 33). Yust wrote Boas for clarification, and Boas referred Yust to American mathematician Saunders MacLane, who was also in Chicago, along with André Weil. At this point, Weil asked that MacLane affirm the existence of Bourbaki; MacLane ended up writing a letter that "strongly hinted" at Nicolas's existence. Finally, Boas referred Yust to J.R. Kline, the secretary of the American Mathematical Society, who affirmed that Bourbaki had previously been rejected individual membership (Boas 84). There is probably good reason to believe that Weil himself wrote the original letter to Boas (Pekonen, The first bourbaki autograph? 17).

This brief history of Bourbaki's theatrical withholding of its identity highlights the symbolic statement being made by Charbonnier when he equates Oulipo with Bourbaki. The presumption is not only that Oulipo is *known to be secret* very early on, but that it is *known to be secret* after a Bourbakian fashion: as a band of self-mythologizing jokesters who were merely *passing for* secret, routinely coming out with notable rhetorical flair. Fifty years after the creation of the group, former member Claude Chevalley admitted that Bourbaki's secrecy *was* rhetorical. Against the grain of the group's collective discourse, Chevalley is quick to downplay the importance of secrecy to the group's identity, claiming that its list of members had always been an open secret and that it was merely passing for secret:

> Throughout his youth Bourbaki tried to *play at* being a secret society. It was quite ridiculous, of course, we could not remain clandestine. Everyone knew it, but we refused even to reply to questions about the list of members, about the origin of the work Bourbaki, or about our projects. (Chevalley 19, my emphasis)

Like Oulipo's own secret existence, Bourbaki's secrecy had never truly been a historical reality; its secrecy had always been a performance, meant to be consumed in the public eye. For Chevalley, the group only "played at" clandestine practice; it was merely "passing for" secret, going through the motions of protecting an identity and practice that was very much publicly known. The very purpose of its creation—writing a new textbook on analysis—required that its secrecy be performative: how could a textbook be useful if its authors were unknown in the mathematical field at large?

This history also suggests that Oulipo's own secrecy would likely be read like Bourbaki's: as a mode of apoliticism or non-interventionism. From the beginning, Bourbaki insisted on being "staunchly apolitical," a somewhat odd gesture, not only because its first publications coincided with the onset of WWII, but also because many of its early members were open Leftists (Beaulieu, A Parisian Cafe and Ten Proto-Bourbaki Meetings (1934-35) 32-33).[52] While it might seem odd that a mathematics collective need explain its apoliticism (why would mathematics need to be political at all?), the question returns repeatedly throughout the history of the group—suggesting that the mathematical field had become just as hyperpoliticized as the literary.[53] The group also held its early meetings in the Latin Quarter, which in the 1930s was bubbling with political activity. Early Bourbaki nevertheless avoided politics, with the exception of some academic politics (*Ibid* 32-33).

Bourbakian apoliticism, like *dégagement*, is thus very much about the fantasy of not being involved, of existing outside of the political realm. Group member Jean Dieudonné explains that Bourbaki refused to intervene not only in politics, but in the more immediate debates of the mathematical field. Dieudonné describes Bourbakian secrecy as a "refusal of all

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[52] Claude Chevalley, for instance, was a member of "Ordre Nouveau," an anarchist group; Laurent Schwartz had Trotskyist inclinations, and both he and André Weil were both forced to flee France during the war, due to their Jewish heritage. Chevalley hints that politics were a point of contention within the group; he admits, however, that he was drawn to Bourbaki because it had nothing to do "with what was going on politically in the world" (Chevalley 21).

discussion or controversy," which stems from "the belief that a mathematical text has to stand or fall on its own merits and should not need any advertising" (Dieudonné, The Work of Bourbaki During the Last Thirty Years 620). While the ideal of a mathematical text adopted on its own merits is certainly a laudable one, it is a bit naïve; logistically, when it came to the actual dissemination of the group's works, someone had to make them visible to the public eye. Dieudonné himself admits that the group remained relatively unknown until individual Bourbaki members began mentioning it (read: advertising it) in their own papers (*Ibid* 621).[54] Secrecy and non-intervention thus pose a very real problem: the danger that one actually not be read at all.

Dieudonné's description of Bourbaki's prohibition against public statements illustrates that Bourbakian secrecy involved odd rhetorical choices, notably a form of *not saying*, or *not speaking for*:

> Bourbaki has never engaged, under his name, in polemics with the "outside world," so to speak, in spite of the many criticisms to which he has been subjected. Neither has there ever been any propaganda published by him in favor of his ideas, nor even a statement of policy or purpose. (*Ibid* 620)

This is an exceedingly strange thing to say in a public venue, even if it is only in an interview in mathematics journal, as is the case here. Nicolas Bourbaki did not "engage in polemics," because he doesn't exist! What is prohibited, Dieudonné clarifies, is that one individual speak in the name of the group, or rather in the name of Bourbaki, the man: "[…] nobody, including myself, has ever been authorized to speak in his name" (*Ibid* 620). Implicitly, this prohibition is meant to prevent one member from dominating the group. In practice, however, Dieudonné *is* speaking for the group—whether he likes it or not. Rhetorically, Bourbaki's secrecy involves an odd kind of linguistic doubling; former Bourbaki members *speak for* the group, but rather than employing the first person, they usually adopt the third-person singular "il." The result is an odd erasure of collective practice, not in the absolute refusal to speak of it, but in the erasure of the first-person plural pronoun ("nous"). This shared pronoun—and shared experience—is projected into the neutral realm of the third, and yet this singular "il" is a collective "I" that members routinely adopt. They are indeed *speaking-not-speaking-for* Bourbaki in spite of the interdiction. Their intervention is merely conditioned on the use of appropriate linguistic form, a gesture that masks the act of intervening. Their secrecy is thus a rhetorical performance.

Outed: Oulipo and the Theatrics of Secrecy

Oulipo obviously emulated Bourbaki's secrecy: its theatrics, its non-interventionism, and its rhetoric. Buried in the back of the *Atlas de littérature potentielle,* one finds a quick disclaimer: "L'Ouvroir de littérature potentielle a longtemps passé pour une organisation secrète. Mais son véritable secret a toujours résidé dans son absolue transparence" (Oulipo,

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[54] Dieudonné notes that there are "exceptions" to this prohibition against public statements, but the exceptions he mentions are hardly striking; they are only banal moments in which Bourbaki contextualizes its own work within the field of mathematics (like an article on the history of the treatise) or explains how to uses its textbooks (as in each textbook's "User's Manual," or table of contents). See Dieudonné 618-623.

Atlas 407). I understand "transparency" here as an avowal of naïveté, an admission that Oulipo had always been readily legible from the outside, in spite of themselves. While Oulipo reveled in the theatrics of passing for secret, their relationship to secrecy is often one of regret, colored by the moment at which the secret came out or the group was forcibly outed. With this in mind, I will conclude by examining a few failed outings of the group, in order to think about why and how Oulipo imitated Bourbakian secrecy. Their secrecy is defensive; it serves less to protect them from the political sphere (like Queneau), than from contemporary literary debates (like Bourbaki in mathematics). By considering the reception of Oulipo's first collective publication, I will argue that while Oulipian secrecy began as a publicity stunt, the group later consciously borrowed Bourbakian strategies in order to distance themselves from another secretive contemporary: the Collège de 'Pataphysique.

The Collège began in 1948 as an homage to turn-of-the-century author Alfred Jarry and the pseudoscience of 'Pataphysics.[55] An infamous secret society, the Collège developed a complex institutional hierarchy, revolving around bizarre rituals and titles. At this point in time, however, the Collège was an institutional powerhouse, regularly publishing a literary journal on a subscription basis.[56] Oulipo's relationship to the Collège began as one of convenience; several Oulipians were already members, including Queneau.[57] Oulipo published its first collective text in the Collège's review (titled the *Dossiers* at that point in time) and hoped to benefit from the Collège's financial backing. But the reception of this first collective text was a disappointment, a failed outing of the group, which forced the group to reconsider its publication record and its relationship to the Collège. This led to a series of failed outings, after which Oulipo came to regard openness with suspicion. Their compulsory duty to speak about their own group led to them being "misplaced" within the literary field; they underestimated how publishing in 'Pataphysics would affect their reception and how using Bourbakian terms like "structure" would be misread during the heyday of structuralism in the mid-1960s. They also came to understand how quickly one's own ideas can spread well beyond the closed circle of the group.

Jacques Bens's meeting notes around the moment of the Charbonnier interview suggest that their first outing was unplanned, but not entirely unwelcome.[58] Early on, Queneau had

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[55] Jarry defined "'pataphysics" as the "science of imaginary solutions," a kind of metaphysics. What this means in practice is elusive at best; one might loosely understand it to mean that poetry allows one to access a different part of reality. While 'Pataphysicians do not consider their work was facetious, to an outsider, many of the publications of the Collège appear to be ironic. Notable members of the Collège included: Boris Vian, Eugène Ionesco, Joan Miró, Man Ray, Max Ernst, and Marcel Duchamp. See Jarry.

[56] The Collège began publishing in roughly 1950 and continues to publish today. Its journal has had several iterations including: *Cahiers, Dossiers, Subsidia Pataphysica, Organographes, Monitoires, L'Expectateur,* and *Carnet trimestriels.*

[57] Several Oulipians were members of the Collège, including Latis (pseudonym for Emmanuel Peillet), François Le Lionnais, Jean Lescure, and Raymond Queneau.

[58] Just two months into the group's existence, in December of 1961, Bens's notes indicate that group members were already teasing each other for being loose-lipped. *Circulaire n°16* opens with Le Lionnais declaring a "condemnation grave, voire la peine de mort" against an unnamed member of Oulipo who outed group members to a mutual acquaintance. Le Lionnais even goes so far as to compare their "secret society" to the *Organisation d'Armée Secrète* (*O.A.S.*), and when Lescure "confesses," the group unanimously votes to execute him. The group's

been pushing members to publicize the group (especially on the radio), but not everyone was on board.[59] Publication, however, became an increasingly promising venue, and eventually, Oulipians turned to the Collège de 'Pataphysics. Already in the second meeting, Oulipians wonder what their relationship with 'Pataphysics should be, specifically to which "Sous-Commission," or 'Pataphysics subgroup, they should belong; Arnaud suggests the "Sous-Commission des Epiphanies et Ithyphanies" (part of the "Commission des Imprévisibles") as it would afford them certain administrative positions and titles (Bens, *Oulipo.1960-1963* 23). Very quickly, Oulipo wonders if this is the right *commission*, only to gain a measure of autonomy as their *sous-commission* becomes a *commission* of its own in April of 1961 (*Ibid* 27, 28, 46). With 'Pataphysics's institutional backing underway, Oulipo decides to publish a text in the *Dossiers* (*Ibid* 40, 44, 53). By June, Oulipo has been outed, or mentioned in the *Dossiers*, and Oulipians agree that their existence "n'est donc plus un secret pour personne" (*Ibid* 63).

As the publication of their first collective text approaches, Oulipians begin to worry this publication is a threat to their secrecy. In October 1961, Oulipian Albert-Marie Schmidt reportedly asks whether Oulipo would still be clandestine after the *Dossier 17*, bringing about an intense discussion (*Ibid* 95). In the following meeting, Oulipians again backtrack, expressing regret over outing themselves by publishing so early. Several members express anxiety over the quality of the publication and how it will be received. Eventually, Arnaud asserts that Oulipo cannot publish with the frequency of a review, like that of the Collège (*Ibid* 98). Significantly, Bens's notes of the meeting move into direct discourse rather than his standard third-person synopsis, signaling this meeting as an event in Oulipian history. What is event-worthy about this meeting, however, is less the rejection of the Collège than the turn to Bourbaki-like practices. As an alternative to publishing in the *Dossiers,* Le Lionnais suggests they build their practice by engaging in a kind of literary axiomatics, "generalizing" the rules of literary forms and "systematizing" their use.[60] This turn to Bourbakian thinking is central to Oulipo's nascent project of cataloging literary form, but also a means of unfettering Oulipo from the Collège.

A few meetings later (February 1962), the group definitively begins to see the *Dossier 17* as a failed outing. Queneau's description of the text's reception suggests that Oulipo, like Bourbaki, ran the risk of not being read:

> Il y a quelque chose de curieux: personne, ni en paroles, ni en écrits, n'a fait de commentaire sur ce Dossier. Il n'a rencontré aucun écho. (Sauf au sein du Collège, naturellement; ce qui n'est pas peu.) (*Ibid* 119)

It seems strange that Queneau should have suspected that the *Dossier* would have solicited the attention of many outsiders, especially given that 'Pataphysics journals only circulated amongst members and subscribers; but given all the emotional build up for the group's first publication,

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troubling dark humor should perhaps be read as demonstrative of the degree to which they treated their secrecy with levity. See Bens 106.

[59] See note 22.

[60] It is often difficult to say exactly what Oulipians knew about Bourbaki (the group is only mentioned a few times in the notes and Queneau's correspondence with André Blavier), but Le Lionnais, as a mathematician, is consciously using Bourbakian language.

it is true that the results must have been fairly underwhelming. Appropriately, Queneau closes the meeting with the question of future publications and future funding of the group (*Ibid* 122). The problem of being secret and unknown like Bourbaki is very real here: if the group was ready to sacrifice its secrecy so early, it was with publicity in mind.

Being read was essential, as Oulipo had already began adopting Bourbaki's pedagogical mission as well. Bourbaki's textbook was meant to supplement or replace existing mathematical materials, offering what Bourbaki called a "tool kit" for "the working mathematician" (Hermann, Mathematics and Bourbaki 32-33). In the preface to Bens's meeting notes, Arnaud adapts this mode of thinking to Oulipo's literary project; Oulipo seeks to catalogue all possible "structures," or in this case literary forms, in order to make them available to other authors ("mettre [des structures] à la disposition des écrivains") (Arnaud, Préface 11). As part of this potentially infinite cataloguing process, Oulipians hoped to offer an example of each given structure and test out its "v(f)iabilité," or its viability and reliability as a "structure" for creating literature (or its utility for producing literature) (*Ibid* 11). This "making available" of literary forms recalls Arnaud's earlier assertion that Oulipo had found its purpose or "utility." This is why Oulipo is constantly reiterating (in the meeting notes and its manifestos) that the group's aims have no thematic agenda: the division of *forme* and *fond* is essential to Oulipo's project, as the goal is to dissociate formal "structures" from their particular semantics aims, making them malleable enough to fit the demands of any author.

That said, Queneau's declaration of failure was a touch premature, for a few meetings later, the notes recount a feud with Jean Paulhan, the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (*NRF*). Queneau explains that he received a letter from Paulhan after the *Dossier 17* was published, stating only:

> Il ne suffit pas, pour rendre la rhétorique amusante, de l'appeler *littérature potentielle*. Le dernier numéro des *Cahiers de 'Pataphysique*, qui porte ce titre, dégage un ennui sordide. Malgré quelques photos de banquets joyeux, réunions mondaines et remises de décoration. (Bens 170)

In the immediate, Paulhan's reaction comes off as biting criticism: Oulipo's interest in form is conflated with rhetoric, making the group's work look very traditional and out of date at best. But Paulhan's letter also confirms that he has a prehistory with Queneau and with 'Pataphysics (and they with him), and this prehistory has affected Oulipo's reception—all in spite of its supposed clandestinity.[61]

What is most notable here, however, is the Bourbakian way in which 'Pataphysics and Oulipian members had already negotiated feuds with Paulhan. In a very early Oulipo meeting, members notice several portraits of Paulhan on the walls of the restaurant where the meeting is being held; they conclude that the portraits do not particularly look like Paulhan and do not allow them to "trencher" the question of Jean Paulhan's existence (*Ibid* 24). A footnote clarifies

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[61] The failure of the *Dossier* could also explain why Oulipo continued publishing independently of 'Pataphysics, in André Blavier's *Temps mêlés,* as well as why they eventually published with more mainstream houses, like Gallimard.

this allusion, making it clear that after a feud between the *NRF* and 'Pataphysics, the latter had, in the manner of Bourbaki-Boas dispute, edited a postcard that declared: "Jean Paulhan n'existe pas" (*Ibid* 24).[62] With this previous feud in mind, it becomes clear that Oulipo was not only deploying Bourbakian terminology in its 'Pataphysical texts and using Bourbakian strategies to negotiate its identity after the *Dossier*, but that they had also acquired a taste for emulating Bourbaki's behavior from 'Pataphysics.

Over time, Oulipians increasingly favor Bourbaki as a model for group practice—both socially and intellectually—over the Collège. Ben's meeting notes only chronicle Oulipo's history up until 1963, but Oulipo would publish in 'Pataphysics journals for a few years after May '68 (including another outing in *Subsidia Pataphysica* n°15). In the interim, Oulipians were increasingly dissatisfied with 'Pataphysics. For example, in a January 1966 letter to Queneau, Oulipian André Blavier alludes to a dispute with fellow Oulipian (and 'Pataphysician) Jean Duchateau (Blavier and Queneau, Correspondance 269). Blavier rejects outright continued funding from the Collège, challenging the legitimacy of the Oulipo *Sous-Commission*. He also complains that the supposedly "scientific" 'Pataphysics is in fact lacking in science; it continues to work arbitrarily, doing *n'importe quoi,* without any kind of fixed methods or "concrete realizations."[63] In a letter from March of 1966, Blavier continues in the same vein, noting that while he appreciated the *Subsidia*, he cannot help but wonder if Duchateau is not more interested in "themes" than "structures" (*Ibid* 274). On the one hand, Blavier makes it clear that the financial security 'Pataphysics offers Oulipo comes with too many strings attached. On the other hand, his interest in method has an inkling of Bourbakian language about it. Blavier critiques Duchateau's failure to create interesting realizations of the structures that the group has produced; otherwise stated, Duchateau has not produced a kind of literary proof, which would solidify the importance of a given literary structure.

Ben's meeting notes, the *Dossier 17,* and Oulipo's publication in the *Subsidia Pataphysica* (n°15) show that the Bourbakian term "structure" was common in Oulipian terminology.[64] While many possible literary structures were rooted in fairly expected variations on traditional or existing poetic form (like *holorimes, antérimes,* poems without verbs, or collective sonnet-writing), others were inspired by mathematical concepts, if not explicitly

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[62] Queneau clarifies that Paulhan's most recent attack was spurred on by a short note in the *Dossier* called "Les Illettrés de la N.R.F.," which accused *NRF* writer Jean Lebrau of factual inaccuracy. See Bens 170.

[63] Blavier does not mention 'Pataphysics directly in this letter, but does use a fairly transparent shorthand (including phrases like "Si la P est la sc. des sol. imag. […]" or "Si 'Pataphysics est la science des solutions imaginaires[…]") (Blavier and Queneau 268).

[64] Bourbaki's notion of structure develops out of a particular mathematical lineage, broadly rooted in the work of David Hilbert, Bartel Leendert van der Waerden, Henri Poincaré, and Jacques Hadamard. The idea, at its most basic level, was to emulate a universalist methodology by using standard notations and terminology to identify and generalize mathematical structures or sets, preceding from the most basic or most fundamental structure, following an axiomatic method. According to Dieudonné, this is different from classical mathematics to the extent that traditionally, mathematical disciplines are divided according to according to the object they treat (arithmetic and numbers, geometry and spatial objects, etc.), but Bourbaki realized that certain structures could be transdisciplinary and thus used set theory as a method for completely reorganizing the field of mathematics. See Dieudonné 618-623.

Bourbakian ones: using pi as a sonnet form, treating various elements of a novel as combinatory elements, reordering or performing an operation on various letters, words, or texts (Bens, Oulipo.1960-1963 119, 125, 163).[65] There are also several direct uses of "structure" over the course of these 'pataphysical and non-'pataphysical texts, which make Oulipo's growing intellectual interest in Bourbaki fairly explicit.

One final failed outing, however, shows that even without the institutional demands of the Collège, Oulipo was not totally autonomous. As they began to adopt Bourbakian concepts, particularly the notion of a "structure," Oulipians found their work susceptible to the same reception as Bourbaki. In a 1998 preface, "Foreward: Prolegomena to a Fourth Oulipo Manifesto or Not," Arnaud begins the preface by claiming that Oulipo has a choice between "scuttling or suicide"—between involuntary or voluntary death—a rather grim overture for a text which is supposed to be introducing Oulipo to an Anglophone audience for the first time (Arnaud, Fourth Manifesto ix). [66] He looks back nostalgically at Oulipo's early seclusion, which, according to him, protected it from the outside world and allowed it to expand and age delicately, without threatening the group's essential nature (*Ibid* xii). But, Arnaud claims, Oulipo could not remain clandestine. If the Academy had "blissfully ignored" in its first decade, the increasing "infatuation" with surrealism and psychoanalysis would lead to the application of structuralism to literary analysis; this change would, in turn, force Oulipo out of the closet, projecting it into the literary field (*Ibid* xii). If in his 1980 preface to Bens's notes, Arnaud remains blissfully unaware of contemporary intellectual movements and *prises de partie* within the literary field, by 1998, he was forced to admit that Oulipo's use of the word "structure," incidentally made it look like it was in cahoots with the largest and most amorphous intellectual movement of its time: structuralism.

Oulipo and Bourbaki encountered the same kind of misplacement in their respective intellectual fields, when readers begin to confuse the Bourbakian term "structure" with "structuralism" at large. While Weil certainly had personal relationships, notably with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Emile Benveniste, that would have exposed him to structuralist theory in anthropology and linguistics,[67] many have tried to expand Weil's familiarity with structuralism

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[65] A *holorime* is a poem in which all of the lines are homonyms; *antérimes* are poems in which the rhyme happens at the beginning of the verse instead of the end. In the *Subsidia 'Pataphysica* n°5, Queneau creates a method which expresses the plots of novels with variations on the formula XY=Z, or character X takes character Y to for character Z. Le Lionnais uses mathematical variables to express all the possible means of revealing the guilty party in a detective novel. In the *Dossier 17,* Lescure employs permutations, in which the words of one text are replaced with others from the same text, according to a combinatory technique based in traditional rhyme scheme. In his "Poèmes Booléens" in the *Dossier 17,* Le Lionnais also introduces axiomatics, notably "set theory," as a conceptual apparatus that could be applied to literature. See Queneau, "La relation x prend y pour z," Le Lionnais, "Les Structures du Roman Policier: Qui est coupable?," Lescure "Les Permutations," and Le Lionnais, "Poèmes Booléens."

[66] Arnaud wrote this piece for Warren Motte's *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, published in English. For more on the competing narratives of foundation of Oulipo, see Motte "Raymond Queneau and the Early Oulipo" 41-54. Motte clarifies that according to Oulipian Jacques Jouet the "Third Manifesto" is a non-existent text, although it is referenced by Jacques Roubaud.

[67] Weil met Claude Lévi-Strauss during their time in New York during World War II and wrote an appendix to *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1949), which applied this appendix tried to apply "abstract modern algebra

and structuralists into a phenomenon, by making structuralism a constitutive feature of the Bourbaki's work, or vice versa, by claiming that Bourbakian mathematics were central to structuralism.[68] Arnaud claims that this confusion prompted François Le Lionnais to write Oulipo's "Second Manifeste" in 1973, in which Le Lionnais draws a distinction between "structurAlism" and "structurElism":

> La très grande majorité des œuvres OuLiPiennes qui ont vu le jour jusqu'ici se place dans une perspective SYNTAXIQUE structrElist (je pris le lecteur de ne pas confondre ce dernier vocable—imaginé à l'intention de ce Manifeste—avec structurAliste (terme que plusieurs d'entre nous considèrent avec circonspection). (Oulipo, La littérature potentielle 19).

This position-taking was rather belated at best, occurring 11 years after the first manifesto and well into the heyday of structuralism; this belated position-taking suggests that Oulipo was thoroughly out of touch with its own reception. While secrecy did not prevent Oulipo from being forced into literary debates, it was at least partially effective in protecting them from the outside. Oulipians managed to be insulated, if not isolated from the literary field.

Eventually, however, Oulipo was not only out, but institutionalized. The ever-growing demand for Oulipian workshops made the group into a pedagogical tool, in high schools and universities, in literary studies and creative writing.[69] If early on Arnaud was in favor of pedagogy, by 1998, he bemoaned the growing importance of pedagogy to Oulipian practice, claiming that Oulipo was "shaken to its foundations by its very success" (Arnaud, Fourth Manifesto xiii). Pedagogy not only violated lesser principles of the group, like its restricted member count, but fundamentally altered the group's practice. Oulipo was left to discard its theoretical and creative energy to the whims of a craven fan-base, ever thirsty for the next little *atelier*:

> If a capitally important problem could be put in abeyance (capitally important since it is a manner of principal: was the Oulipo founded to teach anyone and everyone the art and the means of becoming a poet?), this monopolizing of Oulipo by pedagogical necessities would cause no difficulties, apart from the considerable time and energies these innumerable workshops take, to the detriment of the invention of new constraints

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to kinship rules" (Pekonen, review of Maranda and Aczel 57). Through Emile Benveniste, Weil was also aware of developments in linguistic structuralism by Roman Jakobson and the Prague School.

[68] For example, Amir Aczel's *The Artist and the Mathematician* (2006) largely overstates the influence of mathematics over structuralism. Aczel claims that Bourbaki offers a "structuralist approach" to mathematics and that in turn, structuralism originates in "strict mathematical considerations" (Aczel 2, 56). Many mathematicians have criticized the ahistoricism of these broad claims. Kantor emphasizes that theories of structure appeared in mathematics before Bourbaki and that Bourbaki's theory of structure has a different lineage: it is at least partially rooted in Elie Cartan's theory of continuous groups. Pekonen criticizes Aczel's lack of specificity, explaining that while Aczel claims does little to explain why group theory is central to studies of kinship in structural anthropology. While the concept of "*structure* was central in both undertakings," the two notions can be read as parallel to, or even totally independent of, one another. See Kantor 1 and Pekonen 68-69.

[69] Oulipo has in recent years been added to the *baccélaureat littéraire* and that Queneau's *Exercices de style* has long been praised as a digestible introduction to literary form.

and structures, and to that which the Oulipo persists in calling its "creation." Its physiognomy is changing as pedagogy instills itself in its veins. Its personality is dissolving: it is becoming a "writer's workshop" among other "writer's workshops." Interpreted, once again, in a fallacious manner and with a strong dash of demagogy, Lautréamont's famous maxim, "Poetry must made by all, not by one," works its magic. This recognition is dangerous, for it invites a comparison between the Oulipian methods and the techniques of a modern pedagogy of "creative writing." *Ibid* xiii

For Bourbaki, being read widely was essential for revolutionizing the mathematical field and mathematical instruction. For Oulipo, on the other hand, being read widely meant experiencing canonization: the very moment at which manifesto becomes maxim. As soon as Oulipo began offering workshops, it was subject to "the game of pedagogic competition," and it was obliged to "imitate the theories and terminology" already endorsed by universities (*Ibid* xiii). Oulipo's desire to make Lautréamont's adage a reality, for example, backfired horribly. By making its forms available to everyone, Oulipo was increasingly conflated with creative writing, a field which, in Arnaud and Jacques Roubaud's estimation, merely sought to make bad poets.[70] Oulipo's forced outing had transformed their literary practice into an undergraduate course; at best, it was easily canonized within existing disciplines, and at worst, it was an easily digestible, marketable skill. As Arnaud puts it, "One does not become a pedagogue lightly: one must know how to recycle himself" (*Ibid* xiii).

Over the course of this chapter, I've argued that Queneau and Oulipo's secrecy was not historical, but rhetorical. Both engaged in a performance, along the lines of the open secret, but this performance had a slightly different form and purpose for the man and for the group. Queneau's disavowal is meant to explain his non-involvement in contemporary politics, but also to reiterate critiques of engagement from Etiemble and Lindon; Oulipo's theatrical withholding of information is intended as a means of intervening into the literary field, which would exempt them from current literary debates. Ultimately, however, both Queneau's disavowal and Oulipo's theatrical withholding were unsuccessful; Queneau was inevitably labeled an "apolitical" author, just as Oulipo was inevitably confused with structuralism and creative writing. They were failed secrets or failed outings, which only demonstrate the inescapability of the literary and political fields. The failure of these interventions also situates both Oulipo and Queneau as part of the post-avant-garde. To be post-avant-garde is to always have one's identity equated with a persona, one's literary ambitions with a political agenda, and most importantly, to have every speech read as performance or act.

As we shall see in the next two chapters, always being "affiché," or visible and on public display, is a reality for most writers in late 20th-century France. Perec and Wittig will both find themselves interpellated by the literary and political fields, only to be misplaced and misunderstood. Like Bourbaki, both Perec and Wittig want a text to be evaluated based on its own merits. Like Barthes, both Perec and Wittig will fantasize about the possibility of a "total

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[70] Jacques Roubaud has taken a strong stance against "American creative writing," which he describes as an exploitative industry that inculcates poets in careerism without teaching them how to write poetry. See Roubaud 416.

text," or a text that functions as a complex political act. They will both find that their political activity has a phantom presence over their literary work: Perec will suffer from being eternally labeled a Marxist, and Wittig, a lesbian engaged in identity politics. But while Perec's *La Disparition* will be deemed too literary to be political, Wittig's will be understood to be too political to be literary.

In 21ˢᵗ-century France, the author's relationship to the political and the burden of engagement have both changed. Certain realities of the post-avant-garde, however, remain, like the danger of institutionalization. If for Arnaud, pedagogy is a problem, Perec, Wittig, and Jouet embrace it as a possibility. For these three writers, pedagogy, in some form or another, allows for the formation of a community through shared practice. Their various experiments in formal innovation as a means of creating communities serve as a reminder: even if secrecy was never a historical reality, it was a real identity. It was one of the ways in which Oulipo distinguished itself from preceding avant-gardes and narrated its own history.

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ANNEX:

Image 1: Cover art, Jacques Bens. *Oulipo.1960-1963*. **Christian Bourgois: Paris, 1980. Image.**
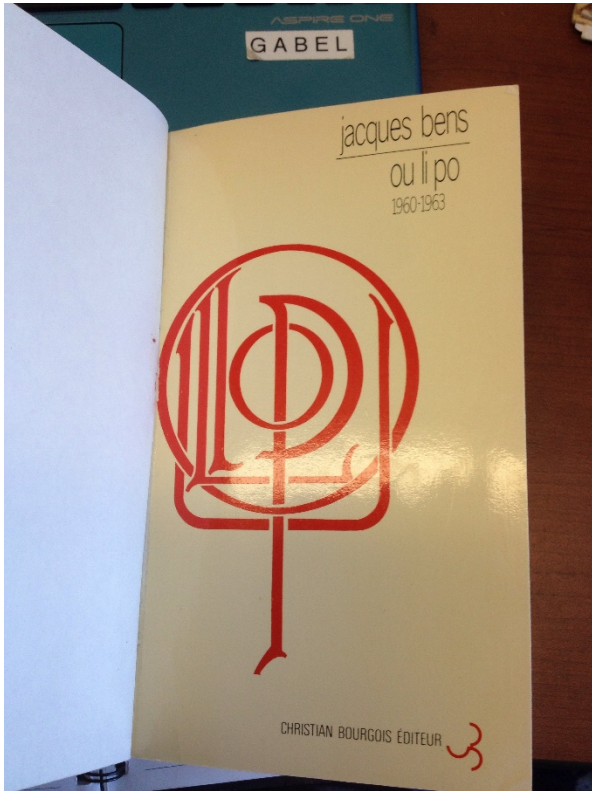
Chapter 2

Marxistes, Tendance Groucho: Perec's *La Disparition* as Collective History

Perec's *La Disparition* has been a subject of debate since its very publication. Perhaps the most infamous review of the novel was René-Marill Albérès's 1969 piece "Drôle de drâmes." Albérès, a literary scholar who is little known today, supposedly did not notice the text's lipogrammatic constraint, or at least failed to mention that a 300-plus-page novel was entirely devoid of the letter "e." Ever since, Perecquians and Oulipians alike turn to Albérès as exemplary of the duped reader—the only person who ever failed to notice the obvious. Unlike his own scholars, however, Perec appreciated, or even preferred such "dupable" readers. The problem, Perec noted, was those who saw the constraint *only* saw the constraint. In a 1979 interview, Perec lamented the fact that the poems of *Alphabets* were not read as poems or *comptines,* but as mere "exploits." Similarly, critics of *La Disparition* did not talk about the book, but the "system": "[…] c'est un livre sans 'e', il était épuisé dans cette définition" (Perec, Entretiens, Vol. II 63, 170-171). Indeed, a majority of reviewers gleefully produced their own lipograms,[71] lending credence to Marcel Bénabou's caricature of reader reactions: *ce n'était donc que cela?*[72] Of course, the question of whether or not to reveal the constraint is a canonical Oulipian debate. Some, like Jacques Roubaud and Jacques Jouet, point to the constraint in some fashion, and others, like Raymond Queneau and Harry Mathews, prefer to remain tacit. In *La Disparition*, Perec chose a middle ground, eliminating more explicit references to the constraint (like a history of the lipogram) and maintaining more subtle ones (like names of historical lipogrammatists).[73] Even before its publication, Perec tried to guard the text against readers with constraint myopia.

Setting aside the question of whether or not someone *could* overlook the lipogram, it does not seem outlandish to assert that the constraint is essential to the text's production and meaning. While most readers tend to think of the constraint in the negative, in terms of what one *cannot say*, Perec, and Oulipians at large, tend to emphasize the affirmative aspect of the constraint. Perec underscores its *disponibilité* (the material that it makes available to the author), and Oulipians routinely speak of its *potentialité* (the infinite array of texts that it could

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[71] Several reviewers imitate the lipogram or other Oulipian constraints. For example, Kincaid wrote a lipogrammatic "Pirates of Penzance" in a review of an English translation of *La Disparition*; Kuntz wrote a "tentative" for the anniversary of Perec's death; Dirda wrote his review of Roubaud's work entirely in the second person. See Kincaid, Kuntz, and Dirda.

[72] Bénabou makes this joke in a draft of his review of *La Disparition,* which he shared with Perec before publishing. See Perec's drafts, or "brouillons," for the novel, held at the *Association Georges Perec,* AGP 86,2,2, 1-6d. Thank you to the *Association Georges Perec* for providing me access to a copy of these drafts in the course of my research. Thank you also to Suzanne Lipinska, who allowed me to consult a manuscript version of *La Disparition,* held at the Moulin d'Andé, which I will be referring to as the Moulin manuscript throughout this chapter.

[73] See Yû Maeyama's invaluable study of Perec's drafts. Maeyama demonstrates that Perec not only removed a "Histoire du lipogramme" from later drafts of *la Disparition*, but even edited direct references to the constraint out of Bénabou's review. Many of these lipogrammatists appear in "Histoire du lipogramme," later published in Oulipo's first collective text, *La littérature potentielle.* See Maeyama 10-17 and Oulipo 73-90.

produce).[74] Not unlike the open secret, the constraint allows the author to straddle the line between withholding and revealing information. This tension between *what one can and cannot say*, between the mechanical reproduction or technical ability required by the constraint, and the intention of the author—or in this case *authors*—is essential to the meaning of the text.

Scholars have traditionally read the allegory of the absent letter as autobiographical. *La Disparition* is a deconstructed whodunit,[75] in which the lead character, aptly named Anton Voyl (atonal vowel), disappears without a trace. While several clues point to the novel's constraint (visions of backwards threes, a missing 5th volume, etc.), one by one all of Anton's friends and acquaintances eventually disappear or die. It turns out that all of the characters descend from two patriarchal bloodlines—those of Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan and Amaury Conson—and they are slowly being killed off by Aloysius Swann, the right-hand man of a strange figure known only as "l'homme barbu." Bearing a distinctive scar on his upper lip, this bearded man is an obvious stand-in for Perec.[76] The author himself becomes the progenitor of this generations-long blood feud. Given that Perec lost his mother to Auschwitz and his father to advancing German troops in 1940, the absent "e," with its homophonous evocation of "eux," stands in uncomfortably for those murdered in the Shoah. Scullion calls this relationship to allegory a "mode of story-telling that continually displaces, hides, and elides the actual object of narration" (Scullion, Georges Perec and the Memory of Vichy France 113).[77] Or as Burgelin notes, Perec's allegory stages *l'indicible*, or the tension between saying and not saying: "Ecrire, c'est cacher alors même qu'est énoncé au plus juste de ce qu'il y a à énoncer" (Burgelin, Les mal nommés : Duras, Leiris, Calet, Bove, Perec, Gary et Quelques Autres Maurice Olender 297). Again, much like the open secret, the constraint plays with the inherent opacity or ambiguity of a given speech act. It hides, just as it enunciates, the very object of enunciation. Seeing as "perec," "georges," and "je" are all theoretically eliminated by the constraint, the "e" signals the not only unsayable "work of mourning"[78] undertaken by Holocaust survivors,[79] but the crisis of Jewish identity in the aftermath of World War II.[80]

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[74] See Introduction.

[75] For more on the novel's relationship to Golden Era detective fiction. See O'Meara 35-38.

[76] Perec had a similar scar and returns to it throughout his œuvre, notably in his posthumous novel, *Le Condottière.*

[77] Scullion argues that Perec's *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance,* allegorizes a collective unconscious marred by Vichy guilt. She points to the dissonance between the fictional narrative's allegory of Nazi concentrationary ideology and the fact that Vichy remains mostly unmentioned in Perec's childhood memories. See Scullion 113-115.

[78] Motte asserts that the "work of mourning," in the psychoanalytic sense, traverses the whole of Perec's oeuvre; not only are his works inflected by screen memories and memory loss, but by the labor of remembering itself. See Motte 56-71.

[79] Suleiman underscores that acknowledging Perec's survivor status altered the way his earlier texts were received; readers no longer dismissed them as mere "formal experimentation," but understood constraints like the lipogram to have "a profound existential significance." See Suleiman 178-186.

[80] Bellos underscores that this "e" is indeed a feminine absence: the novel's title refers to the "Acte de disparition," or the legal documentation that is meant to replace the unrecovered body of Holocaust victims, like Perec's mother. Béhar reads *La Disparition* as a narrative of gender oppression: the suppression of female voices by patriarchal violence. See Bellos 400 and Béhar 409-419.

Albérès, on the other hand, offers different insights into what unsayable crime animates the novel. It is none other than the October 1965 disappearance of Moroccan revolutionary Mehdi Ben Barka. For Albérès, this was the quintessential contemporary "scandal," an unsavory and unmentionable tabloid event. While he had appreciated—even lauded—Perec's portrayal of contemporary life in *Les Choses,* Albérès decried *La Disparition* for taking politics a step too far. Rather than chronicling or documenting real life like *Les Choses*, Perec had stooped to narrating "l'événement de l'actualité"—and even worse—he had dared to substitute an "event" for the whole of the present era:

> [...] "l'affaire Ben Barka", c'est-à-dire un événement récent, propre à susciter la curiosité ou l'indignation, significatif, brutal, mais différent de la chronique, parce qu'il est un point, un trait, un drame, et non une longue légende mêlée de bien et de mal [....] Va-t-il décrire les émeutes d'étudiants ? C'est déjà fait, avec photos. La guerre du Vietnam ? Il est sociologue et non journaliste à sensation. La faillite des petits commerçants ? Ce n'est pas son genre, ce n'est pas fait pour son public. L'embarras des paysans ? Il n'y connait rien [...] il est allé rechercher, dans nos scandales politiques et policiers les plus récent, le plus aigu et le plus trouble. (Albérès, Drôle de drâmes)

For Albérès, Perec had dared to substitute this drama for the whole of a decade. Perec not only fails to chronicle several major events of the 1960s (like May '68 or the Vietnam War), he fails to situate the Ben Barka Affair within this larger history. Albérès accuses Perec of being purposefully inflammatory, drawing attention to a contemporary scandal.

While it is tempting to dismiss Albérès's reading as ungenerous and misguided, he is far from the only person to see this echo of contemporary history in *La Disparition.* Even Perec's biographer, David Bellos, claims that *La Disparition* "is not exactly a political thriller," but nevertheless reads "like the dreams of May '68, a contestation of the (literal) order," as well as a work "full of the somber violence of the students' demands for an end to work, to restrictions, to law, to order, and the whole stultified mess called society" (Bellos, Georges Perec: A Life in Words 401).[81] Indeed in spite of Albérès's accusations, the text is loaded with what Scullion calls "displaced and occulted historical missives," references to specific historical events and persons, that situate it in 1960s France.[82] These "missives" offer an antidote to readings that reduce Perec's creative decisions to the constraint. Certainly, the constraint guided some of the lexical and narratival decisions. Many of the novel's features, however, are hardly required by the constraint. For example, Perec clearly intended it to be metatextual and transhistorical. It is thus no accident that the allegory of the absent "e" is open to multiple interpretations, but an inherent feature of Perec's use of the constraint—proof of its very potential.

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[81] Perec's previous novel, *Quel petit vélo au fond de la cour* (1966)*,* a grotesque epic about a draft-dodger, dealt with the Algerian War in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

[82] Scullion sees references to Vichy France in *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* as targeting the complicity and silence of an entire postwar generation. See Scullion 113-115.

Without negating the importance of the standard autobiographical reading, I argue that the absent "e" allegorizes not only the burden past histories place on the present, but *hides just as it enunciates* a history of the present. Sheringham argues that autobiography necessarily involves "events which occur in the course of composition" that should be read as part of the work's "fabric of intentions."[83] While Perec did not participate directly in May '68, it was certainly on his radar, especially given that he was holed up at the Moulin d'Andé, a château in Normandy that hosts artists in residence.[84] A number of young revolutionaries, from Pan-Africanist poets to the filmmakers of the *Nouvelle Vague,* had lingered on the château's premises, creating fertile ground for artistic and political contestation.[85] According to the Moulin's owner (and Perec's ex-girlfriend) Suzanne Lipinska, Perec had been invited to the château by Maurice Pons, so that he could "vivre à l'abri des mondanités" (Lipinska, Interview). After the success of *Les Choses*, Perec became uncomfortable with the authority granted to him as a "Marxist" author. Like Queneau and Lindon, he was uncomfortable with the public persona it required of him, as well as the phantom of engagement that loomed over his forthcoming texts. While he had once described himself as an *écrivain engagé*, gradually he became disillusioned.[86] The Moulin d'Andé thus afforded Perec the perfect safe haven to experiment with literary identity and collective practice.

This refuge opened up a new "on" for Perec: a collective subjectivity, rooted in "l'âme" ou "l'esprit du Moulin." The Moulin was a veritable communal utopia, where everyone shared meals and chores, and where artists could find silence and solace, without sacrificing companionship. This mutual responsibility and respect created an environment of exchange. Like Oulipo's monthly banquets, meals were an opportunity to share works in progress and to contemplate future projects and collaborations. During his stay, Perec asked other Moulin residents to contribute to *La Disparition,* by adding to his lists of e-less words or by writing their own passages to the novel. Little work has been done on his collaborators, in part because they

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[83] Sheringham also points out that autobiographies by nature involve many discursive forms; this is sustained by Perec's essay "Notes sur ce que je cherche," in which he enumerates the four guiding fields of his oeuvre: autobiography, ludics, sociology, and realism. See Sheringham 13-15 and Perec, *Penser/Classer* 10.

[84] Perec most likely did not attend protests in Paris, although he did attend a gathering at Louviers where he talked about the city's relationship to the Popular Front of 1936. See Bellos 400-401.

[85] Lipinska inherited the château in 1956 and later dedicated its rooms to housing artists. Among the luminaries that spent time at the Moulin, one finds New Wave filmmakers François Truffaut, Louis Malle, and Alain Cavalier; American novelist Richard Wright; Haitian poet René Depestre; actress Simone Signoret; and Clara Malraux, writer and wife of André Malraux. Perec also crossed paths with a number of people passing through the Moulin, including: militants (Alain Geismar and Bernard Kouchner, the editors of the *Tricontental*, a Marxist review out of Havana); filmmakers and screenwriters (Jean-Paul Rappeneau, Bernard Queysanne, and Jean-François Adam); stage directors and playwrights (Marcel Cuvelier and Philippe Adrien); as well as mathematicians (Stella Baruk), journalists (Michèle Georges), and sculptors (Alberto Carlinsky). A number of Perec's friends also became regulars at the Moulin, including fellow Oulipians (Jacques Roubaud and Marcel Bénabou) and former *Lignée générale* comrades (Roger Kléman and Jacques Lederer). See Bellos 407-412; Lipinska, 50 ans du Moulin; Lipinska, Perec au Moulin 51-2; and Perec, Une lettre de Georges Perec à Suzanne Lipinska 55.

[86] See Jean Duvignaud's 1965 interview of Perec, "Le bonheur de la modernité," in which Perec claims literature had transcended the Sartrean split between "littérature engagée" et "dégagée," as well as the need to "moralize" in literature. See Perec, Entretiens, Vol. I 61.

remain uncredited in the final text. Among them one finds known Oulipians (Jacques Roubaud, Marcel Bénabou, and Raymond Queneau) and a number of figures that visited or were living at the Moulin (Maurice Pons, Jean Pouillon, and Roger Kléman). Some collaborators signed their contributions to Perec's manuscripts (Queneau, Pons, Pouillon, Monique Wittig, Catherine Clément, and Edouard J. Maunick). Others later announced their involvement (Clément).[87] Others still will likely remain anonymous, like the local high schoolers who tackled the constraint, one of whom found his way into the final text.[88] Thus, the novel records, in some respects, a chronicle of the Moulin and Perec's compatriots.

In this chapter, I will offer a reading of *La Disparition* as a history of two presents: the present of the text and the present of the texts' creation. On the one hand, the novel itself is infused with the bitter reality of history's inevitable repetition: the farce of a tragedy endlessly reenacted. Perec systematically conflates the violence of the present and the past throughout the novel, unearthing contemporary "historical missives," but also events and figures from the Second Empire, the French Revolution, and beyond. While the problem of representing historical violence looms incessantly, the "e" gradually singles out particular historical crises: the violent secrets of the Algerian War, the work of mourning in the aftermath of the Shoah, and disruptive political action in May '68. On the other hand, the novel also bears non-representational traces of its collective production. Clues scattered throughout the novel gesture towards a community of collaborators hidden behind the authorial "Georges." The novel's secret collective authorship suggests that a shared subjectivity can form through the process of writing—even in the most inhospitable of textual and historical circumstances.

This gap, between what is said and not said in textual and paratextual elements, sheds light on new valences of the "e," demonstrating the full weight of its *potential*. The absent letter figures not only "eux," those have been violently *disappeared* throughout the annals of history, but "on," the anonymous perpetrators and victims of this violence, as well as "nous," other authorial voices lurking in the space of the text. *La Disparition* is not only about the inability to say "e" or "je," but the possibility of saying "we": producing collective subjectivities that negotiate the divide between anonymous ("on") and personal communities ("nous"). It also attests to how this "nous" handles the bitter irony of history's repetition. Dark humor and shared textual practice point to a new kind of political community: *Marxistes, tendance groucho.*

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[87] In her memoir, Catherine Clément indicated that she wrote a passage on Kant and Spinoza; the Moulin manuscript includes her passage, signed "Catherine Bèckes." Bellos credits her under the name "Catherine David." See Clément, Mémoire 182 and Bellos 402. See also note 36.

[88] According to Lipinska, Perec asked Marie-Noëlle Thibault, a Moulin resident and professor at a high school in Louviers, to have her students write their own e-less texts. Maeyama's study confirms this, as does the Moulin manuscript, which includes several "devoirs de français," among which one finds the excerpted piece. See Lipinska, Interview; Maeyama; and Bellos 403.

No "e" = "on," or History's Endless Repetition

Scribbled on the bottom of her own contribution to *La Disparition,* Monique Wittig left Perec a little note: "Cette histoire du présent me tracassait, cher Georges. Excuse-moi pour cette pâle imitation. Veux-tu me dire comment s'appelaient les armées qui utilisaient les éléphants?"[89] Wittig's brief response is puzzling, as she moves quickly from her reaction to the novel to a slightly comical, lexical demand. But it also encapsulates the tone of *La Disparition,* which oscillates constantly between a seemingly objective, quasi-journalistic narration of horrific violence, and light-hearted wordplay and humor. More importantly, for Wittig, *La Disparition* is unquestionably a troubling history of the present. But *which* present?

Already in the "Avant-Propos," Perec conflates multiple presents, as he narrates a violent popular uprising, which leads to crises of leadership and changes in power. The opening lines of the novel characterize political uprisings as an effect of rampant "on-dit," or knowledge transmitted from press release to paranoia:

> Trois cardinaux, un rabbin, un amiral franc-maçon, un trio d'insignifiants politicards soumis au bon plaisir d'un trust anglo-saxon, ont fait savoir à la population par radio, puis par placards, qu'on risquait la mort par inanition. On crut d'abord à un faux bruit. Il s'agissait, disait-on, d'intoxication. Mais l'opinion suivit. Chacun s'arma d'un fort gourdin. 'Nous voulons du pain,' criait la population, conspuant patrons, nantis, pouvoirs publics. Ça complotait, ça conspirait partout. (Perec, Romans & Récits 313)

After its joke-like intro (a cardinal, a rabbi and a Mason walk into a bar…), the passage fails to produce a punchline. Throughout the passage, the narrator hints at the unclear link between a given actor's speech and subsequent collective political action. First, a message is "made known" by various institutional authorities who are bankrolled by some external power ("un trust anglo-saxon"). This message, a mundane public heath slogan ("people die of starvation"), is effortlessly diffused via the radio and propaganda posters. The public, in turn, misconstrues the statement, by substituting "intoxication" for "inanition." Propaganda is transformed into rumor, or the anonymous collective knowledge of "on-dit." Rumor is recirculated in the form of "opinions," only to be transformed into the dehumanized "ça." With the exception of those three institutional stand-ins (religious and secular), all of this information is altered and reproduced by unknown referents or groups. Conspiratorial knowledge is the driving force of political upheaval. Information is transformed by everyone, but seemingly initiated by no one. The cycle of political speech is complete.

As the crisis unfolds, speech becomes act, and the ominous, unknown "on" or "ça" commits a litany of violent attacks. The catalog of "on's" acts run the gamut, from attacks on the police, government officials, and media, to mass pillaging, politically motivated

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[89] Wittig's note on her contribution suggests that she read some (or most) of the text before having written her piece. To my knowledge, she was not living at the Moulin d'Andé and did not contribute to the drafts of the text, but she did submit a piece for the final version. See the Moulin manuscript.

assassinations, revolutionary-style guillotining, aerial bombing, and even mutiny. Their senselessness reiterates the passage's playful humor—a consulate member is killed for stealing a fish—but these illusions are necessarily loaded. To mention, for instance, a hallucinating "mauvais plaisant" who sprays the Faubourg Saint-Martin with napalm, is to evoke the on-going events of the Vietnam War, the use of mustard gas in World War I, and ever-developing technologies of chemical warfare (*Ibid* 313).

Hidden within this seemingly endless list, however, Perec encodes a cartography of May '68, situating these events within the geographic locale of not just central Paris (Saint-Paul), but the working class and student milieux of post-war France (*Ibid* 313-4).[90] While many of these places are commonly known Parisian metro stops, this cartography soon gives way to more explicit references. The events of the "Avant-Propos" span April 6th through an undefined moment in May, a timeline that is roughly contemporaneous to May '68 (*Ibid* 313).[91] Clearly, Perec cannot use certain months (ending "-re" or "-vier"), but he does not shy away from abbreviations, nor are his options limited to April ("mars," "mai," "juin," "août"). Nevertheless, Perec obsessively returns to the month of April, both in the unfolding narrative and in flashbacks.[92] Perec also mentions May directly, jokingly taking the phrase "Mai fût chaud" literally ("Mai fut brûlant") by claiming that cars and passerby actually caught fire (*Ibid* 314). The closure of youth- or student-centered sites, like "bars, bistrots, billards, dancings" for "un motif inconnu," points to May's beginnings in the disputes between faculty and students over pools and dormitory use (*Ibid* 314).[93]

This continuity of crisis among student- and worker- milieux evokes a layering of historical events, updating Baudelaire's "Le cygne" and its complexly palimpsestic Paris of 1848.[94] Derek Schilling argues that this "Perec le chiffonnier" uncovers the violence of the past in the throes of the present; the present is not a mere screen for past trauma, but the past is relived in the present (Schilling, Mémoires du quotidien: les lieux de Perec 16). Several

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[90] The text mentions the site of a concentration camp (Drancy); the first *zone libre* city between occupied Paris and free Lyon (Mâcon); the working-class periphery of Paris (Clignancourt, Montsouris, Nation, Orly); and working-class cities of France (Nancy, Mâcon, Drancy). Areas close to the student-centered Paris of the Latin Quarter (Palais-Bourbon, Latour-Maubourg, Raspail) loosely echo those of the worker-student strikes of May '68.

[91] While many argue that May '68 was precipitated by earlier events and a larger global history, a few directly related events include: the "March 22 Movement," during which an anti-Vietnam War rally was held; the events of May 3rd-6th, with the closure of the Nanterre, student protests at the Sorbonne, the closure of the Sorbonne, followed by more protests; the May 10th "Night of the Barricades," during which 40,000 people marched in support of imprisoned students; and the general strike on May 13th. See Wolin 88-90, 93, 98.

[92] For example, on April 6th, la Tour d'Orly, L'Alhambra, L'Hôpital Saint-Louis, and L'Institut are bombed; on April 8th, Anton Voyl seeks medical help; one of the clues (a "signal" scribbled on to a billiard table) is discovered towards the end of April or beginning of May; a mysterious individual (Tryphiodorus, who later ends up being Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan, one of the "progenitors" of the family feud) first appears in April of 1928; Amaury Conson discovers that a photo of the Barbu had been stolen from him at least 28 years ago, in an evening in April. See Perec, *Romans & Récits,* 313, 324, 431, 418, 500.

[93] One dispute over student facilities took place at the opening of a student pool at Nanterre. See Wolin 78-80.

[94] The metro is a favorite linguistic resource for Oulipians, most famously in the procedural constraints of Jacques Jouet's *Poèmes du métro* (2000).

massacres of anonymous groups of people conjure up even more recent history: "Plus tard, on s'attaqua aux Nords-Africains, aux Noirs, aux juifs. On fit pogrom à Drancy, à Livry-Gargan, à Saint-Paul, à Villacoublay, à Clignancourt" (Perec, Romans & Récits 313). In one line, Perec polemically accumulates genocides—of North Africans, Blacks, and Jews—calling on the collective allegory to draw connections between (or lump together?) racial, ethnic, and colonial violence. He associates the Holocaust with colonial genocide, civil rights issues, and the Algerian War, forcing us to contemplate how and when these discourses and events collide.

On the one hand, Perec's palimpsestic cartography of violence substantiates Kristin Ross's claim that May '68 was not a restricted geographical or temporal student moment, a "narcissistic and truncated reduction of May to the confines of the Latin Quarter," but an event with "international" aims and with an "Algerian and worker prehistory" (Ross, May '68 and its Afterlives 2-3, 6-7). On the other hand, while Perec's tone is certainly not without *soixante-huitard* anti-authoritarianism, he falls short of their quintessential third-worldism or their identification with the historical underdog: we are not all "juifs allemands" as the '68 slogan suggests, nor is it even clear that the underdog has a voice at all.

Given the lipogrammatic constraint, Perec has limited options for discussing the agents of political activity—but that does not mean he avoids politics altogether. Clearly, Perec cannot directly reference "le parti communiste" or "socialiste," nor can he cite the key players of '68 (communistes, syndicalistes, maoïstes, étudiants, or ouvriers) without having recourse to acronyms or more specific groups. More generally, he cannot refer to "le groupe," nor can he employ plural articles ("les," "mes," "ces"), effectively eliminating most plural nouns. He can use "nous," but he cannot voice a first-person singular internal to this group without using elision ("j"). Nevertheless, here, and throughout the novel, Perec uses the constraint as a way into political subjectivity. The lipogram allows him to probe into the collective pronominal forms, like "on," that we routinely adopt. To this end, he consistently leaves it unspecified, taking full advantage of the ambiguity of the pronoun. Christelle Reggiani argues that Perec thematizes an "intentionalité ou subjectivité cachées" behind the constraint (Reggiani, Poétiques oulipiennes. 12, 23). Perec reproduces many avatars for himself across the novel (from "le Barbu" to Anton Voyl to Douglas Haig), but also interrogates the very possibility of a hidden intentionality or subjectivity: what if we cannot know who this "on" is? What if the referent and its intention are forever hidden to us?

This poses several questions: for example, how does this referentless subjectivity mesh with the litany of violent acts? And the references to May '68? If this is a history of the present, where are the students and workers, if not internal to this "on"? Perec implies that they are part of these threatening masses, who ambiguously witness and perpetrate violence, as both *victime* and *bourreau*. In the "Avant-Propos," there is no mention of the student-worker struggle, no allusion to the collective idealism—the sense of unity or the belief in change—that often characterizes narrations of May '68. In fact, the whole structure of subjective intention has been eliminated, as there are no clear political actors to embody these pronominal subjects, just objective effects: violence seemingly without perpetrators. Perec's consistent

denial of referents and his choice of pronoun have the combined effect of being accusatory. This "on" draws attention not only to our collective violence, but our collective indifference. No one is claiming responsibility for—or complicity in—the workings of history.

As "The Avant-Propos" wavers impossibly between Commune and Reign of Terror, the narration becomes completely dominated by this subject- and referent-less "on," who elects a rowing champion only to execute him, leading to a comical proliferation of leaders:

> Plus tard, on vit surgir un roi franc, un hospodar, un maharadjah, trois Romulus, huit Alaric, six Atatürk, huit Mata-Hari, un Caius Gracchus, un Fabius Maximus Rullianus, un Danton, un Saint-Just, un Pompidou, un Johnson (Lyndon B.), pas mal d'Adolf, trois Mussolini, cinq Caroli Magni, un Washington, un Othon à qui aussitôt s'opposa un Habsbourg, un Timor Ling qui, sans aucun concours, trucida dix-huit Pasionaria, vingt Mao, vingt-huit Marx (un Chico, trois Karl, six Groucho, dix-huit Harpo).
>
> Au nom du salut public un Marat proscrivit tout bain, mais un Charlot Corday l'assassina dans son tub. (Perec, *Romans & Récits* 315)

These leaders surface as if out of nowhere; they are no longer elected or willed, they simply come into and out of power. The pronominal article ("un") indicates that each leader is just as unremarkable, just as interchangeable as the last, making Perec's historical layering almost sacrilegious in its confusion of movements and figures. Important political forms of the historical present, like Marxism and Maoism, are embedded in a long line of historical possibilities: from Ancient Rome, to Medieval and Revolutionary France, to fascism, to various monarchies (the French *roi franc*, the Indian maharajah, the Slavic hospodar). In the realm of possible political leaders, French, American, and Spanish Revolutionary figures are openly equated with current presidents and fascist leaders. This history-in-miniature condenses hundreds of years within the same paragraph—even conflating imperialism (embodied by 15th-century Turko-Mongol ruler Timor Ling) with hard-won democracy (in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Turkey). The careful rhyming of leaders' names lends itself to comical mix-ups: is it "Charlot" Chaplin or "Charlotte Corday"? Embedding a quip based in *soixante-huitard* slang, Perec ends this history with an accusation. He implicitly chastises May's *enragés* for being guilty of the same slippery logic performed by the text: are you *Marxiste, tendance Groucho…* or *Marxiste, tendance Chico… Karl… Harpo*?

In this mess of overlapping histories, May '68 loses its immediacy, becoming yet another *coup-d'état* in a long line of failed political regimes. As the "Avant-Propos" closes, Perec offers a glimmer of resolution, in the form of a revolutionary takeover of the "administration" by students. But it is not the students who climb the Tour Sully-Morand, but the feeble *cadre,* who surrenders on behalf of the faculty, to the ever ambiguous "Pouvoir Public" (*Ibid* 315). A tank with unknown occupants inaugurates a *de facto*, quasi-military rule ("soi-disant dispositif

martial"). Bureaucracy and military rule soon make way for anarchy, and the passage's referent-less language becomes all the more hyperbolic: "Alors ça tourna mal" (*Ibid* 315). [95]

I am lingering over the "Avant-Propos" because it establishes the substitutive and palimpsestic logic of the text.[96] Perec intentionally positions this political crisis up front, setting the stage for the drama of the text. Historical references throughout the novel—to May '68 and later the Algerian War—establish its contemporaneity and point backwards to past historical crises.[97] It is hard not to situate "Perec le chiffonnier" in a lineage of historical thinkers who see history as cyclical, as inevitably repeating itself. *La Disparition* zig-zags from mass protest to mass murder. The variables of history are not uprisings and violence, but when and where these events manifest. Reggiani argues that the constraint itself is emblematic of "technical reproduction" (Reggiani, Poétiques oulipiennes. 26-29). In this light, Oulipo's search for new "postures auctoriales" and new literary forms are a means of reflecting on the barbarism of writing a poem after Auschwitz; the constraint's "technical reproduction" metaphorizes the reproducibility of mass murder (*Ibid* 26-29). Perec's use of the detective novel only reiterates the reproducibility and substitutability of death—expanding the "e" allegory to embrace several historical crises. Characters who are confused with one another—like Ibn Barka and Ibn Abbou or Douglas Haig and Anton Voyl—become emblematic of the inescapability of historical violence.

It is no surprise that *La Disparition*'s intrigue begins with not only a family, but a nationalist, feud: the war between the Savorgnan-Clifford and Mavrokhordatos houses. Several characters in the Savorgnan-Clifford family line are linked to the Zahir, an ominous jewel or patrilineal mark of death. Much of the novel's ridiculously complicated plot revolves around the jewel's passage from one family member to another. The jewel's mysterious and troubling powers echo cabbalistic mysticism, but the Zahir actually originates in the "conflit austro-ottoman" (Perec, Romans & Récits 139-140). [98] Initially, it is unclear which revolutionary conflict fits the bill, until the origins of the patrilineal feud are uncovered. During the Albanian War of independence, Augustin Mavrokhordatos, Olga's grandfather, initiates a fight against the

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[95] Military intervention would end May '68, just as it had previous revolutions; after the June 1968 elections, the government brought in troops to remove strikers from factories in the greater Paris region. See Wolin 102.

[96] As Maeyama points out, Perec wrote the piece *after* he wrote much of the original novel, including the "Post-Scriptum," which describes the philosophy of the constraint at length. In the final draft of the novel, Perec also situates the intrigue strictly in 1968. See Maeyama 40.

[97] For example, when we are first introduced to Anton Voyl, he is listening to the radio. The news cycles through a number of contemporary historical events, like "racial conflicts" in Biafra (that seceded from Nigeria in 1967), hurricane Amanda (of 1964), or a tennis match between Michel Santana and Pierre Darmon (who never competed against each other, but won the Roland-Garros tournament in 1961/1964 and 1963, respectively). '68 resurfaces when Georges Pompidou, residing at the Prime Minister's residence in Matignon, proposes that *syndicats* maintain "un *statut quo* social." Like the "Avant-Propos," the radio emission concludes violently; this time with a putsch in Conakry (a reference to Guinea's 1958 independence). See Perec, *Romans & Récits,* 320.

[98] For example, Augustus B. Clifford spares his bastard son, Haig, after finding the jewel in the baby's swaddling cloth. When the adult Douglas Haig disappears, it is later revealed that he took the jewel and fed it to his fish, Jonas; Clifford dies crying out "Zahir," and Clifford's daughter-in-law, Olga Mavrokhordatos, dies after discovering the jewel inside the dead fish.

standing Czar. He is eventually given up, however, by an Englishman "Lord Vanish"—who is very likely Augustus B. Clifford. Augustin's son Albin vows to avenge his father's death, but ends up falling in love with an actress, who later gives birth to Olga. Clifford tries to kill the actress, but fails, only to discover that his son Haig has fallen in love with Olga. Thus, in this Romeo-and-Juliet narrative, the son and daughter of opposing families are united, only to die with the whole of their family lines. All of this intrigue to say, that another possible reading of the mark of death is the fallout from a revolutionary feud. The senselessness of the feud is only furthered by a final revelation: Olga and Haig are not only lovers, but brother and sister.[99] The fate of the star-crossed lovers doubles down on notions of the "on" as shared. These *victimes et bourreaux* are indeed part of one and the same community.

Against the backdrop of this revolutionary and nationalist feud, the *present* of the Algerian War finally appears alongside the disappearance of Ibn Abbou. After Anton disappears, his friend Amaury Conson consults a detective, Ottavio Ottaviani. When Ottaviani and Conson first meet to share information, they discover the local area is overrun with police (*Ibid* 359). Ottaviani surmises that the authorities must want to "disappear" someone nearby, and Amaury guesses it must be Voyl. Eventually, Ottaviani discovers that a "Moroccan lawyer" was disappeared, and Amaury becomes convinced that it be his most recent informant: Hassan Ibn Abbou (*Ibid* 359). Ottaviani, however, rejects this explanation outright, beginning to narrate "l'obscur imbroglio" of the disappearance of one "Ibn Barka." We've arrived at the "event" that shocked Albérès: the disappearance of Mehdi Ben Barka, in October 1965. Indeed, the newspaper story that Ottaviani recounts has the aura of the quintessential "scandal":

> Ça fit du foin au Quai d'Orsay. Papon niait d'un bloc. Mais Souchon avouait tout, puis Voitot. La divulgation d'un soi-disant journal où Fignon occupait un haut magistrat suscita à Matignon un profond chagrin. L'on prouva, non sans mal, qu'il s'agissait d'un faux. Oufkir produisit un alibi bouffon. Puis l'on suicida Fignon, tandis qu'à l'instruction ça n'avançait pas ; l'opposition cloua au moins vingt-huit fois au pilori un Pouvoir qui autorisait un forfait aussi vil. (*Ibid* 361-2)

There's someone who avows guilt (Souchon) and someone who does not (Papon); there's a fake or a forgery, a false alibi ("un alibi bouffon"), and a forced suicide ("l'on suicida Fignon"). Among a series of ambiguous references ("Souchon" or "Voitot"), one finds many historical figures involved in the Ben Barka affair: Maurice Papon, the prefect of police under de Gaulle, and Mohammed Oufkir, the right-hand man of Moroccan King Hassan II, who was convicted by French courts of Ben Barka's murder (only to disappear himself, after a failed coup in 1972). One can understand why Albérès was shocked; Perec does not shy away from directly mentioning the individuals implicated in the scandal.

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[99] Savorgnan swapped the baby Haig for another infant who had died.

Perec also does not hesitate to condemn the larger public who stood by and let it happen. If initially, the "on" is the witness (the discoverer of the conspiracy to kidnap Ben Barka), it rapidly shifts to encompass perpetrator, ally, and coconspirator:

> On travaillait la main dans la main! [….] On plaida à huit clos. On cria haro sur un figurant qui n'y pouvait mais, un connard qui n'avait pas compris; quant aux gros, aux puissants, aux politicards, on n'y toucha pas… (*Ibid* 361-2)

In only a few lines, "on" evokes: 1) those who organized the conspiracy and managed to plead out secretly; 2) those who spoke out against this injustice; and 3) those who continue to let it happen. Perec combines all of the agents of a given event into a single pronominal subject, problematizing "on" as a mode of subjective intention that we ("on") routinely adopt. We cannot be victims of this kind of violence, he suggests, without perpetrating it ourselves.

The story of the real Ben Barka (Ibn Barka) is abandoned here, but his fictional doppelgänger (Ibn Abbou) will be awarded a state funeral—unlike Ben Barka himself. This spectacle rivals the popular uprising of the Avant-Propos: "Tout-Paris" attends the procession, including a Maharajah, a Duc, and an Iman, and Oulipo's very own "Raymond Quinault" (*Ibid* 374-5). Temporarily, it appears that Perec is bestowing upon Ben Barka a fictional burial that he was never awarded in real life, but after services for "le grand disparu," Ibn Abbou's coffin spills open, only to reveal that there is no body inside (*Ibid* 377). The mystery of the disappearances remains unsolved, dissolving into finger-pointing:

> Au Quai d'Orsay on accusa à la P.J. ; à la P.J. l'on accusa Matignon ; à Matignon la Maison Roblot qui accusa la Maison Borniol qui accusa—va savoir pourquoi—l'Hôpital Foch qui accusa l'Institut qui accusa l'Anglo-Iranian Bank qui raccusa Pompidou qui compromit Giscard qui condamna Papon qui montra du doigt Foccard…
>
> -Ah non, fit Ottavio Ottaviani, il nous suffit d'un Ibn Barka par an! (*Ibid* 377)

Institutions come to replace people, as the public ("on") inaugurates a game of finger-pointing: were the funeral companies (la Maison Roblot, la Maison Borniol) or the hospital (l'Hôpital Foch) to blame? Was the Anglo-Iranian Bank or L'Institut responsible? Or, should we be setting our sights on the powers at hand: the police ("Papon" and the "P.J.," ou le Palais de Justice) and the Prime Minister (residing in Matingon). Among government officials, was it the ex-Gaullist centrist, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, or de Gaulle's chief of staff on African affairs, Foccard? Ibn Barka's disappearance sheds light on a justice system that fails to serve justice, and of a culture that simply shifts blame from institution to office-holder. *Saying* or *not saying* has little bearing, as speech is little more than a performance of justice. Much like Oulipo's open secrets, speech acts simply fail to perform; the truth will always be lost to the unsaid.

"On," or the Production of a Communal Subjectivity

With this cycle of history in mind—from revolution to disappearance and back again—one wonders if Perec is little more than a *Marxiste, Tendance Groucho*: a revolutionary pessimist who sees the future as, well, more of the same. The Groucho's black-tongued wit belies a fear of the reproducibility of historical violence. With every pun, he grows ever wary of the ambiguity of language, which sustains history's anonymity, its many unspoken subjectivities and hidden referents. But, we should also consider yet another "hidden subjectivity" of the constraint. Intradiagetically, Perec is intensely critical of collective practice. Extradiagetically, however, Perec and his community of collaborators are modeling a form of communal practice: the shared writing of *La Disparition* at the Moulin d'Andé. Passing references to Moulin friends and paragraph-long non-sequiturs lay bare the seams of *La Disparition*. These clues point to its collective authorship, but also sew a non-representational vein, affording the constraint with new potential. Its absence is not only accusatory, but productive, building a collective "nous" out of the ashes of so many unspoken "on." The missing letter begins to figure many voices lurking behind the singular "author" of a text. *La Disparition* thus offers another, competing history of the *present,* a different autobiographical story—one that is about the community that *speaks through* the text. These *Marxistes, Tendance Groucho* respond to the crisis of history by sharing its burden, collectively shouldering the weight of the constraint.

Before analyzing his collaborators' contributions and the model of history put forth by the text's collective authorship, I will outline what distinguished the Moulin d'Andé as a community. This utopia of Grouchos had a few notable traits: its sociability, its anti-institutionalism, and its collaborative atmosphere. When Lipinska opened the Moulin's doors, she hoped to create a "phalanstère," or a utopia after Charles Fourier. Here, artists could, in the words of Maurice Pons "se réfugier, se retirer, se ressourcer, travailler" (Lipinska, Perec au Moulin 48). Invitations to the Moulin were mostly by word-of-mouth and a given individual's stay could vary widely—from a long weekend to half a lifetime (both Pons and Clara Malraux died in residence). Perec had initially planned to visit for only a few days, but ended up extending his stay to several years. Soon, he became the "pivoting point of the tribe," known for his slapstick jokes (like pretending to fall down the stairs or slam his fingers in a car door) and his love for games of all sorts (notably ping-pong and chess). Suzanne fondly remembers the sound of Perec's Underwood typewriter in the Jeanne d'Arc room and his bittersweet demeanor: "Il oscillait sans cesse entre la drôlerie et la déprime; parfois il exprimait la déprime à travers la drôlerie" (*Ibid* 48-52). *Drolleries that express depression* is an altogether appropriate description for the novel as well as the man. Perec, as the community's class clown, embodied a thoughtful, sometimes dark, intellectual critique—one that is not ashamed to be light-hearted, or even downright silly, in its unveiling of history's greatest tragedies.

One can see how an Oulipian would be enamored with the Moulin's spirit of collegiality and reciprocity—but also its relative secrecy. Moulin community members hardly adopted a

rhetoric of secrecy, but they did live outside of the public eye; they felt little need to broadcast their work to a larger public (unlike other intellectual groups of the time). The Moulin was also arguably one of literature's best kept open secrets: it was a resource that many exploited, but that never quite developed an institutional status. While the Moulin project has become more formalized in some respects (offering, for instance, a scriptwriting fellowship), it eschewed a direct path towards consecration. Recalling the title of a friend's Master's thesis, Suzanne claims that this anti-institutional spirit animated the Moulin's continued growth: "L'utopie résisterait-elle à l'institutionalization?" (Lipinska, Interview). In some ways, the Moulin was the quintessential *soixante-huitard* project; the community espoused the radical positivity of May's *enragés* and self-consciously refused to be tamed for mass consumption.

But most importantly, the Moulin was notoriously collaborative. In fact, *La Disparition* is far from the only collective project to come out of the Moulin, or even Perec's time at the Moulin. [100] During his stay, Perec would not only undertake several collaborative projects, but he would also build friendships that would influence his later work. For example, Perec met filmmaker Bernard Queysanne, who would go on to direct the film adaptation of *Un homme qui dort* (1974). [101] Fittingly, Perec's Moulin peers were also among the first to comment on his work: Catherine Clément wrote one of the first articles about the Holocaust allegory in *La Disparition;* Eugen Helmlé translated the novel into German. [102] It comes as no surprise that Perec first published excerpts from *La Disparition* in a collective volume; the text first appeared in the Collège de 'Pataphysique's journal, *Subsidia 'Pataphysica* n°6, alongside other experiments from the "Sous-Commission" de l'Oulipo. [103] Not unlike Oulipo, Moulin members were mutually supportive—far from the aggressive competitors that can populate literary groups or the literary scene at large. They were not media-driven, in fact, they had very little public presence at all (making them perhaps more secretive than Oulipo itself). They nevertheless did not sacrifice critical inquiry, nor did they seek to become a breeding ground for cultural capital.

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[100] In 1992, Quai Voltaire published a collectively authored volume of short texts by former residents. *Le Moulin d'Andé* includes texts by Pons, Perec, Signoret, Roubaud, and Depestre, as well as Oulipian Paul Fournel, Nancy Huston, Emmanuelle K., and Charlie Hebdo cartoonist Georges Wolinski.

[101] Perec later wrote the script for Queysanne's *L'Oeil de l'autre*, as well as Jean-François Adam's *Retour à la bien-aimée*. Perec also met stage director Marcel Cuvelier, who encouraged him to adapt his radio play, *L'Augmentation*, for the theater; Cuvelier later staged the piece at the Théâtre de Montparnasse in 1970 and again in 1982. In 1976, Perec asked Suzanne's daughter, Christine, to take pictures of his childhood street, Rue de Vilin, that were printed alongside his full-length pangram-poem, *La Clôture*. Mathematician Stella Baruk, another Moulin resident, supposedly introduced Perec to the latin bi-square—one of the structuring principals of his magnum opus, *la Vie mode d'emploi* (1972). See Lipinska, Perec au Moulin 51-2.

[102] See Clément, "Auschwitz, ou la disparition." See Perec, *Anton Voyls Fortgang.*

[103] 'Pataphysicians follow their own unique calendar, so it is difficult to date its journals with total accuracy, but given that Subsidia 'Pataphysics n°5 came out in Spring 1968 (it mentions May '68 directly), I estimate n°6 came out in late 1968 / early 1969. The section of *La Disparition* published in the Subsidia corresponds with Douglas Haig's career as a baritone and his death on-stage at the Palace of Urbino. See Perec, Romans & Récits 100-107. See also Chapter 1.

This collaborative spirit paved the way for Perec's lipogramatic novel to become a communal project. Pons describes Perec as openly inviting others to play at the lipogram, as if it were a mere variation on bridge or go. Perec would not only mine everyday conversation for e-less words, but he asked several compatriots to write two to three pages on a subject of their choice. Ever the vigilant teacher, he also would ferret out and correct the inevitable stray "e" in their texts (much like he did in his own) (Bellos 402).[104] The "brouillons" for *La Disparition*—a collection of drafts not unlike the propaedeutic *Cahier des charges* for *La Vie mode d'emploi*—are also written in multiple hands; this suggests that several people contributed to Perec's drafts, much like the Moulin's own guestbook. As a result, the writing of *La Disparition* was collaborative on several levels. Perec's friends not only wrote fragments of the novel, but helped him to gather "materials" of which he could "make use of" (*disposer)* in his writing.

Perec gives a nod to many (but not all) of *La Disparition*'s contributors in the text of the novel proper, providing textual clues that hint at the novel's collective creation. For instance, "*L'opoponax* de Monica Wittig" appears in Anton Voyl's personal library (Perec, Romans & Récits 350-355). Several contributors appear as characters in the novel. This is especially true of Perec's Oulipian collaborators: Raymond "Quinault" attends Ibn Barka's funeral; one of Anton's friends, Arnaud Karamazov, is likely a doppelgänger for Noël Arnaud (given that "Karamasov" is Russian for "Christmas"); Ibn Abbou could be a stand-in not only for Ben Barka, but Marcel Bénabou; both "Jacky Roubaud" and "Paul Brafford" (Belgian Oulipian Paul Braffort) appear in earlier drafts (Maeyama, Les notes préparatoires à la Disparition de Georges Perec 21, 30).[105] In his contribution, a nearly incomprehensible military report, Alain Guérin does not even bother to come up with pseudonyms, hence the text's title: "Rapport du Consul Alain Gu. Rin / au Royal G – P.R.C" (Perec, Romans & Récits 364-365). Once again, the e allegory has garnered new meaning: images of absence not only point to the missing letter, but to the community of writers who are missing in the final version of the novel.

With these clues in mind, we arrive at the contributions themselves, which often appear, funnily enough, as evidence in the novel's on-going caper. In fact, the first array of contributors' texts comes up not long after Anton's disappearance, when Amaury stumbles upon his notebooks. This "instructif curriculum studiorum" includes short texts on a variety of subjects, each written by a different collaborator: "français" by the anonymous high schooler; "philo" by Catherine Clément; "maths" by François Le Lionnais; "anglais," excerpted from Edgar Vincent Wright's lipogramatic novel *Gadsby* (1939); "aux us primitifs" by Jean Pouillon; "animaux" by Wittig; and "patois sarrois," a German text by Eugen Helmlé (*Ibid* 350-355). These texts certainly characterize Anton Voyl as an impressive autodidact, but make for poor evidence. They offer little insight into his disappearance. They have no overarching narrative, no particularly useful information. Their content reiterates the deconstruction of the detective

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[104] Maeyama has shown that Perec was systematically developing lists of e-less words, often categorized by grammatical form. See Maeyama 18.

[105] Noël Arnaud's avatar went through several surnames, including Arnaud Balibard, Xmas, and Karamasov.

novel, but also suggests that Perec's collaborators really did write on a subject of their choosing. Perec also did not include the excerpts from Anton's journals until later drafts of the text, suggesting that it was not so much the content of the clues that mattered, but their presence. Perec was intentionally laying bare the seams of the text, pointing to its context of production.

The Moulin manuscript offers valuable information on how Perec incorporated the texts of his collaborators. Most contributions appear separate from the main body of Perec's own handwritten text; most are in the hand of their creators, and most, but not all, are signed. All of the texts from Anton's curriculum appear in this group, as well as several short pieces that are scattered throughout the novel; a few of the texts in the manuscript seem to not have been included in the novel. [106] Bellos and Maeyama have previously identified several collaborators and their passages.[107] An additional note in Perec's "brouillons" reveals the authors of a few texts that are either unsigned or do not appear in the Moulin manuscript.[108]

In the print version of *La Disparition,* Perec does little to change or signal his collaborators' contributions. He often sets the texts apart with indents or italics, but aside from the occasional name-drop, they are not visibly written by anyone other than himself. The contributions themselves are also mostly untouched (aside from the occasional corrected "e"), appearing exactly as they do in manuscript form.[109] More often than not, this means that the contributions are just barely integrated into the larger narrative, often as random clues or useless information from informants. For example, pieces from Queneau and Pons appear to be total non-sequiturs. One of Queneau's excerpts appears late in the novel, when Arthur Savorgnan consults a lawyer in Ankara, hot on the trail of his missing brother, Amaury; the

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[106] The Moulin manuscript includes the following signed texts: Pons's "A Lydia"; Roubaud's opening poem "La Disparition" (which appears both signed/unsigned, likely in Perec/Roubaud's handwriting respectively); Paul Queyrel's "bastill'Polka" (signed "Paul Quérel"); Clément's "Mort d'un Kant" (signed "Catherine Backès"); Queneau's "Ondoyons un poupon" (signed "R.Q.") and "Au son d'un ocarina"; Pouillon's "aux us primitifs" (Perec's title); Wittig's "animaux" (Perec's title); Helmlé's "Das Landhaus" (typed); Jean Queval's "Champs"; and Maunick's "… transcrit du ponant pour Lorna" (signed "'douard J. Maunick"). Maunick's text is not included in the final text. The manuscript also includes Guérin's "Rapport" as well as an anonymous piece entitled "Racontards sur l'agitation du mai soixant[e] avril." See Perec, Romans & Récits 541-543 (Pons), 311 (Roubaud), 492-493 (Queyrel), 352 (Clément), 544 (Queneau), 521-522 (Queneau), 352-3 (Pouillon), 353 (Wittig), 353-354 (Helmlé), 522 (Queval), 364-365 (Guérin), 353-354 (anonymous passage on May '68).

[107] Bellos has previously identified several of these contributions. Maeyama suggests that Wittig, Pons, Queneau, Jacques Roubaud, Jacques Lederer, Roger Kléman, and Edouard J. Maunick all contributed to *La Disparition,* beginning with the Moulin manuscript; he mentions a contribution by Arnaud, but I have been unable to find this passage. I have identified passages by Queyrel and Queval that were not previously identified by Bellos or Maeyama. See Bellos 401-402 and Maeyama 34.

[108] On this page, one finds a list of collaborators and topics, among which one finds Le Lionnais's "Maths," and Wright's "Anglais." An earlier version of "Maths," can also be found in the "brouillons," signed "F. La Laonnais," appearing just after the *compte-rendu* for a recent Oulipo meeting. Maeyama credits Roubaud with the "Maths" section. See AGP 86, 1, 87-89 and Maeyama 2.

[109] Perec corrects a stray "e" in Queneau's contribution "Ondoyons un poupon." Bellos also points out that Perec found an "e" in Helmlé's passage. See the Moulin manuscript and Bellos 402.

lawyer, ever the Scheherazade, willfully wastes Arthur's time, by recounting a story about a dwarf named Ali Baba (*Ibid* 521-522). In the very next chapter, Aloysius Swann, before he is revealed to be the Barbu's accomplice, consults a piece from "l'adjudant Pons" on the disappearance of Yorick Gribaldi; Pon's contribution is, for all practical purposes, an account of his most recent novel, *Rosa* (1967) (*Ibid* 541-543). Perec clearly included these texts as "fausses pistes," meant to derail the reader. They also demonstrate the potentiality of the constraint; while they all respect the constraint, each collaborator produces a different text. Some contributors even add an additional formal constraint: Roubaud's contribution is a sonnet, Queyrel's a polka, and Queval's a *chanson* (*Ibid,* 311, 492-493, 522)*.* It is also a question of "uptake": the constraint can be integrated into any genre or understood through different generic frameworks.[110]

Perec's willingness to incorporate his contributors' texts *as is* suggests that he hoped they would melt imperceptibly into the whole of the text. He does not so much erase his own authorial mark, as integrate the work of others into his own voice—without, however, sacrificing their singularity. In this light, the extradiegetic "on" of the text is one in which multiple voices may reside comfortably, hidden behind the name of the (seemingly singular) author. This method of collective writing offers an intriguing model for both collective practice and history: history can be written by or ascribed to an individual, but this individual is always secretly multiple, always the sum of a community of voices. From this perspective, the ambiguity of "on" is hardly insidious or a means of rejecting responsibility. Rather, it is a testament to a community that has agreed to share one voice. In this respect, the "Perec" of *La Disparition* is not unlike the shared identity of "Oulipo" or "Bourbaki." Here, however, "Perec" is not a pseudonym adopted by the group, but a real person, who has agreed to be the voice box, or *porte-parole*, for others.

Importantly, Perec's extradiegetic "on," does include the voices of the nameless, given that not one, but two excerpts from Anton's journals, are written by anonymous contributors. The first, "français," can be linked to the homework of a Louviers high schooler. The second, "conflits sociaux" (or "Racontards sur l'agitation du mai soixant[e] avril" as it is titled in the manuscript), however, appears to be anonymous in all versions of the novel.[111] The problem of who authored this piece is all the more compelling given that the "social conflict" at hand is indeed May '68. It raises the question: if Perec writes about May '68 and Algerian War elsewhere, why would this piece need to be anonymous? Is Perec protecting the identity of a friend by agreeing to adopt another's words as his own?

The text of "conflits sociaux" offers a more positive perspective than the Avant-Propos. It is much more in keeping with standard representations of May '68. The passage explicitly takes place on May 3rd (the day Sorbonne students protested against the closure of Nanterre)

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[110] See Freadman. See Introduction.
[111] See the Moulin manuscript.

and presents us with the classic images of student-protestors: many wear red and black armbands ("qui son chiffon noire, qui son chiffon cramoisi") and shout slogans ("Dix ans ça suffit," "Charlot nos Sous," "Pouvoir au Populo") (*Ibid* 353-4). The narrator circulates in student circles of the Boulevard Saint-Michel ("Boul'Mich), well-versed in slang for snobbish intellectuals ("mandarins") and cops ("orang-outangs") as well as for political groups—from anarchists ("anars") to communists ("cocos") to the *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* ("J.C.R.," a Leftist student group) (Hamon et Rotman 618):

> Ça arriva un trois mai. "Agitation au Boul'Mich," titra un journal du soir. Sur l'injonction d'un mandarin pas malin, un adjudant lança son bataillon à l'assaut d'un tas d'anars, cocos ou J.C.R. qui, à bon droit, voulait un pardon total pour cinq copains foutus au trou. (Perec, Romans & Récits 353-4)

This "mandarin pas malin" is likely Sorbonne rector Jean Roche, who asked Maurice Grimaud, the Prefect of Police, to clear the Sorbonne; Grimaud sent in the CRS, a veritable battalion, to arrest student-protestors, four of whom (not five) were imprisoned (Wolin, The Wind From the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s 86-87). Unlike the narrator of the Avant-Propos, this narrator also presents information within clear moral parameters: this is the righteous masses versus corrupt cops. He claims that the Sorbonne's *enragés* had every right to protest and that mere pranks, like a rock thrown at a police car, elicited a wildly disproportionate response: "[…] Grimaud ordonna son pogrom: l'argousin s'affaira, matraquant, asphyxiant, s'acharnant sur maint moribond k.o." (Perec, Romans & Récits 354). The anonymous contributor gently mocks the exaggerated self-righteousness of the *soixante-huitards*: who are they to confuse massacres with protests against swimming pool closures? Or, the CRS with the SS? H/she nevertheless takes their side, suggesting that this representation of police violence is not altogether inaccurate.[112] While the contributor points to the aftermath of May 3rd, like the general workers' strike on May 13th, he nevertheless concludes that consumerism will have the upper-hand: "Du carburant manquait aux stations…" (*Ibid* 354). This statement is both a testimony to the striker's tactics and a prediction of their failure—won't gas win out in the long run?

This passage demonstrates yet another model of collective writing: one in which competing voices come into contact under one and the same "on." Anonymous voices are brought out to challenge the "author's" version of events, to offer an opposing perspective. This competition does not mean, however, that these voices are incompatible. The narrators of both the "Avant-Propos" and "conflits sociaux" share a tongue-in-cheek, but nevertheless deeply black, sense of humor. Seeing as the Moulin was teeming with Leftist intellectuals, a number of candidates for the anonymous contributor come to mind: was it Perec's *Lignée générale* comrade Jacques Lederer? Or Alain Geismar, a student militant who just happened to

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[112] If students chanted "CRS = SS," it is because the police did employ violent tactics (like tear gas, stun/flashbang grenades, firetrucks, etc.), but as in the passage, students were known to resort to hyperbole (rumors of rapes and summary executions were rampant). See *Dictionnaire de Mai 68* 352-3.

stay at the château? Could it have been written by multiple people? Or even Perec himself? In some ways, the question seems to be beside the point: for is the point not that this text could have been written by any member of the "on" of the text?

Perec's project is collaborative in so far as it incorporated others' words and works, but also in the traditional sense: it is co-created or cowritten. The drafts show that Perec cowrote portions of the novel with his fellow Oulipians Marcel Bénabou and Jacques Roubaud. This is the case with the lipogramatic "translations" of canonical French poetry, like Baudelaire's "Les Chats" or Rimbaud's "Voyelles." These translations, supposedly more excerpts of Anton's journals that he sent to Olga before his disappearance, appear as evidence about halfway through the novel. It comes as no surprise that Perec would ask Oulipians to collaborate on these poems, given that this is exactly the kind of exercise Oulipians were engaging in already.

The first indication in the "brouillons" of collaboratively written texts comes in the form of a type-written poem, corrected by hand in pen. The first line ("Sois soumis, mon chagrin") indicates that this is an early draft of a lipogramatic translation of Baudelaire's "Recueillement." The draft bears only a small mark that indicates its co-authorship, towards the bottom of the page "avec MB, 1/12/67"—in which "MB" is a clear reference to Marcel Bénabou (See AGP 86, 1, 107).[113] The following page of the drafts bears a similar inscription "jeudi 16 novembre, avec la collaboration de Claude" (See AGP 86, 1, 92 & 108). This type-written poem is a lipogramatic version of another Baudelaire poem ("Les chats"), entitled "Nos chats." The plural possessive pronoun of the title ("nos") is, of course, required by the constraint, but Perec certainly had alternative options ("vos," for instance). The fact of the poem's co-authorship dictates the shift to "nous." This subtle change of title foreshadows the novel's final shift from an ambiguous "on" to a collective "we."

Before considering this "on" transformed into "nous," it is worth lingering over the identity of this mysterious "Claude." Initially, there are no obvious candidates for "Claude," until one sees, tacked on to the end of the poem, an additional stanza, in the form of a riddle (See AGP 86, 1, 108):

Un lai? Un madrigal?
Qui l'a fait?
Arthur Rimbaud? Victor Hugo?
Non: un fils adoptif du commandant Aupick.

Perec and "Claude" jokingly refer to the lipogramatic poem's origin by referencing the names of those who have been plagiarized (Rimbaud and Hugo)—just as Perec will do in the final text of the novel. They point directly to their own intervention, by assigning authorship of the poem to one "adoptive son" of some unknown Commandant Aupick. Like Oulipo's forebears, the mathematics collective Bourbaki, Perec and his compatriots adopt a collective pseudonym,

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[113] The use of initials was also a common practice in several of Oulipo's collective volumes. See Oulipo, *La Littérature potentielle,* for example.

quietly "outing" themselves in the space of the text.[114] The name "Commandant Aupick," like "Bourbaki," happens to refer to a real, historical figure, a general and politician from the Second Restauration, Jacques Aupick. Jacques Aupick, it turns out, was none other than Baudelaire's adoptive father (Aupick married the widow of Joseph-François Baudelaire, Caroline Dufaÿs). The pseudonym is an elaborate means of crediting the original author of "Les chats": Baudelaire himself (whose name bears too many "e's" to be cited directly).

The general's first name, "Jacques," also unveils the identity of Perec's collaborator: Jacques Roubaud. While the pseudonym "Claude" is used repeatedly in the drafts, the final novel credits the adoptive son of Commandant Aupick with three poems ("Trois Chansons"): "Sois soumis, mon chagrin," "Accords," and "Nos chats" (Perec, Romans & Récits 402-404). This, of course, adds another layer of confusion, as it suggests that at least one of the poems, "Sois soumis, mon chagrin," had no less than three authors: Perec, Bénabou, and Roubaud. The pseudonym's purpose, then, is not only to credit Baudelaire without uttering a single "e," but to subtly point to the collective authorship of the poems, after the fashion of Bourbaki. In the end, Perec's entire process of composition is a game: he invites others to play at the lipogram, inserts his collaborators' texts as comical evidence, and turns the coauthored poems into yet another riddle to solve. In this sense, he not only invites his Moulin compatriots to "play" in the game of lipogram, but the reader. He asks that we readers uncover the real mystery of the identities of those who contributed to the text.

Clearly, Perec and Roubaud wanted to distinguish their lipogramatic translations of Baudelaire from Roubaud's original work, especially because Perec will respond to the poem in the final pages of the novel. Roubaud's poem, also titled "La Disparition," appears under his name and is given a privileged position, as the epigraph to the final version of the novel. The lipogramatic poem loosely follows the sonnet form (with two quartets, two tercets, *rimes embrassées,* and hendecasyllables rather than alexandrines). The first stanza sets the stage for the detective novel, as the poem begins with an enigma, bearing all the signs of a crime committed:

> Un corps noir tranchant un flamant au vol bas
> un bruit fuit au sol (qu'avant son parcours lourd
> dorait un son crissant au grain d'air) il court
> portant son sang plus loin que son charbon qui bat (*Ibid* 311)

In good Oulipian fashion, the poem opens with its own linguistic puzzle: should the first line be read as a continuous thought, where "tranchant" is a gerund connecting two nominal phrases ("Un corps noir tranchant un flamant"), or is "trenchant" an *adjectif déverbal* describing the first nominal group ("Un corps noir tranchant / un flamant")? Either way, the crime centers on a bizarre trifecta: a "black" body, a flamingo, and a fleeting sound. The black body might be contrasting with a red backdrop (a low-flying flamingo), or, quite literally, cutting the flamingo

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[114] For more on Bourbakian naming practices, see Chapter 1.

in half. Either way, a fleeting sound (steps? a man running?) follows the crime, which itself had begun with (literally "adorned") a sharp squeak (a car breaking? a gunshot?). This heavy sound now lingers in the air. An unknown individual ("il") runs away, "bearing" his blood further than "beating carbon" (the pavement? a bullet? a beating heart?).[115] This individual may be fleeing, but as the second stanza indicates, no one—rather nothing—is in hot pursuit:

> Si nul n'allait brillant sur lui pas à pas
> dur cil aujourd'hui plomb au fil du bras gourd
> Si tombait nu grillon dans l'hors vu au sourd
> mouvant bâillon du gris hasard sans compas (*Ibid* 311)

Semantically, Roubaud produces a series of lexical "gaps," as he stacks up paradoxical figures for absence, each seemingly "missing" something: nothing "shines" on the unknown individual; a cricket falls noiselessly (or "nakedly," but aren't all crickets naked?) into what is out of sight ("dans l'hors vu"). Another dangling adverbial phrase ("au sourd") either reiterates the soundless fall of the cricket or characterizes a "moving gag"—itself conspicuously missing a letter ("mouv*e*ant"). This ambiguous imagery gestures towards some unseen crime, all the while foreshadowing Perec's many allusions to absence or the absent "e."

With the final image of "a hazard without a compass," Roubaud transitions into the second half of the poem, which describes the constraint itself:

> l'alpha signal inconstant du vrai diffus
> qui saurait (saisissant (un doux soir confus
> ainsi on croit voir un pont à son galop)
>
> un non qu'à ton stylo tu donna brûlant)
> qu'ici on dit (par un trait manquant plus clos)
> l'art toujours su du chant-combat (noir pour blanc) (*Ibid* 311)

Roubaud borrows familiar Perecquian shorthand, alluding to the constraint with terms like "l'alpha signal" ("signe") and "un trait manquant plus clos" (which recalls Perec's half-closed circles). The garbled, triple-parenthetical syntax[116] of the final tercets performs the obscurity of the sign. An attempt to reorder the poem according to each parenthetical voice might look something like this:

> l'alpha signal inconstant du vrai diffus / qui saurait [...] l'art toujours su du chant-combat
> (saisissant / [...] un non qu'à ton stylo tu donna brûlant)

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[115] "Carbon" is also likely a reference to the "Carbonari," or a revolutionary secret society in 19th-century France and Italy. The Carbonari is, in turn, a coded reference to Oulipo. See Chapter 1.

[116] This self-consciously opaque stylistic tic is characteristic of Roubaud's more recent poetry, notably, *Ode à la ligne 29,* which actually goes so far as to indent and color code multiple layers of parentheticals, which themselves become a component of the constraint. See Roubaud, *Ode à la ligne 29.*

<pre>
            (un doux soir confus ainsi on croit voir un pont à son galop)
        qu'ici on dit
    (par un trait manquant plus clos)
    (noir pour blanc) (*Ibid* 311)
</pre>

While there are potentially many ways of reconstituting the original syntax of the line, one can see that there are already many (hidden) subjectivities behind the constraint. The first "level" of the poem describes the "e" as a sign, one that manages to communicate a diffuse truth ("un vrai diffuse"), which in turn would be associated with the art of "chant-combat"; this level speaks to the power of the absent "signal" ("signe") as a poetic force. The next level of the poem, however, addresses the constraint writer in the second person (Perec himself?); this "tu" has chosen to submit to the lipogramatic rule ("un non qu'à ton stylo tu donna brûlant"), but so has the impersonal narrator of the poem ("[un non…] qu'ici on dit"). Yet another plane of dialogue introduces a shared recollection of "on" (presumably involving the second-person addressee); it describes a lovely night on which "on" saw a "galloping bridge" (a *moulin,* perhaps?). The two final parenthetical lines return to the plane of the constraint itself, with its obscure significance. The poem speaks not of the ink on the page ("noir sur blanc"), but of one color exchanged for another ("noir pour blanc"): nothing exchanged for nothing. Overall, Roubaud's poem functions like a *mise en abyme* of *La Disparition,* concentrating several aspects of the novel into a few lines; it gestures towards the whodunit setting, the problem of the constraint's meaning (and the letter as sign), the implementation of the constraint and its effects on the writer, and importantly, the communities of "on" (both impersonal and personal) that the constraint creates. It epitomizes the potentiality of the constraint, even, among friends; Roubaud and Perec have very different methods of telling the same shared story.

The *dénouement* of the novel returns to Roubaud's epigraph, transforming the second-person address into a shared, collective community. Here, one finds Perec's most explicit allusion to the shared production of the text, but also a glimpse of hope for political and collective practice. At this point in the novel, Aloysius Swann, the right-hand of the murderous Barbu (the stand-in for Perec), recounts the depths of their crimes, revealing their plot to kill all of the Barbu's descendants. While elsewhere in the novel, Perec predominantly has recourse to "on" as the dominant first-person plural pronoun, here, he switches "nous." Aloysius declares that the group has finally completed the labyrinth, through which they had been wandering aimlessly ("[…] où nous marchions d'un pas somnambulant") (*Ibid* 551). On the surface, Aloysius's speech attests to the impossibility of solving the novel's crime; no one was really capable of resolving the caper, each was senselessly wandering through the depths of the crime, until the moment at which he unveiled its master.

Read in light of the text's collaborative formation, however, this final passage acquires new meaning. Aloysius's monologue concerning a "solution" towards which the group has been striving can be understood as a description of the novel's murder mystery, but also of the process of writing, as each collaborator has taken his turn at "solving" the constraint. After Roubaud's opening poem, one might surmise that the "non qu'à ton stylo tu donnas brûlant,"

refers only to the constraint writer, Perec; here, suddenly, it is not only Perec, but "nous" who had to fumble through the darkness, or walk the somnambulist's path of the lipogram:

> Chacun, parmi nous, offrit sa contribution, sa participation. Chacun, s'avançant plus loin dans l'obscur du non-dit, a ourdi jusqu'à sa saturation, la configuration d'un discours qui, au fur qu'il grandissait, n'abolissait l'hasard du jadis qu'au prix d'un futur apparaissant sans solution, à l'instar d'un fanal n'illuminant qu'un trop court instant la portion du parcours, lors n'offrant au fuyard qu'un jalon minimal, fil d'Ariana toujours rompu, n'autorisant qu'un pas à la fois. (*Ibid* 551)

Each collaborator offers his attempt at the constraint, traveling the bumpy road of the "non-dit." Importantly, Perec underscores the potentiality of the lipogram: each individual tries to exhaust or ("saturate") the constraint, but the constraint constantly eludes its authors; there is no mastery over the effects of the constraint (its "hazard") because it constantly projects future possibilities that will forever remain unresolved ("un future apparaissant sans solution"). Perec underscores that potentiality is not about the end result, but the process, because, as Kafka says, there are any number of paths that arrive at that end: "Franz Kafka l'a dit avant nous: il y a un but, mais il n'y a aucun parcours; nous nommons parcours nos dubitations" (*Ibid* 551). To solve the constraint, one can undertake any number of methods for arriving at a possible solution. The text describes these solutions as a series of dietics, open-ended possibilities that govern the logic of narration:

> Parfois, nous avons cru savoir : il y avait toujours un "ça" pour garantir un "Quoi ? ", un "jadis", un "aujourd'hui", "toujours", justifiant un "Quand?", un "car" donnant la raison d'un "Pourquoi"? (*Ibid* 551)

The constraint, like any other form of narration, is apparently simple: a series of fill-in-the blanks to be completed, but which, once again, harbors the potential for any number of possible solutions.

In the final lines of the novel, however, Perec's tone switches yet again, returning to the bitter pessimism of the Avant-Propos. "Nous" far from being distinct from the bitter anonymous collective "on," is very much complicit in its workings. While at any one moment, a member of the collective may appear to have arrived at a solution, no one has achieved mastery over the constraint: "[…] aucun parmi nous, ni aux protagons, ni au scrivain, ni à moi qui fus son loyal proconsul, nous condamnant ainsi à discourir sans fin, nourrissant la narration […]" (*Ibid,* 551). Intradiagetically, neither *La Disparition*'s cast of characters ("nous" or "protagons") nor the Barbu, nor Aloysius, the Barbu's "proconsul" has mastered the detective narrative, understood the workings of fate. Extradiagetically, neither the writer ("scrivain") nor his handful of collaborators (again "nous") has mastered the constraint; the constraint's potentiality, its endless narrative possibilities, offers no resolution or satisfaction, but rather unites the group in its senselessness, its lack of direction. More specifically, the group is united—and betrayed—by the self-negation that characterizes the lipogram:

[...] n'ayant plus pour nous l'ambigu concours d'un discours qui, tout à la fois, nous unissait, nous constituait, nous trahissait, / la mort, / la mort aux doigts d'airain, / la mort aux doigts gourds, / la mort où va s'abîmant l'inscription, / la mort qui, à jamais, garantit l'immaculation d'un Album qu'un histrion un jour a cru pouvoir noircir, / la mort nous a dit la fin du roman. (*Ibid* 551)

With the end of the detective novel, comes the long-foreshadowed conclusion; death will end the novel because this is how *romans noirs* end. This bitter note on death also dictates the experience of the constraint and its emotional significance: it unites Perec and his collaborators in the experience of loss. The "nous" created by the end of the text is a community "united," "constituted," but also "betrayed," "revealed," or even "outed" ("nous trahissait") by the ever-permanence of death and of loss. This has implications for Perec, and his compatriots, but also for the historian ("histrion" in *La Disparition*'s vernacular) and history at large. With these final words, Perec has constituted his community of collaborators as *Marxistes, tendance Groucho*: a community all too familiar with the tragicomedy (or tragifarce) of history. This community can play at history like a light-hearted game of "who, what, or where," but not without knowing that this game is a priori forsaken—little more than the game of death. Each may contribute his text, his solution, but inevitably, each is participating in a losing game. On this final note, Perec forecloses any possibility of hope for collective practice. The absent letter comes to figure not only the text's various "absent histories" (WWII, May '68, or the Algerian War) or the communities created by history (the anonymous "on" or the more personal "nous"), but everything that makes this history irrevocably "ours": our complicity, our anonymity, and our tragedy.

In the next chapter, Wittig, too, will grapple with questions of narrating our history and our collective practice. She is also interested in what it means to write history and approaches this not only as a formal or linguistic, but a generic question: what genres enable collective history? Or the rewriting of history? What genres fix history into a singular past? Like Perec, Wittig hopes to record contemporary history (this time of contemporary feminist collectives) and to create a virtual community through her text. Intriguingly, however, Wittig's collaborators are not any known compatriots; they are not friends or acquaintances who help her to play at the game of the text. Her compatriots *are texts*. Establishing an exclusively textual community is her response to the drama of her own real-world political practice.

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Chapter 3

Stumbling Sheep: Political Education and History in *Les Guérillères* and *Paris-la-Politique*

"These discourses speak about us and claim to say the truth in an apolitical field, as if anything [that] signifies could escape the political in this moment of history, and as if, in what concerns us, politically insignificant signs could exist." Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*

In a series of essays written in the 1980s,[117] published in English as *The Straight Mind* (1992)*,* Monique Wittig asserted that to be a "minority" writer[118] was to face a literary field in which writing was *always already* political. As she wrote in the eponymous essay*,* many discourses—from linguistics and semiology to anthropology and psychoanalysis—claim impartiality, when in fact, they are underpinned by the discourse of heterosexuality. Within this discursive framework, homosexual writers are spoken *about* and denied the authority to speak *for* themselves. Desperate to communicate at all, they are like witches at the stake, who, speaking under duress, can only utter "what they're supposed to say" (Wittig, The Straight Mind 24). Even when unfettered, texts written by minority writers are equated exclusively with "symbols" and "manifestos," or metonymic stand-ins for political projects. When a text becomes a "symbol," Wittig argued, it is understood to be a call to action intended for a restricted audience. It is denied polysemy, or more largely, literarity in the broadest sense of the term: the very possibility of being read *as literature.* Or as Wittig so bluntly put it: "It is only interesting to homosexuals" (*Ibid*, 63). Minority writers are thus in a double-bind: either their work is political *or* literary—never both.

Wittig is still predominantly known for her polemic statements –for instance, her famous assertion that "Lesbians are not women"[119]—and her involvement in radical political groups. While her novels are often grotesque, even violent in their portrayal of women and romantic relationships, many Wittig scholars narrow their focus to her neoclassical influences. For a wider public, her literary corpus is mostly known for feminizing the French language. When her literary work is granted any kind of political authority, it is read almost exclusively in terms of gender politics. Even gender scholars, accuse Wittig of being "naïve" and "utopian." Does she really believe that playing with language can transform the material world? That using

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[117] This collection brings together several essays written in the 1980s, most of which were originally published in English (it was not translated into French until 2001). These essays make up most of Wittig's theoretical corpus, which although relatively limited, merits serious inquiry.

[118] When Wittig uses the term "minority," she is not referring to racial, ethnic, or sexual minorities, as is the standard in American English, but she is drawing on Marx and Engels's notion of the minority as the "class of the oppressed." Wittig thus understands "women" as referring not to a particular sex, gender, or sexuality, but to a class of oppressed people, subjugated by men in patriarchal, capitalist society.

[119] This phrase is often misread as a gesture of lesbian separatism. Wittig, however, understood women as constituting an oppressed class, defined by their subjugation in a patriarchal, capitalist society; lesbians are not "women," because they are not a class dominated by men. As de Lauretis explains, Wittig understood lesbians to be "slaves" or "refugees"; they deviate from the current class order and are thus by nature displaced subjects. See Wittig "One is not born a woman," in *The Straight Mind* 9-20 and de Lauretis 51-62.

a different pronoun can alter the way we think about sexuality? (Yes, she does.) Her detractors characterize her work as not only divorced from history and reality, but uncompromising in its radical separatism.

Any seasoned reader of Wittig knows that she never ascribed to such a purist, "either-or" divide between literature and politics. For Wittig, language is by nature political and ideological. Reading and writing can therefore be political practices in and of themselves. In this light, literature is a privileged site for political activity, if not the very locus of political engagement. Language, literature, and politics are inextricably linked. *How* exactly Wittig understood literature to be political is the question that drives this chapter: What transforms the "manifesto" into politicized literature? What separates literature from mere political propaganda? In this chapter, I will examine the kinds of reading and writing praxes Wittig hoped to foster. I will draw special attention to the ludic dimensions of her work—beyond the obvious example of feminization—in order to argue that Wittig understood form as a means of stimulating and simulating political activity. In particular, Wittig's ludic use of intertexts was meant to act as a kind of political education, instructing her readers in Maoist guerrilla warfare and Marxist materialism.

Wittig, while she was not an Oulipian and only an acquaintance of Perec's, offers an interesting counterpoint to Perec on several levels. While Perec lamented the fact that *La Disparition* was only read as a *system,* Wittig laments that her own are only read as *symbols.* While Perec's constraint work has traditionally been read in terms of what one *cannot say,* Wittig's feminized texts have been read in terms of what one *is supposed to say.* As I say in the Introduction, if Perec was too playful to be political, Wittig was too political to be playful. Both authors desired that their texts be read as both political and literary, and both were denied this possibility and polysemy. Moreover, in the two works by Wittig that I will be examining in this chapter, *Les Guérillères* and *Paris-la-Politique,* Wittig narrates similar questions surrounding collective political practice and responsibility. Like Perec, Wittig treats collective practice as a formal question, or as a question of how linguistic forms (especially pronouns) enable the formation of certain groups. She is also wary of how pronouns allow certain individuals to speak *for* others—and to deny responsibility for the workings of history.

While *Les Guérillères* (1969) and *Paris-la-Politique* (1999) were written thirty years apart, they represent two very different—but interrelated—moments in Wittig's career. As we shall see, during the writing of *Les Guérillères,* Wittig was actively involved in several nascent feminist groups (like the *Mouvement de libération des femmes,* or MLF); when she was writing *Paris-la-Politique,* however, Wittig was looking back on those feminist groups, which were now inactive or splintered, and thinking about how they came to be and how their formation was narrated. Taken together, these texts offer a compelling example of how an author can make new use of old techniques (like the manipulation of pronoun usage) at a later point in her career. In this chapter, I first consider *Les Guérillères* on its own terms and in light of my analysis of Perec from the previous chapter. Then, I look at *Paris-la-Politique,* in order to show how formal play done in that text, done with some of the same tools and techniques, might suggest

a new point of view on *Les Guérillères.* Like the many possible outcomes of the constraint, Wittig's use of pronouns in early and late texts becomes a question of *potentialité*—or the many ways in which a form can be deployed to different ends.

Traditionally, the problem of Wittig's "place" within gender and sexualities studies is a problem that plagues most secondary criticism on Wittig. Wittig did not identify with dominant currents in French feminism, like *essentialisme universaliste* or *différentialisme* because she felt that these currents were still too reliant on universalizing, abstract concepts, like "heterosexuality" and "women."[120] Instead, Wittig was informed by lesser-known materialist Marxist feminists, such as political theorist Christine Delphy, or sociologists Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Colette Guillaumin.[121] In spite of this Marxist heritage, many scholars continue to lump Wittig under the umbrella term of "French Feminism," while others, in the last decade or so, have tried to attach Wittig to "queer" theory, by positing that she either "anticipates" or "attacks" it (Epps and Katz, Epps and Katz 433-436). Brian Epps and Jonathan Katz argue that both of these lines of thinking are reductive. They have responded by bringing renewed focus to Wittig's politics and her relationship to poststructuralism and to Marxist materialism. They loosely align Wittig with contemporary thinkers from the Frankfurt school (like Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno) and take seriously her contributions to a Marxist tradition that historically failed to take sex and gender into account (*Ibid* 427).

While Epps and Katz often overstate Wittig's affinity[122] with the Frankfurt school, their work does elucidate Wittig's materialist understanding of utopia. Unlike Adorno, Wittig argues that being utopian does not prevent a text from having real-world political content or bearing a connection to material reality. Instead, the paradox of utopia is that it represents not so much an achievable future, but the "here and now of oppression and suffering":

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[120] Debrauwere-Miller divides the history of French feminism into two distinct moments. From 1950-1970, de Beauvoir's *existentialisme universaliste* dominated; de Beauvoir undercuts *essentialist* notions of women and poses the theoretical opposition between a natural biological sex and a *constructed* gender, but also emphasizes the importance of universal Republican values, in particular equality. From the 1970s onwards, French feminism is divided between *différentialistes*, who emphasize the importance of identity (racial, sexual, ethnic or gender), and the *matérialistes*, who highlight the material struggles of women and define women as a class of people dominated by men patriarchal society. Within the *matérialistes,* one also finds "luttes de classe" feminists, who emphasize not only women's class struggles, but the problem of domination in capitalist society at large. See Debrauwere-Miller 25-28.

[121] Wittig met both Delphy, Mathieu, and Guillaumin through the journals *Questions Féministes* (1977-1980) and *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (1981-2002). For her part, Delphy argues that "French Feminism" was a term invented by Anglo-American academics as parallel to "French Theory" and that it glosses over serious theoretical differences between feminist groups in France. See Delphy 15-58.

[122] Epps and Katz are careful to call this an "affinity" rather than a direct "influence," given that Wittig did not have any kind of sustained engagement with any of these thinkers, nor did Frankfurt scholars substantively engage with questions of gender (although Wittig did translate Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* into French in 1968). Instead, they argue that the Frankfurt School's critique of Marxism can be read as a "historically intermediate 'bridge' between Marx and Engels and a Materialist thinker like Wittig" (Epps et Katz 437-438).

[…] utopia, as the imagined, desired, or anticipated disappearance of suffering, is that through which suffering appears, makes its way into material consciousness, and motivates politically concerted action to transform reality. (*Ibid*, 426)

Paradoxically, in its effort to transcend suffering, utopia makes suffering visible. In its desire to posit an alternative reality, it lays bare the conditions of material reality *as is*, thus allowing for a political awakening of sorts.

In this chapter, I will bring together Wittig's most overtly utopian text, *Les Guérillères* (1969), and her much later, follow-up text, *Paris-la-Politique et autres histoires* (1999). The texts make a compelling pair because they come "before" and "after" the most politicized parts of Wittig's career: *Les Guérillères* precedes the foundation of the MLF, while *Paris-la-Politique* was mostly written and published after her departure for the US in 1976 and after her involvement with 1970-1980s radical groups and journals, like *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR), Gouines Rouges, Questions féministes,* and *Nouvelles Questions féministes.*[123] *Les Guérillères* narrates the everyday lives of a utopian feminist collective, in which women progressively discover and reject notions of gender essentialism, preparing for and eventually winning a literal and linguistic battle against men. *Paris-la-Politique,* on the other hand, describes the territorial squabbles taking place within an unnamed political group, narrating the on-the-ground experience of political practice. Together, they offer two very different perspectives on political practice: one from the "macro" perspective of group practice and groups within history ("elles"), the other from the "micro" perspective of individual experience within a given group ("je"). These texts ask us to negotiate the gap between history as it is narrated and history as it is experienced.

In spite of the 30-year-publication gap, the two novels were also conceived as part of the same politico-literary project—a fact virtually ignored in Wittig criticism—based in Marx and Engels' notion of "universalizing the particular."[124] In the *German Ideology,* Marx and Engels posit that reality is a "negative ideal," or that social reality does not exist independently of its "ideological formations" (*Ibid* 427-8). Within a capitalist society, these "ideological formations" are created by the dominant class, whose "particular" interests are presumed to be "universal." To be freed of domination, the "minority," or the oppressed class, thus, needs to control representations of reality. This does not mean that the minority class affirm its viewpoint *is* the new universal; on the contrary, "universalizing the particular" implies that their

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[123] *Paris-la-Politique et autres histoires* is divided into two parts of new and republished materials respectively. The first section, entitled "Paris-la-Politique," contains previously unpublished texts (with the exception of "Y a-t-il à boire? Y a-t-il à manger?" published in *Vlasta,* 1985). Republished stories include: "Yallankoro" (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1967), "Une partie de campagne" (*Nouveau Commerce*, 1970), "Le jardin" (*Questions féministes*, 1978), and "Les Tchiches et les Tchoches" (*Le Genre humain*, 1983). My reading focuses on the vignettes that had not been published prior to the volume itself.

[124] This temporal gap is one reason why the texts are not typically read together. If *Les Guérillères* and *The Straight Mind* have been more or less canonized as staples of French feminist thought, *Paris-la-Politique* has been passed over in silence, garnering little to no critical attention.

viewpoint would be so particular as to refuse abstraction, provoking a *remise en cause* of abstract universalism at large.

In *the Straight Mind,* Wittig identifies language as the site of this ideological power struggle over material reality. Wittig argues that modern intellectual disciplines (like structuralism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics) are too reliant on a universalizing logic, which transforms material reality into fixed, ahistorical "languages":

> Thus, the entire world is only a great register where the most diverse languages come to have themselves recorded, such as the language of the Unconscious, the language of fashion, the language of the exchange of women where human beings are literally the signs which are used to communicate**. (Wittig, The Straight Mind 21-22).

Rather than serving as a "weapon against ideology," these "discourses," in an effort to systematically explain various aspects of human culture, have been dissociated from the very people they describe. The diversity of human experience is flattened out and/or naturalized, reified as a system, or "the language of X." Heterosexuality, for instance, is not understood to be one historical instance of sexual behavior, but the framework through which other sexualities should be understood. No wonder Wittig is wary, as I mention in my epigraph, of these "discourses that claim to speak about us": lesbians have become "signs" rather than individuals who have a stake in the language itself. For Wittig, the most disappointing side effect is that subjects become alienated and divorced from material reality, plunged into an "ahistoric vacuum**" (*Ibid* 21)**.

But how does Wittig apply "universalizing the particular" to literature? In part, this means feminizing the French language, by replacing all gender-neutral pronouns (like "il," "quelqu'un," "on") with feminine personal pronouns (like "elles" or neologisms like "quelqu'une" or "j/e"), feminine referents, feminized past participles, etc. This feminization draws attention to the extent to which masculine pronouns, and thus masculine referents, are presumed to be universal subjects. It is also meant to "universalize the lesbian point of view." As Judith Butler argues, Wittig does not seek to "legislate" or require a minority point of view ("We are all lesbians"), nor does she intend to simply "reverse the power structure" by placing lesbians in power ("All hail the Lesbians!").[125] Likewise, "to universalize" does not means "to democratize," as the minority viewpoint does not pretend to represent the interests of everyone ("We are *not* all lesbians") (Butler, Wittig's Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View 520-521). Wittig does not posit a dually particular and universal subject ("I am human, and I am lesbian") because the feminine, plural subject challenges the very notion of the abstract subject (revealing the "I" and the "human" to be implicitly masculine in a number of discourses) (*Ibid* 519, 522). "To universalize the particular" is thus not to represent, describe,

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[125] Many Wittig scholars feel that Butler's treatment of Wittig in *Gender Trouble* negatively affected the French writer's reception in the U.S. I find, however, that Butler's more recent analysis of Wittig is one of the few to actually contend with Wittig's complex, and often opaque, political theory.

or require a particular viewpoint. In turn, Wittig's feminization of language forces us to confront a particular, lesbian point of view, which cannot be generalized.

In this respect, Wittig is parting from a Marxist tradition that not only ignores sex and gender, but rejects any positive formulations of subjectivity. Wittig rejects Marx's derision of subjectivity as petty and bourgeois, as well as Lenin's assumption that any attempt to think as a "class" is automatically a "divisive and diversionary act" (Epps and Katz, Epps and Katz 427). For Wittig, these assumptions have the combined effect of denying the oppressed subjectivity altogether. While she would never claim that subjectivity is not fractured or uncomplicated (indeed this is why she invented the split subject "j/e"), she does believe that oppressed have the right to speak and think for themselves. "Universalizing the particular" thus involves conveying the oppressed's subjectivity—however imperfectly—to others.

Wittig's politico-literary project is thus experiential. Her goal is to transform the lens through which we view reality. She hopes to "shock the reader" by inaugurating a new language, which "wages war" against certain dominant conceptions (like the presumed masculinity of the abstract subject and compulsory heterosexuality). "To universalize the particular" is to thus fundamentally alter the "very conceptual framework by which we proceed politically" (Butler 522). For Butler, this means that Wittig is hardly a naïve avant-gardist—who purports to change the real world by changing the textual world—but a materialist writer for whom "universalizing" is by nature a "material action," as it is "an action upon the body" (*Ibid* 522). Otherwise stated, she forces us to contend with the reality that language is ideological and that it significantly shapes the way in which we experience our bodies and the material world. As Wittig explained in a posthumous collection of essays entitled, *Le Chantier littéraire*, her project was to show that language was *not* immaterial[126]:

> [...] que le langage participe premièrement de l'ordre du réel et deuxièmement qu'il le façonne aussi bien, que ce qu'on appelle l'idéologie n'existe pas séparément et en opposition (en tant que monde des idées, monde de l'âme, monde du mental, par opposition au réel, à la matière, au monde physique et social) au réel. (Wittig, Le Chantier littéraire 44)

Material reality does not exist *a priori,* as material existence is constructed and filtered through language*;* ideology is not a supplement to, but rather inherent in language itself. To reconfigure language is thus to reconfigure the very means by which reality is experienced and understood.

Both *Les Guérillères* and *Paris-la-Politique* share this interest in reconfiguring language and in contending with reality and history as ideological constructions. While *Les Guérillères* can

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[126] Wittig began working on *Le Chantier littéraire* in 1986 as part of her doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of Gérard Genette, at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes des Sciences Sociales*. *Le Chantier littéraire* expands on theoretical essays that Wittig wrote in the 1980s, and Wittig had intended to publish it just after *Paris-la-Politique* in 1999. According to Sande Zeig, Wittig's longtime partner and collaborator, Wittig was so shaken by Nathalie Sarraute's death, however, that she never completed the project. See Wittig, *Le Chantier littéraire* 7-8.

be read as a teleological narrative about women's political education and progress towards emancipation, *Paris-la-Politique* offers no overarching narrative or ultimate resolution. Written in a series of disjointed episodes or vignettes, structurally *Les Guérillères* loosely reproduces the epic form: from the discovery of ignorance to battle and liberation. If occasionally Wittig zooms in on a given voice or historical actor, for the most part these voices are subsumed to the global perspective of the impersonal "elles." *Paris-la-Politique* is written in a similar vignette style, but its historical gaze is limited to parables—mere glimpses of experiential realities. Nevertheless, *Paris-la-Politique* extends *Les Guérillères*'s call for readers to identify with "elles" (literally "se conjuger sous 'elles'") by claiming that there is something universal about these micro-experiences: "[…] car ici sont décrits des phénomènes qui sont les mêmes dans tous les groupes politiques" (Wittig, Paris-la-Politique 8). Unlike *Les Guérillères,* however, *Paris-la-Politique* unearths a first-person narrator who, unsettled by the dynamics of the group, constantly feels singled out and marginalized by her peers. Universalizing the particular thus goes beyond identification with the oppressed. The distance between the collective and the individual must be felt. The particular experience of group practice must be palpable.

Reading the two texts side by side, I highlight the less "naïve," more "material" side of *Les Guérillères's* utopianism. These are moments, particularly in the first third of the text, where Wittig narrates tensions and struggles within the female community. These are moments when the community finds itself divided amongst a number of camps, forced to negotiate the gaps between competing discourses of revolution. These are moments when, far from coalescing into a united front on the path towards freedom, the women are at odds with one another, trudging along, directionless, without an apparent goal. Narrating these moments of aimlessness, of stumbling, Wittig reveals her utopia to be, at least in part, a "negative ideal": a reflection of the contentious reality that Wittig experienced. 1960s, '70s, and '80s French feminists were hardly unanimous and were no strangers to power struggles. For this reason, Wittig calls on surprising—and even troublesome—metaphors for group practice, like that of what I will call the "stumbling sheep."

In an early vignette of *Les Guérillères*—long before the infamous battle of the sexes— the women are meditating on the nature of history. How does an event become worthy of memory? When do you know that an event is beginning? That history is being made? Must a goddess must bestow her authority on the event? When the goddess's power is rejected outright, the community experiences a crisis of chronology. For what metronome punctuates experience in a world devoid of ritual? Eventually, "beginning" or "starting from zero" is staged not as event or a starting place, but a collective state of being:

> Qu'est-ce que le début ? disent-elles. Elles disent qu'au début elles sont pressées les unes contre les autres. Elles ressemblent à des moutons noirs. Elles ouvrent la bouche pour bêler ou pour dire quelque chose mais un son ne sort. (Wittig, Les Guérillères 38)

At first glance, this state of "being-sheep" appears strikingly condescending: are these speechless women-sheep mere stand-ins for the mindless masses? For the ostracized refugees

from yet another senseless herd? But as the vignette continues, Wittig draws attention to the uncoordinated unison of the group's conflicting movements:

> Elles avancent, il n'y a pas d'avant, il y a pas d'arrière. Elles progressent, il n'y a pas de futur, il n'y a pas de passé. Elles se meuvent les unes contre les autres. Leurs membres à nul point ne peuvent s'accrocher. Les mouvements qu'elles amorcent avec leurs membres inférieurs ou avec leurs membres supérieurs multiplient les déplacements. (*Ibid* 40)

The women-sheep advance in a directionless space, where there is no front nor back, no future nor past. In fact, there is no time at all: the world in which they "progress" is resolutely presentist, happening (if indeed "happening" can occur without time) in the *hic et nunc*. In the zero hour that is this present, they move awkwardly, as a mere jumble of bodies in which no limbs can make purchase. Their "progress," if there is one, is configured as uniquely spatial, "directed" only in so far as one can experience direction in immanence. But somehow, nevertheless, the women-sheep move "together." The collective is somehow united, still "conjugué sous elles." This jumble of bodies nicely metaphorizes the "beginning" (of political practice? of a revolution? of history?) as an act that is always *in medias res*. The state of "being-sheep" is the experience of history, the experience of *stumbling*, of *moving towards*—even if this *towards* is without *something.* (Of course, *somethings* are invisible through the gaze of the present.)

This tentative, if hopeful, movement casts Marxist teleologies of history in a new light. While the novel's titular forms of organized warfare and guerilla attacks might suggest that history is always on a steady path towards revolution and emancipation, this stumbling is resolutely anti-teleological and anti-progressive in nature. It makes room for the possibility of revolutionary failure, thus allowing for a brand of materialism that would admit a multiplicity of possible events, histories, and outcomes. But it also characterizes revolution as a slow, cyclical process, one that often involves a series of failures, or steps backward. It anticipates a vision of history in which the cycle of revolutions is never complete; each upheaval is only temporary, as every step forward is already a step back.

Before turning my gaze to the texts themselves, I want to argue that these competing histories will shed light on another aspect of Wittig's theoretical project, her desire to "change the textual reality within which a text is inscribed" (Wittig, The Straight Mind 63). The real problem with the author's double-bind of being either political or literary is the text no longer circulates *as text*. The text is "banned" from the "textual reality," or the whole array of texts that make up a given national canon or global literary heritage. It can "no longer operate as a text in relationship to other past or contemporary texts" (*Ibid* 63). I understand this to mean that literary texts, or any text that is read *as text,* articulate relationships to one another through citation and intertext. They establish "textual micro- and macro-realities" by bringing a particular set of texts into dialogue with one another, and by extension, establishing the broader framework within which new texts may be understood. They create the structure

within which patterns of reading and writing happen. Without recognition of the text's literality, its status as *literature* and *text,* there is no dialogue. The whole system of intertextual associations is ignored.

Wittig's project, then, is to "alter the textual reality," by challenging canonicity and by establishing a new textual framework through a unique array of intertextual interlocutors. Wittig describes her own writing as a practice of "montage" (Wittig, Some remarks on Les Guérillères 41). *Les Guérillères* explicitly includes a list of "*prélèvements*" or intertexts from which she lifted passages in order to compose the novel (Wittig, Les Guérillères 209-210). Dominque Bourque argues that this practice of intertext renders Wittig's writing procedural: she is following a dialogical constraint that obliges her to engage with her intertexts (Bourque, Ecrire l'inter-dit. La subversion formelle dans l'oeuvre de Monique Wittig. 10). While Bourque and other have focused mainly on Wittig's literary intertexts (especially her Greco-Roman sources and her use of Sappho), few have taken into account her non-literary sources.[127] While I concur that Wittig's literary intertexts are essential to reading *Les Guérillères,* I will focus on her non-literary intertexts—particularly political theory and propaganda. These sources shed light on how Wittig grounds her materialist utopia in political theory, especially those theories at work in real-world conflicts, like the Chinese Cultural Revolution or the Vietnam War. Wittig's non-literary intertexts show that she understood reading to be a practice of political education: exposure to a particular set of texts, in order to establish a new textual macro-reality. In the context of this textual political education, the work of the reader is to turn to these intertexts and uncover their bearing on the literary work.

My goal in focusing on these intertexts is to consider the many frameworks—textual, generic, social, and historical—through which formal play can accrue *potential*. For Queneau and Oulipo, open secrecy was a performative practice whose form could be altered ever so slightly (taken as a disavowal or a withholding, for instance). These minor changes in form allowed Oulipo to intervene in the literary sphere in new ways and to articulate different relationships with contemporary groups. For Perec, constraints could have different possibilities when used by different individuals of the same group. A given constraint could also simultaneously articulate competing viewpoints on past and present histories. Wittig, on the other hand, sees how the same form can be manipulated by one individual at different points in time and how these two formal moments can articulate competing viewpoints on the same history. Overall, by recovering intertexts—references to Bourbaki, e-less passages by Perec's collaborators, or sources cannibalized by Wittig—I am reconstituting the textual network within which these forms developed possible meanings. While *potential* appears limitless, it is nevertheless conditioned by specific historical networks of textual circulation and reception. To uncover hidden or secret intertexts is to reconstruct a coded dialogue, or the linguistic game of hide-and-seek that allowed these authors to quietly *game the system*.[128]

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[127] See Savona's analysis of Dante in Wittig, Savona 132-155.
[128] See Introduction.

Adding to Butler's assertion that Wittig's work is a materialist practice, I will also expand this notion of "changing the textual reality" to include, quite simply, the practice of rewriting. If in *Les Guérillères*, Wittig engages with others' preceding textual histories of revolution, in *Paris-la-Politique*, Wittig forgoes most intertexts other than her own. She rewrites and supplements her own corpus (her own textual micro-reality), through the gaze of revolutionary failure. What comes to the fore is not a textual political education, but the representation of the volubility of political groups—and the precarious place of the individual within in the group.

Intertexts in *Les Guérillères*: Reading as Training in Popular Warfare

Most readers know *Les Guérillères* for its portrayal of a community, in which women ("elles") are represented as the universal subject—the linguistic and cultural default. The feminine occupies the universal, abstract position, not only because Wittig feminizes all personal pronouns, but because she feminizes many other linguistic practices, like naming. Formally, *Les Guérillères* is divided into three sections; each begins with a single page bearing a large "O" and includes a series of vignettes, which are frequently interrupted by a list of names. The list includes both feminine and masculine names, as well as names that tackle naming as a "gendering" process in itself. Wittig defaults to the feminine form of common masculine names in French (Simone, Roberte, etc.), feminizes traditionally masculine names or historical figures (Maximilienne, Agrippine, Virgilie, etc.). She even implies that traditionally masculine names (like Aimé or Gé(rard)), have feminine referents in the predominately feminine community of "elles." The feminine prevails over the masculine—both linguistically and culturally.

But feminizing the French language is only one part of Wittig's utopian project. Her list of names implicitly takes on narrations of history, by putting literary, historical, and mythological figures side-by-side, in the same transhistorical, transnational, and transcultural community. Commonplace biblical and Greco-Roman figures fraternize with Hindu (Kali, Sita), Japanese (Amaratsu), and Egyptian (Nephthys, Nout, Maat) gods. Dutch, German, and Visigoth princesses (Wilhelmine, Radegonde, Galswinthe, Brunehaut) rub elbows with Catalan (Pétronille), Numidian (Sophonisbe), and Egyptian (Hétéphèrès, Merneith, Nebka) rulers. Entire Tahitian dynasties (Pomaré) and Japanese titles (Shogon) are reincarnated in individual women.[129] This is a community of powerful women, and among them one finds a number of

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[129] Wittig typically uses the Gallicized forms of her sources in text. Kali is the Hindu goddess of death and destruction; Sita is the wife of Vishnu's avatar Rama. In the Shinto tradition, Amaterasu is the Japanese goddess of the sun. Nephthys is the consort of Seth and daughter of Geb and Nut; Nut is the Egyptian goddess of the sky; Maat is the sister is the personification of truth and justice. Wilhelmine was queen of the Netherlands from 1890-1948. Radegonde (1520-1587) was a Germanic princess, who was captured and married to Clotaire I, King of the Francs. Galswintha (? -568), daughter of Visigoth king Athanagild, became Queen of the Francs when she married Chilperic I; Brunehaut was Galswintha's sister and became the acting ruler of Austrasia, after her husband Sigebert I was assassinated. Pétronille (1135-1173), the wife of Raimond Bérenger IV, Count of Barcelona, became queen of Aragon in 1137. Sophonisbe (235-203 BCE) was the daughter Hasdrubal, a Carthaginian king, and she married the Numidian king Syphax. Hetepheres I was the wife of Snefrou (2649-2609 BC); Merneith (early 3rd millennium BCE) was a queen of the 1st dynasty; Nebka (2688-2682 BCE) was a king of the 3rd Egyptian dynasty. The Pomaré dynasty ruled from 1743-1880; "Aïmata," who appears among the names, was queen of Pomaré IV, from 1813-1877. Of course, the names are not limited to historical figures or gods; Wittig includes common objects (Pomme, Barbe),

poets, writers, and militants: like Akazomé Emon (a Japanese poetess of the Heian era), Delmira Augustini (a Uruguayan poetess), Pernette du Guillet (a French poet who inspired Maurice Scève to write *Délie*), Halide Edip Adıvar (a Turkish writer, feminist, and politician), Lessia (née Laryssa Petrivna Kossatch, a 19th-centlury Ukranian poet and Marxist), Malwida von Meysenbug (a German *femme de lettres* and a friend of Nietszche), Oluméaï Božena Němcová Bozéna (a writer of the Czech Renaissance), and Nuon Chéa (a leader of the Cambodian Maoist movement, the Khmer Rouge).[130] Wittig is clearly rewriting history to showcase the women who have been written out of it.

Indeed, Wittig describes the process of writing and rewriting *Les Guérillères*, as one of grappling with history:

> A book is made of two sides, the page on the right and the page on the left that can be in a dialectical relation. In this case the fold of the book, to the extent that it unites them, serves as dialectical copula. The page on the left become for me the page where my own text could develop, and the page on the right became the page of history. Thus, each page had to be written in parallel but at the same time, each in conflict with the other on either side of the fold. (Wittig, Some remarks on Les Guérillères 39)

As Wittig reworked her manuscript, she envisioned a procedural method that would replicate dialectical history. It is not altogether clear how these procedures worked: did she have her manuscript in one hand and her sources in the other? Vignettes scattered "on the left" and citations "on the right"? What is clear is that the "book" metaphorized dialectical thinking. Reading from "left-to-right" and "right-to-left" concretized the dialectical back-and-forth; here, the middle fold of the page became the space of crossover, convergence, or resolution. Wittig's procedural dialogue between text and intertext required her to constantly negotiate the gap between *History* and her own *histoires.* This procedural dialectic of histories further enabled a procedural tactic that she called a "pitiless montage" or "surgical operation." She incorporated citations in her own text "effected in such a way that the reader can't recognize them" (*Ibid* 42). This operation of divorcing citations from their contexts simulates a kind of dialectical resolution, in which the collision of two texts would create an entirely new, third text. Through her cannibalism of intertexts, Wittig materially performed the domination and dismantling of history—using its word against itself.

This practice of cannibalizing intertext is emblematic of what Christine Planté calls Wittig's "brutification du language." Wittig begins with a ludic appropriation of extant textual forms, like dictionaries or epics, a "making available" of raw materials not unlike Perec's

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abstract concepts (Modestie, Victoire), geographical locations (like Kaha, a city in Azerbajin, or Zaïre), and scientific terminology (Zona, the term for shingles). For bibliographic information on gods and goddesses, see *The Encyclopedia of World Mythology,* 376, 406, 424, 300, 306, 296. For all other bibliographic information see the *Encyclopédie Larousse* online.

[130] See *Encyclopédie Larousse* online for bibliographic information.

disposition.[131] This work of appropriation in turn provides the "particulars" that she can later universalize. This "travail d'appropriation du déjà-là"—or mining of one's linguistic resources—unearths useable minerals: "matériau *disponible*, dégagé autant que faire se peut des usages sociaux" (Planté, Préface 26-27, my emphasis). Once culled, or pulled from the page of history, these materials become decontextualized, torn from the institutions and sociocultural circumstances that bore them. They are "silent" or "white noise" as Barthes would say, or "irresponsible de tous les contexts."[132] They are ripe for the construction of a new textual reality.

Through this "ludic appropriation," Wittig challenges generic, gender, and cultural hierarchies, showcasing *histories* that would not traditionally fit the bill. Non-Western histories and mythologies (Vyasa's *The Mahabharata,* a Sanskrit epic about the Kurukshetra War) are juxtaposed with 19th-century socialist-utopian philosophy (Flora Tristan's *L'union ouvrière*) and first-hand journalistic reports (John Reed's account of the Bolshevik Revolution). Wittig places wartime propaganda (French revolutionary and Tai-Ping *chansons*) and political pamphlets, alongside major theoretical texts on philosophy, war, and politics (Kautilya's *The Arthashastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on the state and society). She also includes a number of texts that hardly qualify as "history" at all, but that certainly have a bearing on the way in which women and sexuality have been represented historically. For example, Brantôme's memoir, *Les dames galantes,* is a juicy, word-of-mouth account of affairs and intrigue in the Valois court—notable for its portrayal of lesbianism; Gérard Zwang's *Le sexe de la femme* is an exhaustive, interdisciplinary study of *le sexe féminin* as a scientific and cultural object.[133] These intertexts make up Wittig's textual reality: the corpus of texts through which her own can be understood. This idiosyncratic corpus includes works unlikely to be known by the majority of her readership (or French readers at large).

These *prélèvements* predictably include the must-reads of a *soixante-huitard* political education—like Marx's work on the French Commune or excerpts from Mao's *Little Red Book*—but also showcase workers' revolts. John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* recounts the political and socio-economic intricacies of the days leading up to the November 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. His text makes the fairly orthodox claim that workers acquired political experience

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[131] See Introduction.

[132] For more on Barthes and *écriture blanche*, see Chapter 1.

[133] Future scholarship should investigate further how Wittig's intertexts intervene in the history of epistemologies of gender and sexuality. While some of Wittig's intertexts, like Sappho and Aristophanes, are canonical examples of an all-female society, others are fairly unusual. Brantôme's *Les dames galantes* includes an honest portrayal of noble and courtly sexual practices (including affairs, lesbianism, sadomasochism, etc.). For his time, Brantôme is surprisingly objective, but he still reproduces the kind of "heterosexual discourse" that Wittig would likely find repugnant. (One chapter, for example, debates the extent to which lesbian affairs constitute adultery.) Gérard Zwang's *Le sexe de la femme* is similarly problematic. Given that vaginas are privileged objects in Wittig's work, she would have no doubt appreciated Zwang's erudition. In his introduction, however, Zwang outright excludes homosexuality and self-consciously adopts a masculine gaze. He proclaims that men (like the clinician or the physician) have traditionally unearthed the vagina's great secrets and underscores the validity of a "masculine perspective" on female sexuality. See Brantôme 119-128 and Zwang 6, 10-18.

through self-organization in the factories and the fields; his attentiveness, however, to various hierarchies of workers' self-organization (from trade unions to the *Red Guard*) demonstrates their sheer complexity. Jean Chesneaux's history, *Les sociétés secrètes en Chine* (1965)*,* also highlights worker self-organization; he argues that clandestine worker societies laid the groundwork for local insurrections against imperial power. Flora Tristan's *L'Union ouvrière* was an early contribution to the theorization of workers' rights in the 19th-century. Tristan called for centralized and transversal organization at a moment when unionizing was almost universally outlawed in France and Europe (Tristan, Union ouvrière. Suivi de lettres de Flora Tristan. 36-40). Through these texts, Wittig establishes a transnational workers' history, making a claim for workers' self-organization, through whatever means possible.

These histories of worker self-organization not only echo the eventual self-organization of the women themselves, but foreshadow Wittig's theoretical assertion that women constitute a class*.* For this reason, Tristan is given a privileged position in the text of *Les Guérillères* proper; her aphorisms become guiding words for the feminine community: "Elles placent comme exergue […] la phrase de Flora Tristan, les femmes et le peuple marchent la main dans la main" (Wittig, Les Guérillères 189). Her inclusion recalls Wittig's practice of naming the women after authors and militants, many of whom were involved in early struggles for women's rights. Her call for the joint organization of women and workers also suggests that both parties have a stake in the politics of labor. Another *prélèvement*, Aristophanes's *Lysistrata,* directly addresses the question of women's labor. In this bawdy Grecian comedy*,* the eponymous heroine convinces Grecian women to withhold sex, to pressure their male compatriots into making peace during the Peloponnesian War. Wittig gestures towards a modern reading of the play: as a critique of patriarchal society and the burdens of women's labor. In her theoretical work, "The Category of Sex," Wittig argues that "sex" is a label bestowed upon women in order to naturalize their forced labor in heterosexual society. Men "acquire" women through marriage contracts, gaining financial and social control over women; women thus constitute a class of unpaid laborers, responsible for childbirth and child rearing (Wittig, The Straight Mind 6).This array of women's and workers' histories imply that that women should organize as *workers* and as a *class.* They thus allow for an implicit critical intervention that is later made explicit in Wittig's theoretical oeuvre.

A similar logic of *détournement* is at work in Wittig's use of Laclos's *De l'éducation des femmes*. In a 1783 speech on the question of women's education, Laclos claimed that women's education could not be ameliorated, as society had so severely denaturalized women that they had become "uneducable." Speaking to women at large, he chastised them for what they had become and delicately called for a revolution:

> Venez apprendre comment, nées compagnes de l'homme, vous êtes devenues son esclave [....] apprenez qu'on ne sort de l'esclavage, que par une grande révolution. Cette révolution est-elle possible?" (Laclos 48-9).

Wittig likely agrees with Laclos's assertion that women are enslaved by society, given that elsewhere she claims that lesbians are like "escaped slaves," who have fled a life of indentured servitude.[134] But rather than grant Laclos the last word, Wittig responds to him in the text of the novel:

> Elles disent, esclave tu l'es vraiment si jamais il en fut. Elles disent, ils ont tout prévu, ta révolte ils l'ont d'avance baptisée révolte d'esclave, révolte contre nature […] (Wittig, Les Guérillères 153).

"Ils" ambiguously refers to unknown male interlocutors, within which Laclos could easily be included. Wittig mocks the finality of his tone; he is at fault, not for describing women's lives as slavery, but for having so little faith in their self-liberation. Wittig's inclusion of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) only further substantiates this argument: the problem is not only that women are enslaved by society, but that, as Marcuse claims, society is essentially repressive; it exists to control our basic instincts. Wittig would like to envision a society in which not only women—but everyone—would be liberated from repression.[135]

While Wittig clearly favors active female figures, like Sapphic lovers and Amazonians, Wittig's amazons are being provided with a particular, non-classical political education: the guerilla warfare of Maoist revolutionaries. [136] What she reproduces in her intertextual montage is not only a history of communist revolutions (particularly in Russia, China, and Vietnam), but textual training in guerilla warfare: the very texts that have been used to train guerrilla revolutionaries. This includes not only propaganda by Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong (*De la juste solution des contradictions au sein du peuple* or *Problèmes de la guerre et de la stratégie*) and by Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap (*Guerre du peuple, armée du peuple*), but the texts that the revolutionaries themselves would have read.[137] In fact, Wittig's practice of reading is already revolutionary: her intertexts display *internationalist* aims—the equation of disparate historical events in one and the same worker revolt. This "transhistorical" reading practice is commonplace in Maoist revolutionary thinking. For example, the Vietnamese editor of *Guerre du peuple* and Ernesto Che Guevara in his preface to the Spanish edition both claim that Giap's fight is emblematic of larger historical trends: in Africa, in Latin America, and elsewhere.[138]

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[134] See note 3.

[135] Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) builds on this argument, by critiquing the repressive tendencies of modern capitalist societies as well as the communist Soviet Union. He claims that capitalist society is essentially repressive by creating desire for unnecessary needs. Epps and Katz call this "repressive desublimation," whereby seemingly liberating concepts actually serve the oppressor (Epps et Katz 440).

[136] Among the names in Wittig's list, one finds a number of Sappho's lovers (like Anactoria de Milet, Gongyla de Colophon) and Grecian prostitutes, or *hétaïres*.

[137] As I have mentioned before, Wittig defaults to French translations of Mao's texts; I have kept the Gallicized titles here for clarity.

[138] See Guevara 90-91. Giap's Vietnamese editor claims that the "map" of Asia, Africa, and Latin America has significantly changed since WWII, but there is still work to be done. He goes on to mention a number of

Pierre de Clausewitz's *On War,* a beloved standard of both Mao Zedong and General Vo Nguyen Giap, is emblematic of this revolutionary reading practice.[139] A Prussian general who served both for and against Napoleon during the Napoleonic Wars, Clausewitz was one of the few veteran generals to take to the pen. His *On War* is notable for making a few key assertions about the nature of war: war is far from logical, as it is by nature violent and uncertain; it is also an extension of the duel, as a fight to the death, in which two opposing parties must assure the other's eventual destruction. Most famously, Clausewitz asserted that war is necessarily political, or way to achieve political goals. Thus, his adage, "war is the continuation of politics by other means." What interested Maoist revolutionaries, however, is that Clausewitz was one of the first to theorize popular and guerilla warfare. General Giap, who had his wife and secretary read *On War* aloud to him between the battles of Hanoi and Dien Bien Phu in the Vietnam War, particularly enjoyed Clausewitz's chapter on "The Armament of the People" because it seemed to him as if Clausewitz were writing about contemporary events; in his memoires, Giap marveled that an officer of the Prussian Empire could have been interested in "cette forme populaire de la lutte armée," claiming that it was testimony to "[…] son amour très fort pour sa patrie et […] son refus de vivre en esclave" (Derbent, Giap et Clausewtiz. Suivi de Général Vo Nguyen Giap "Contribution à l'Histoire de Dien Bien Phu" et Ernesto Che Guevara, "Préface du livre du Général Giap: Guerre du peule, armée du peuple." 46-47).

With this in mind, Wittig has conscripted Clausewitz among others to make a key argument of *Les Guérillères*: violence can and should serve a political cause. Mao's *Problems of War and Strategy* (1954), for example, is a treatise on the use of guerilla warfare in civil war, written just prior to the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Part of the treatise claims that revolutionaries must take up arms in order to gain control over the army, and subsequently the state. From this, Mao derives the adage: "Every Communist must grasp this truth: 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (Mao 13-14). The adage resurfaces in modified form in third part of *Les Guérillères*, when the women prepare for battle:

> Elles disent qu'elles ont appris à compter sur leurs propres forces. Elles disent qu'elles savent ce qu'ensemble elles signifient. Elles disent, que celles qui revendiquent un langage nouveau apprennent d'abord la violence. Elles disent, que celles qui veulent transformer le monde s'emparent avant tout des fusils. Elles disent qu'elles partent de zéro. Elles disent que c'est un monde nouveau qui commence. (Wittig, Les Guérillères 120).

Mao's call to arms (to "transformer le monde [en s'emparant] avant tout des fusils") arrives at a pivotal point in the text: the moment when the women have begun to think as a *class*. Not only are they self-organizing ("elles ont appris à compter sur leurs propres forces") but self-actualizing ("elles savent ce qu'ensemble elles signifient"). They have taken on a new language

"obstacles" in the fight against colonialism, like the ongoing Algerian War, UN "plots" against Lumumba's reign in the Congo, and American actions against Cuba (Giap 8).

[139] For example, the Secretary General of the Indochinese Communist Party, Truong Ching, asked his soldiers to read Clausewitz. See Derbent 45-47.

that has fundamentally altered their material world, by teaching them that they can liberate themselves. Not long after this call to arms, several vignettes treat the problem of strategy and tactics. The women undertake their own textual instruction in revolution, seriously evaluating Maoist tenets. Like Mao, they reject traditional armies as "institutions," choosing rather to focus on more "portable" armies; they do not seek to gain terrain, but to ambush and disarm their adversaries (Wittig, Les Guérillères 134-6). They replicate, in this sense, the art of guerilla warfare.[140]

Wittig's textual reality is significant not for creating a unique canon of revolutionary figures, texts, or interlocutors. Rather, her textual reality is experiential: she is inviting her readership into the revolutionary fold. With her ludic appropriation of the brute materials of history, Wittig points her readers in the direction of her intertexts, but leaves the actual work of textual analysis untouched. She asks us to dive into the dialectic of the page, to zigzag our way between the left and the right, between text and intertext. The reader must come armed, ready to ferret out the citations buried in her mountain of text. They must practice their own surgical operation, parceling out the moments when intertexts intervene in the narrative. By demanding that her readers follow in her textual footsteps, Wittig concretizes text as an incarnation of material reality. She asks us to think of text as a material object: to be held, to be read, to be dissected. This textual political education is not just a lesson in Maoism, but materialism. It is a reminder, as Butler says, that language is material: it acts upon us, upon our understanding of the world.

What Wittig asks of her readers, is, however, an impossible task. After all, the great majority of citations in Wittig are, just as she promises, unrecognizable. Without access to her drafts—that notebook with history on the right—many of these citations remain virtually undiscoverable. Her ludic appropriation of intertexts is so successful that these texts might as well be words in the dictionary. In this way, Wittig's *Les Guérillères* recalls some of Perec's more elaborate procedural writings, like *La Vie Mode d'emploi.* The greatest feat of Perec's processes of randomization is that they are so successful as to be imperceptible. In this sense, Wittig's text is doubly experiential; it is not only about materiality, but revolutionary failure. She, too, seeks out the "dupable" reader: an individual willing to follow her along her textual journey, even if it does not amount to a singular or a satisfactory resolution. What matters is not deciphering the system of the constraint, but the process of attempting to decipher it. Through this process, of uncovering hidden intertexts and seeking out imperceptible citations, readers must come to terms with their own *potential,* or the way that they ascribe meaning to the text. They must construct their own textual reality within Wittig's textual framework and draw conclusions of their own.

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[140] Guerilla warfare often works via defensive, rather than offensive tactics. The idea is to position small, mobile groups in remote areas, drawing out the opposing army into a series of small altercations, rather than bringing two opposing armies face-face-face.

Revolutionary Progress: *Les Guérillères* and the Representation of Textual Histories

But what of those stumbling sheep? What of that directionless, but united group—the foil to the list's exceptional women? What of the disorganized masses, those limbs that have yet to coalesce into a group, much less a *class?* While Wittig's attitude to her sources—those "histories on the right"—is hardly uncritical, her relationship to them is not always one of conflict. While her textual political education critiques history's erasure of women and workers, its homage to Maoism borders on gentle indoctrination. On some level, Wittig does believe that reading about popular and guerrilla warfare will advance women's movements. In spite of—and due to—her ludic appropriation of intertext, Wittig indicates that textual political education serves a real purpose. After all, why shouldn't we read *Les Guérillères* as a chronicle of the revolutionary emancipation of women?

In addition to the extradiegetic textual reality of the intertexts, however, Wittig portrays a number of textual histories intradiagetically. While the women do indeed liberate themselves by the end of the text, along the way they must decipher several textual narrations of history. They must tackle different genres of text, each with their own modes of representation and prescribed reading methods. They effectively practice what Wittig preaches: enacting, through these historical *mises-en-abyme,* her method of material reading. As I've already mentioned, *Les Guérillères* is broken up into three parts, each divided by a single "o." But this "o" shifts in meaning as the women encounter different text types, or different stand-ins for history as a textual genre. Through these shifts in meaning, Wittig provides a rough narrative about history as it is created through the collective practice of reading symbols and texts.

In the first part, books called "*féminaires*" introduce the "o" as a symbol for the vulva, the clitoris, or the vagina—all of which are worshipped by the community. The feminairies are bibles of gender essentialism; they standardize the meanings of the vulva symbol. These meanings come from prosaic commonplaces: a clitoris or a vulva compared to a flower, nut, or shell, or even a web and a trap (Wittig, Les Guérillères 16, 31 42-43).[141] Bit by bit, the collective begins to rewrite the standard meaning of the "o" to include more creative meanings, like the vulva as an erotic organ, a mirror, a sun, or a reflection of the community's many goddesses (*Ibid* 24, 29). Eventually, however, the community not only rejects the symbols, but the goddesses for which they stand, and the "o" comes to represent the total erasure of their past and their memory:

> Elles disent qu'elles n'ont pas besoin des symboles ou des mythes. Elles disent que le temps où elles sont parties de zéro est en train de s'effacer dans leurs mémoires. Elles disent qu'elles peuvent à peine s'y référer. Quand elles répètent, il faut que cet ordre soit rompu, elles disent qu'elles ne savent pas de quel ordre il est question. (*Ibid* 38)

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[141] Here, Wittig's work might rejoin that of Zwang's, given that she, too, would like to catalog the many historical meanings of the vulva, drawing attention to the relative paucity of work on the subject (compared works on the phallus). See note 15.

The process of erasure is so complete that the women do not even remember the past that they have rejected. We return to the stumbling sheep's resolute presentism, their dedication to present without past nor future. For a moment, Wittig's realism is in its purest state. If reality is a "negative ideal," or an ideologically-driven social construction, then it can indeed be totally erased. With this total abolition of reality as an ideological system, the women's minds have been scrubbed clean—leaving an entirely blank slate for a new reality.

Wittig nevertheless envisions erasure as a process, as she narrates the rejection of the "o" symbolism over the course of several vignettes throughout the second and third sections of the novel. In spite of supposedly having "forgotten" the previous symbolic order, the women must continually renew this rejection. Their presentism is one of continuous forgetting, continually bumping up against new symbols to scrub away. They start to reject any parceling of the body, refusing to privilege one body part over another; they declare that they apprehend "leurs corps dans leurs totalité," and they refuse to be "prisonnières de leur proper idéologie" (Wittig, Les Guérillères 80). The first step is not to rewrite the current symbolic order, but to describe what it will not be ("Elles ne disent pas […]"): vulvas will not be compared to the moon and the stars, to suns, planets, and galaxies, etc. In short, they eventually reject conventionality altogether, but not without a struggle.

The feminaries provide an interesting model for the anonymous practice of collective history—in spite of the proscriptive knowledge they contain. The women circulate little copies of the feminaries, reading excerpts aloud to one another, giggling and laughing. When they skim through the text itself, they find "[…] de nombreuses pages blanches sur lesquelles elles écrivent de temps à autre" (*Ibid* 17). By discussing and scribbling on their well-worn copies, they develop a casual form of textual exegesis and symbolic resignification. Like Wittig as she writes the novel, the "elles" dismantle history to its the base unit of meaning ("O") and continually reinterpret this letter, transforming it altogether. There is no formal writing of history—no "history on the right"—but instead haphazard intervention by unnamed readers. A whole series of anonymous participants must grapple with "the dialectic of history," by dialoguing with whichever histories remain on the page. By the end of the section, however, the feminairies are no longer even legible: they have fulfilled their purpose ("rempli leur office"), they are not modes of knowledge ("moyens de savoir"), they're entirely out of date ("démodé") (*Ibid* 67). The makeup of the population of women has subtly changed. The women, presumably the inheritors of those who worshipped the vulva and read the feminaries, are now incapable of even identifying the feminary's purpose, of determining why the feminaries could have existed. The symbolic rejection of the feminairies, and of the outmoded symbolic thinking they represent, is instead taken as a ludic moment: an excuse for bonfires and light-hearted ridicule: "Tout ce qu'on peut en faire […] c'est de les entasser sur les places et d'y mettre le feu. Il y aurait là le prétexte des fêtes" (*Ibid* 67). This break in the transmission of history, happens seamlessly, smoothing over the women's previous stumbling blocks. Again, the mentality of the group has shifted over time, almost without having to remember why or how it has changed.

The form of the feminaries also loosely reproduces the form of the novel itself; they are comprised of printed words in capital letters, which intermittently fill the page and leave it blank (*Ibid* 17). This *mise-en-abyme* of Wittig's writing and reading process suggests that the project's "failure" is perhaps less tragic than it may appear; Wittig would like her reader to have a similarly casual attitude towards her own novel and its eventual obsolescence. She asks her readers not only to scribble all over her novel, but to rid themselves of it when it is no longer needed. In contrast with the other forms of history that Wittig presents in the *Les Guérillères,* Wittig, as a novelist, has no interest in reifying history, or in reducing it to a singular teleological narrative. She does not desire her novels to become the signs or symbols of history or a particular political cause. On the contrary, Wittig wants to defer to her readers and enable polysemy as much as possible. Like Queneau, she also seemingly does not demand fame or notoriety for her work. When her work is no longer useful, Wittig is more than happy to see it disappear.

These "petits livres" also cannot but bring to mind another "petit livre" of the late 1960s, the little red books of *Quotations by the Chairman Mao*. These texts began to circulate after the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1966, inaugurating a subsequent wave of Sinophilia in France. Copies of the feminaries circulate throughout the transnational and transhistorical feminine community, recalling the outlandish commercial success of Mao's texts worldwide, but also their continual reappropriation in various historical contexts. This transnational consumption also hints at the particularities of French Maoism: its investment in a plurality of cultures over traditional Republican universalism, its emphasis on third-worldism and identification with the underdog. The little books are a sign of Maoists' own brand of "universalizing the particular": a collective desire to unite behind very different revolutionary crises and to see these crises as part of one and the same shared struggle.

Their subsequent rejection is initially puzzling because Wittig not only cites Mao in her intertexts, but because Marxism and Maoism influenced feminists in her immediate circle. When she was writing the novel in '68, Wittig was working with pre-MLF feminist and *soixante-huitard* student groups: like the informal "groupe de Vincennes," the Marxist student collective *Féminisme, Marxisme, Avenir (FMA)*, or psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque's "Oreille vertes." These groups would go on to form the MLF, which would later splinter into post-May '68 movements like *Vive la révolution* (VLR).[142] By rejecting the "petits livres," Wittig challenges her '68 peers by threatening their most sacred text; she refuses to treat *the* Little Red Book as an icon, but rather, sees it as yet another necessary—but ultimately passing—moment in time. This gesture anticipates the fraught relationships between individuals characteristic of *Paris-la-Politique*, where competing groups of women are vying for power, and one individual "je" always finds herself an outsider.

In the second section of *Les Guérillères*, a more informal mode of textual history is introduced, called "le grand registre." The register is a large text left open to the public, to

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[142] For more on the formation of the MLF, see Delphy, Les origines du MLF 137-148.

which all of the women contribute and from which they read aloud. More than the feminaries, the great register echoes the continual beginning of the women-sheep. It doesn't really have a first page or a perceivable order; everything is haphazardly accumulated in multiple hands (*Ibid* 74-75). The women can modify it at any time, but the text is rarely available ("rarement disponible") (*Ibid* 74). The great register invites a reading practice that is even more haphazard:

> On peut le prendre au hasard et trouver quelque chose par quoi on est concerné. Cela peut être peu de chose. Les écritures si diverses qu'elles soient ont toutes un caractère commun. Il ne se passe pas de moment sans que l'une d'elles s'en approche pour y inscrire quelque chose. Ou alors c'est une lecture à haute voix d'un passage quelconque à laquelle il est procédé. Il se peut que beaucoup d'entre elles soient présentes pour la lecture. Il se peut aussi que la lecture se fasse sans assistance aucune, sauf une mouche qui importune la lectrice en se posant sur sa tempe. (*Ibid* 74-75)

If the feminaries transmit some established knowledge about gender, the register need not transmit anything. The content of the "grand registre" is never explicit. It documents without informing; it remembers without remembering anything in particular. If it is history, it is not written or read in any formalized manner. No one speaker or group is dictating the way events must be documented. The group never acts as cohesive whole; rather, individuals may intervene as they please. Somehow the great volume is always unavailable and yet always being amended. Echoing the uncoordinated unison of the women-sheep, history is produced by and for a feminine collective. But, significantly, it unites the collective in an ultimately passive fashion. It transforms the many hands, or limbs, of writing into the same body of text: by allowing them to exist in the same textual space.

Wittig's vision of history in the great register seems radically utopian in some respects, but it nevertheless harbors an implicit critique of history's consumption and circulation. True, it is hard to envision such an anodyne mode of history. Where is the grand narrative or the will to shape future events? Does this text even count as history if it seems altogether contingent and irreproducible? And why bother creating collective history if it is seemingly without reason? But if the "grand registre," in all of instability cannot be reproduced or copied, it also cannot be converted into a "petit livre" for individual consumption or appropriation. In this respect, the great register is a timely critique of "le petit livre rouge," and the ease with which it was taken up as a symbol for future revolutionary utopia. She critiques Western consumerism of Mao's text, in which commodity and politics become confused. This critique also further develops the "micro" reading practices involved in the "macro" project of her textual political education. She steers her readers away from excessive "Mao-philia," against reading as a practice of icon-worship or commodity fetishism. Together, the feminiaries and the great register substantiate Wittig's "material" utopianism, proving that she is only too cognizant of the material nature of reading and circulating texts, icons, and ideologies.

In the third section, Wittig continues to paint history as aimless—not just stumbling, but meandering *flânerie*. It is therefore fitting that the "o" symbolism will eventually return as a metaphor for the "new" movement of the group:

> Les déambulations sont cycliques et circulaires. Quels que soient les itinéraires, quels que soient les points de départ qu'elles choisissent, elles aboutissent à la même place. Les parcours sont parallèles, équidistants, de plus en plus étroits à mesure qu'ils s'approchent du centre de la figure. Si elles suivent le tracé de l'intérieur vers l'extérieur, elles doivent parcourir le plus grand des cercles avant de trouver le passage à franchir qui les ramène au centre. Le système est clos. Aucun rayon partant du centre ne permet de l'élargir ou de le faire éclater. Il est en même temps illimité, la juxtaposition des cercles qui vont s'élargissant figure toutes les révolutions possibles. C'est virtuellement la sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part. (*Ibid* 97)

In this final "o," *revolution* has become oddly literal: an explosion of concentric circles of movement. An infinite series of parallel paths or *parcours* carry the women across a kind of three-dimensional Venn diagram; they boomerang back-and-forth, darting from the center outwards, from inside to outside. Their movement reproduces many of the paradoxes of the great register: both open and closed; fixed and limitless. Their movement is nevertheless governed by its own revolving geometry. No matter which spiral—which *revolution*-ary path—they take, they will be delivered to the same resting place. No matter how far they stray from the center, they are always enclosed within it.

Wittig's final "o" upends the material metaphors through which we apprehend history. Wittig's *revolutions* deviate wildly from the established lines, arrows, and roads of our cultural imaginary. The women do not move linearly, *towards* future progress. They have no prescribed paths, but they are not unanchored either: they share a center. As in Natalie Sarraute's *tropismes,* whatever they share is hardly manifest, visible only on the most subconscious level. Thus, Wittig manages to create a negative revolutionary teleology; it is resolutely anti-progressive, configuring the endless back-and-forth of liberation, but not without some kind of "shared" something (like hope?).

Alongside competing models for textual history, Wittig also offers a few rough sketches of the feminist groups in which she circulated. While Wittig's "stumbling sheep" claim to hardly remember or to not even value remembering, a handful of the vignettes in *Les Guérillères* loosely record Wittig's experiences in feminist groups. In one, the women attend a book-burning festival. In another, they take up traditionally masculine jobs in the *cités industrielles*. Still other vignettes about "photographs" and "engravings" towards the end of the first section explicitly mention strikes and strikers, situating these strikes in a distant past, prior (and foreign) to the community of "elles." This temporality is a slightly odd way of treating contemporary history. (Why talk about current events as if they've happened before?) But, these events track the many *revolutions* of emancipation: the trials and errors of different kinds of political activity.

The first photo of this vignette series describes a *jour de grève* undertaken by women in a textile factory. The strike does not seem to be rooted in any actual strikes of May '68, and the passage lacks any particularizing details. While there is indeed one woman among the group of "elles" ("quelqu'une") who can decipher the mystery of the photographs, in general, the photos are treated from a distance: objects to be observed, to be studied: "Elles regardent des vieilles images, des photographies. Quequ'une les explique [....] Ou bien quelqu'une commente la série de photographies des manifestations" (*Ibid* 52-53). As the women assess the political form of the *syndicat* from afar, Wittig is hardly proscriptive. She may be steering her readers towards class consciousness with her intertexts, but she does not coerce them into institutionalized forms—like unions, associations, or committees.

In the next passage about strikes, a little later on, another singular "quelqu'une" intervenes in the narration, but here the photos are not mere objects of observation, but of discussion. The political activity to be tested and discussed here is that of the *manifestation*, or the mass-protest. While some protests are coordinated through institutionalized union activity, they often spawn from spontaneous, grassroots organization. This anti-hierarchical political form is revolutionary chaos at its apex. Fittingly, the demonstrators advance, governed by the ebb and flow of masses.

> Leur foule compacte déferle sur la place, rapide quoique sans violence, portée par le mouvement interne qui lui impose sa masse. D'énormes mouvements s'effectuent en divers points de la place quand les manifestantes tentent de s'arrêter autour des groupes d'une ou de plusieurs parleuses. Mais elles sont immédiatement poussées entraînées par les milliers de jeunes femmes qui les suivent et qui s'arrêtent à leur tour. (*Ibid* 53)

The group's uncoordinated harmony echoes the revolutionary boomerang. There is the possibility of stopping in pieces or in unison, but gradually, awkwardly, only to be taken away ("entraîner") by the larger group. Some women circle around individual *parleuses,* but no one woman comes to dominate the group. It is evident here that *manifestation* differs significantly in its spatial practices from *le jour de grève*; rather than being an occupying the workplace, the women overtake public space and thus move *en masse* around the city. As the passage closes, the *manif'* gradually dissipates. The collective movement of the group is broken up naturally by the rhythm of *la pause café* and informal *bavardage.* The *manif'* closes with this fairly informal image, of cafés and fountains, suggesting that history can happen in the most usual, most casual, most everyday of circumstances. This final *manifestation* is a compelling instantiation of revolutions; revolutionary emancipation is not a singular "event" of history, but a series of unraveling movements that are part and parcel of everyday life. History is not made of singular flashpoints, but casual interventions.

And yet, in spite of this multiplicity of histories, *Les Guérillères* will ultimately end in a battle: the third and final section hinges on the inevitability of war and peace. The much-anticipated battle of the sexes is relatively brief, and the subsequent harmony between men

and women feels provisional and forced. The very proximity of the war to its happy resolution meshes poorly with Wittig's antiteleological imaginary. In a textual economy in which metaphors for irresolution and directionlessness abound, can revolution really be had "by the barrel of a gun"? In spite of her inclusion of Maoist treatises on war—Wittig's battle seems more discursive than physically violent—an excuse to engage with her many intertexts. While Wittig has been careful not to fully endorse any one textual, political, or historical form, *Les Guérillères* closes with an awkwardly definitive battle-cry. In sudden stylistic turn to propaganda, the women solemnly affirm the end of war and salute a new era: "Mues par une impulsion commune, nous étions toutes debout pour retrouver comme à tâtons le cours égal, l'unisson exaltant de l'Internationale" (*Ibid* 207-8). All hail, International Communism! This final salute to communism—while clearly the ending that Wittig had always intended—awkwardly butts up against the anti-proscriptive, anti-progressive tone of the rest of the novel. It also unconsciously foreshadows the text she will publish thirty years later, *Paris-la-Politique.*

Paris-la-Politique: the *Mouton Noir* versus the Slumbering Sheep

Paris-la-Politique is in many ways not an obvious sequel to *Les Guérillères*: it has only a few (mostly neoclassical) intertexts, only a few names, and no lists. As a novel, it lacks *Les Guérillères*'s formal complexity. It has no overarching narrative and no pages or symbols in "o." Its French may be feminized, but not as aggressively. It may unfold in a vignette-like style, but the vignettes are much less cohesive as a whole. Many of the vignettes are fully enclosed narratives—one-off parables that quickly and efficiently make their point. The most notable difference, however, is the shift in voice. The revolutionary hero of the collective "elles" has been forsaken, making room for a single, solitary "je."

While the first-person is virtually absent from *Les Guérillères,* in *Paris-la-Politique,* "je" is the central voice of the text. Rather than moving with the flock of "elles," however, this "je" is resolutely an outsider, psychologically isolated from the rest of the group. From the perspective of this *mouton noir,* the women's shared motion is reconfigured as mere chaos: a grotesque political circus. Through this stranger's gaze, the women's collective practices are transformed into vacant rituals. This grotesque milieu comes to be defined by one adage: "Le délire est devenu raison, la folie est de mise" (Wittig, Paris-la-Politique 11). Hence the title of *Paris-la-Politique*'s first vignette, "Le carnaval," in which the first-person narrator is forced to play the role of court jester:

> Je voudrais m'en aller, me mettre à l'abri, me reposer du mouvement et du bruit, aller chez moi. Mais c'est ici que j'habite en plein carnaval. Et quand je me fais rudoyer ou insulter, je ne peux pas quitter l'endroit comme on fait pour un théâtre si on n'aime pas les insultes des acteurs. (*Ibid* 10)

If *Les Guérillères*'s macro perspective kept us above the fray, here we've been thrown into the wilds of grotesque mayhem. Like Queneau at Cérisy, the narrator's "je" desperately desires to escape, but there is no outside—no refuge from the spectacle of politics. This "je," unlike

Perec's "on," is not *victime* et *bourreau*, but she is doubly the outsider. She is both witness to and victim of the senseless hysteria of her peers. Sadly, this is no Bakhtinian carnival—there is no reversal of the power structure or challenge to authority. Wittig conveys the senselessness of such a political rat race with a new metaphor: women endlessly chasing after hot-air balloons ("baudruches"). But the balloons always falter and burst. No matter, new balloons are at the ready: "On les remplace. On ne s'en lasse pas" (*Ibid* 10). What better metaphor for the meaninglessness of politics than people chasing bursting balls of hot-air *ad infinitum*?

Several vignettes paint grotesque rituals, to reiterate the dangerous futility of political practice. In "Les mise en boule," Wittig literalizes solipsistic *nombrilisme;* she describes a crude ritual in which the women stare at their own belly-buttons, bending over to the point of kissing their own asses (*Ibid* 13-14). "Limbo" caricatures entry into politics as a game of limbo: whoever passes under an arbitrary line can join the group of "elles." "Le cens capital" describes the practice of a "mise-en-garde politique"; at any moment, one woman may attack another, but she must stop whenever the latter yells "uncle" ("pouce"). This practice supposedly assures self-governance, by asking that each be responsible for policing her peer. In reality, however, little groups of women ("petits groupes") are safe from being attacked, while the cries of others are functionally ignored (*Ibid* 21-23). "Circenses" reimagines the bubble-race as a hellish food-fight. Famished individuals are thrown into an arena and forced to fight over scraps of meat. When the first-person narrator, a bewildered stranger ("la visiteuse," "l'étrangère"), grabs hold of the megaphone and begs them to stop, the women ("elles") are cold and indifferent. These games, they claim, guarantee the "democratic" process; no one is exempt from participation. Clearly, the revolutionary logic of *Les Guérillères* is upended, as the fight for emancipation has been replaced with this so-called "happening" (*Ibid* 45). In this "spectacular event," staples of revolutionary rhetoric have become the vile cheers of a blood-thirsty crowd: "Du sang. Du sang. De l'action […] Go home les étrangères. Vague à l'âme. Vive la révolution" (*Ibid* 47). If *Les Guérillères* is a battle, this is mere sport. Violence is no longer politics *by other means*: it is spectacle, a farcical *mise-en-scène* of a revolution gone wrong.

Another vignette, "Le balayage de rues," furthers this parody of revolutionary speech and action, by suggesting that theory is irremediably divorced from practice. The parable opens with a casual observation about collective practice, claiming that all debates naturally devolve into squabbling: "[…] si quelqu'une remarque qu'il est nécessaire de balayer les rues mil s'en trouve tout de suite une autre pour dire qu'il n'y a pas encore assez de poussière" (*Ibid* 17). The question of "sweeping the streets" becomes emblematic of an endless, theoretical debate about nothing. If one woman says it is about "sweeping" another declares it is about "how to sweep"; if one claims not to give a damn ("se foutre du balayage"), another asserts it would be a crime to ignore it (*Ibid* 18). Gradually, the women's debate devolves into bickering over practical minutiae: should they use a shovel? Nets? Magnets? Some other machine? Before they know it, the wind has arrived, but nothing has been decided:

> L'ambiance est à la détente comme après l'accomplissement d'une dure tâche. Une voix dans le lointain crie, désespérée : attendez. On n'a encore rien décidé. (*Ibid* 19)

This parable epitomizes the very real scenario in which discussion impedes action. From this "macro" perspective, casual everyday practice does not unfold naturally, but out of habit. Revolutions then run the risk of merely running in circles. The forlorn cry of the singular "voix" ("*Attendez*.") poignantly figures the helplessness of the outsider-witness. The bellows of the black sheep are drowned out by the endless drivel of the flock.

All of these grotesque rituals and parables set the stage for *Paris-la-Politique* as an allegory not of political education, but of the experience of politics. Rancière's distinction between "la politique" (politics) and "le politique" (the political) is useful here. "Le politique" is "the political" as a philosophical object; this includes the "principles" of law, power, and community. "La politique," however, designates "doing politics" as an activity; "politics" necessarily evokes the struggles between parties over power and exercising power (Rancière, Aux bords du politique. 13).[143] On the one hand, *Les Guérillères* functions on a level of abstraction similar to "the political." By debating various strategies or tactics, *Les Guérillères* clearly contemplates the application of a conceptual apparatus—Maoist guerilla principles or various reading practices—to the very real problem of women's emancipation. This is not to say that *le politique* is divorced from material reality. On the contrary, Wittig's textual political education puts forth notions of *the* political (like "self-organization" or "class") that have been implemented in the real world (in workers' unions, etc.). *Paris-la-Politique*, on the other hand, portrays the pejorative *"la politique,"* or politics: the petty in-fighting of self-serving *politiciens* over the right to puppeteer the masses.

Of course, Rancière argues that "*le/la politique*" are two facets of the very same word, and thus, the same problem: how to live together ("la vie en commun") (*Ibid* 13). Theory is inseparable from practice, because the two always work hand-in-hand. I have already argued that *Les Guérillères* stages a dialectical reading and writing practice. I would also like to suggest that Wittig's two novels function jointly in dialectic opposition: macro versus micro, "elles" versus "je." According to this line of reasoning, *Paris-la-Politique* can be read as a rewriting of *Les Guérillères*—but one that is not merely additive. It fundamentally alters what precedes it. This rewriting forces the reader to reflect back on her text and corpus of intertexts in a new light. *Paris-la-Politique* thus incarnates the malleability of the textual reality in itself. A single text can reactivate the entire system's structure, causing the system as a whole to shift its internal dynamics.

Across the two novels, Wittig uses pronominal tension (between "je" and "elles") to embody the struggle inherent in le/la politique. She thus activates another valence of Rancière's "le/la politique": politics as a mode of subjectification. In this sense, politics is not only the "implementation" of a theoretical model, but a diffuse human activity ("une forme dissensuelle de l'agir humain") that allows notions of subjectivity to form (*Ibid* 15). In this light, democracy and other political forms are not only kinds of government, but the process by which individuals begin to understand themselves as political subjects.

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[143] See Introduction.

Wittig thus problematizes not only the way in which textual political educations and textual realities construct notions of political subjectivity, but language—especially pronominal play. Wittig's use of pronouns frames political subjectification as a question of *prise de parole,* or the right to speak for oneself and others. Like both Queneau and Perec, Wittig figures group political practice as a question of Bourdieusian *jurisdiction*, or of who has the right to speak, for whom, and in which institutional contexts. Accordingly, the universe of *Paris-la-Politique* is populated by various semi-institutionalized "petits groups" in competition and cahoots for power: the "judases," the "zealous acolytes," and the "new arrivals." The "judases" are exemplary of the *politiciens;* these self-satisfied individuals are already in power and will do whatever they can to maintain it. The "zealous acolytes" are those who enable the judases' power; the mindless followers who sustain the hierarchy by currying favor with the judases. There may be many judases and many acolytes, but one group cannot exist without the other: for every leader, there must be devotees. The "new arrivals" have to learn to play the game, or else they will quickly find themselves in the positions of the outcast. If the women of *Les Guérillères* were free to experiment with the political, here the political is overshadowed by politics.[144]

If "elles" in *Les Guérillères* can signal the group's unity in spite of internal divisions, "elles" in *Paris-la-Politique* is constantly referring to different groups. Functionally, the new arrivals and the acolytes shift between judases, creating a series of unstable "petits groupes," or "groupements." In the vignette "Les petites chaises," Wittig explains that "elles," like "on" in *La Disparition,* is a mobile pronoun, with unclear and ever-changing referents:

Quand je dis: elles dans ce cas, je désigne tout groupement subitement pris d'esprit de corps et prêt à tout pour obtenir le soutien de l'assemblée. Devant les petites chaises l'intérêt général doit céder séance tenante. Mieux même elles sont l'intérêt général, ce qui s'appelle ailleurs prendre la partie pour le tout. Mais c'est une tactique éprouvée qui permet à un ou plusieurs individus de parler au nom de masses d'autres. Et quelles que soient les masses en question, elles ont toutes ceci en commun qui est une vertigineuse absence de la politique. Elles jouent leur rôle dans la révolution française, dans la révolution russe, elles font trois petits tours et puis s'en vont. Peu importe car elles n'existent que pour faire foule au carnaval et nulle part ailleurs leur présence n'est indispensable. (Wittig, Paris-la-Politique 15-16)

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[144] When Wittig speaks of the danger of one voice opposing the group, she is gesturing towards the historical dynamics of MLF and controversies over its legacy and institutionalization. Among the many groups which molded the MLF, Antoinette Fouque and her *Psych et Po* were key figures, but Wittig and Delphy have since accused her of retrospectively overstating her influence. Delphy accuses Fouque of posing herself as *the* founder of the group that had no singular founder and of branding and profiting from the MLF name. Otherwise stated, according to Delphy, Fouque took hold of the symbolic power of the MLF and spoke for the MLF without the group's consent, claiming jurisdiction and in so doing, actively eclipsing the real work of the MLF and supplanting it with *Psych et Po*. See Delphy, "Les origines du MLF," 137-144 and Delphy and Wittig 6-7.

The pronominal "elles" thus changes according to its enunciative context, spontaneously producing different micro-groups or grouplings ("groupements") who mess with the motion of the whole. If "elles" as a pronoun is unstable, so too are the groups for whom it speaks, and the notions of subjectification that it establishes.

This pronominal deictic thus epitomizes the experiential nature of belonging to an unstable series of groups. While these grouplings supposedly represent the interests of the whole ("l'intérêt général"), they are in fact the "majority" groups that manage to stifle the voice of the "minority." Through a sinister synecdochal logic, these micro-groups of "elles" can be substituted for the entire group of "elles." The grouplings intentionally pervert revolutionary strategies: the group does not represent but *replaces* the masses. For Wittig, however, what is particularly troubling about this process is that these grouplings lack guiding principles or concrete goals. Their "vertigineuse absence de la politique" is paradoxically politics totally devoid of the political. Such politics Wittig suggests, have existed historically in every revolution. Here, the most pessimistic claim is that the pronominal "elles" exists to "faire foule": the pronominal placeholder creates a real-world crowd, that is equally vague, equally interchangeable in the larger equation of politics. The insidious "on" of Perec's "Avant-Propos" has returned; if the carnival needs a crowd of spectators, so, too, does the revolution. So goes the revolutionary tautology: *elles* cannot exist without *elles.* Someone needs to stave off the urgency of action, or as Wittig puts it, keep those chairs warm: "[…] les fesses posées sur leur petites chaises elles peuvent attendre" (*Ibid* 16).

What is most troubling about these insidious, interchangeable "elles" is, as in Perec, the problem of subjective intention. For if "elles" only exists to warm those chairs, can it really be seen as a fully realized subjectivity? We are forced to look back on the whole of *Les Guérillères* in a new light, attesting to what Epps and Katz call Wittig's "dialectical interplay" between "a relatively concrete individual subjectivity" ("je") and a "relatively abstract collective non-subjectivity" (Epps and Katz, Epps and Katz 428). The "elles" of *Les Guérillères,* as much as it is a driving force behind revolution, is hardly a convincing subject position—a perspective from which the world may be apprehended (like "je"). This is perhaps an inherent problem with Wittig's methods of feminization: are our readerly habits too reliant on the first-person plural ("nous")? Does the relative absence of "nous" in Wittig's "elles" prevent the women's subjectivity from becoming fully realized? Like Perec, Wittig implies that any collective, as a constantly changing cohesion of disparate referents, is in some respects subjectless. In this light, Wittig's theorization of the subjectivity of the oppressed is only possible in the singular— and even this subjectivity is fractured.

In "L'Assemblée," the question of pronouns and modes of subjectification comes to a head, as one woman ("elle") becomes an object ("la") singled out from the group. As the vignette opens, the women in power ("les légitimes") are seeking a sack that cannot be found, for unspecified reasons. Eventually, someone ("quelqu'une") decides that one women ("elle") should get it herself. This "personne" has been inconspicuously sitting in a corner, with a lover's arm ("le bras d'une amie") wrapped around her, but she suddenly finds herself interpolated

and exposed. Her exposition is compared to that of Scheherazade or another of Shahryar's wives—a blushing bride on the verge of execution. The deed has been done, or *said* rather:

> L'une d'elles dit d'une petite voix: Qu'on lui coupe le cou. Bien entendu ce ne sont que des mots. Mais l'usage d'un mot, il appartient à Nathalie Sarraute de l'avoir découvert, peut accomplir un glissement vertigineux dans l'organisation de l'espace des personnes en présence. Tout d'un coup les corps ne se tiennent plus de la même façon. Il y a une tension, un raidissement dans le maintien général. L'espace qui entoure l'interpellée se vide. Un gouffre vert se creuse autour d'elle. (Wittig, Paris-la-Politique 25)

The call for an execution instigates a *tropisme* of its own; the women naturally reconfigure the physical space around the accused woman. Language provokes a "flock mentality," or an unconscious shared mental state, as the women collectively part ways, leaving the "personne" vulnerable. Language, here, is material. It impinges on these women's bodies—making them move in spite of themselves.

When the desired sack is finally unearthed, the narrator-witness ("je") cannot imagine its purpose: to cover the accused's head or her hands? To slip her dead body into, when it is thrown into the Seine? It turns out that the sack has but one inscription, one word, "elle," written in capital letters:

> Ce mot, ce petit mot à lui tout seul signifie: tu seras dans cette assemblée parlée à la troisième personne. Il sera parlé de toi comme si tu n'étais pas là. On disposera et statuera sur ton nom, sur ta vie, sur ton corps et toute vivante que tu apparais là, tu ne vaux guère mieux qu'un cadavre dont il faut appareiller les restes. (*Ibid* 26)

If in *Les Guérillères,* the pronoun "elles" unites many separate groups in the neutral collective, here "elle" becomes the mark of exclusion, isolation, and difference. The third-person becomes emblematic of being spoken *about,* of no longer owning one's own narrative. To be the black sheep is not to be denied a political subjectivity, but to be denied the authority to act upon it. The subjectivity of the oppressed, Wittig suggests, is a subject position without jurisdiction, or even *prise de parole.* For this reason, this "subjectivity without authority" experiences an erasure or dissolution of self: "[…] elle est en train de se dissoudre et de disparaître, aspirée tout entière par le mot du sac" (*Ibid* 27). She transforms into the object with which she is identified, disappearing into the material realm.

Watching this *disparition* provokes a crisis of self for the narrator-witness "je". The narrator's lover, also waiting in the audience, coquettishly takes the narrator's hat, smiling and calling her "le petit Wittig." This reference stands out in the world of *Paris-la-Politique,* where unlike *Les Guérillères,* almost no characters are named. The narrator feels she, too, is being singled out: "[…] il [le chapeau] va entrer dans le sac" (*Ibid* 26). This moment poignantly illustrates how easily political authority can be lost; the narrator "je" fears denunciation even by her lover. Wittig, too, can just as easily be thrown into the *mot de sac.*

The execution scene unexpectedly closes with an escape into the metaphysical. Unlike the guerillas, who have forsaken all gods, "elle" is miraculously saved by two guardian angels in a brief *deus ex machina*. The angels tear the sack and almost save "elle" from falling into its hellish abyss—almost. Under the watchful eye of the narrator, "elle" finds herself in an arena, in which a male gladiator awaits. She asks the gladiator to execute her, to martyr her, as a last act of love ("geste amoureux"). The parabole ends with another aphorism: "Dans toute condamnation il y a mise à mort. Celle qui s'accomplit par les mots n'en tue pas moins, même si elle s'accomplit de mort lente […]" (*Ibid* 29). In the mirror universe of *Paris-la-Politique* words can—and do—kill.

Perhaps this is why in the vignette, "CMNT," the stumbling sheep reach a stumbling block that cannot be surmounted: the "judases" and the "acolytes" blocking their path. Wittig's pronominal habits have been reversed, as one first-person plural group ("on") fights back against the advancing masses ("elles"). But no matter the narrators' struggle, they only move backwards ("comme à contre-courant") and they butt up against some kind of slippery, ominous masses ("de lourdes masses glissantes") (*Ibid 40)*. When they finally liberate themselves from the shadowy masses ("des ombres épaisses"), they realize they've been enchanted, fallen victim to the powers of words: "machination, mystification" (*Ibid* 41). Through their mystifying powers, these words have lost all their meaning—all of their Rabelaisian marrow ("la substantifique moelle"). The women's former wanderings are transformed into sleepwalking, as they walk as if in a dark tunnel, running into dark walls and wax figurines. If the shadowy masses around them move, it is not only to "faire foule," but to "faire bande": "Surtout si elles font bande autour de l'une d'entre elles." The "elles" have become threatening automatons, who do not stumble, but move methodically, in mechanical steps. They fall into single file and march as a blind mass awaiting execution: "[…] on s'en souvient si on y survit" (*Ibid* 41). The movement of groups in *Paris-la-Politique* is not one in which you painlessly forget the past, but one in which each group is in a fight to the death over the right to remember.

It is hard to reconcile *Paris-la-Politique*'s dramatic pessimism with *Les Guérillères*'s more measured hopefulness. Clearly, in the span of some thirty-odd years, something has happened to Wittig, to shift her understanding of the political so firmly into the realm of politics. All of the possibility inherent in the guerilla-women's experiments, in their grappling with history and text, seems foreclosed, impossible in the damned universe of *Paris-la-Politique.* In spite of its very real portrayal of the experience of the outsider, *Paris-la-Politique* is firmly planted in a farcical, metaphysical hell. The novel's nightmarish quality paradoxically makes *Les Guérillères* seem even less utopian, all the more real and practical. Together, Wittig's two novels invert our understanding of material and ideal, of utopia and hell. For Wittig, the fantasy of a democratic or communal practice can only ever happen from a "macro" perspective—as the "micro" perspective of experience reveals the hell in which we live.

Rather than conquer her textual reality—or build on her textual political education— *Paris-la-Politique* pays tribute to the dangers of textual obsolescence. The all too real danger of not being read or never being understood eclipses the possibility of ever altering the textual

reality. Wittig points to an entire social world that acts upon the textual reality; these are the many groupling and institutions that condition the text's circulation and its very existence. This social world can easily designate—and execute—a single text, lumping it into a "sack" that ensures its non-circulation. The text—and its ability to alter the textual reality—is always butting up against the enemy, the executioner. Revolution revolves because it is not going anywhere: the black sheep really is at the hands of the flock.

The crisis lurking in Wittig's texts, however, is not so much biographical as it is historical. It is not just about the failure of feminist groups, but the failure of communism more broadly. As we shall see, Jouet shares with Wittig an obsession with the lost historical possibility of communism. Both Wittig and Jouet deploy a retrospective gaze, comparing the communisms of the past with their absence or deformation today. They both use this retrospective stance to zoom in on their own experiences of French communist politics, using these case studies as an attempt to glean where things went wrong. As I will discuss in the next chapter, while Jouet also turns to parable and virtual communities, the form of his text, *Le Cocommuniste,* is radically different. While Wittig did not live to the continuation of communism's failure into the 21st century, Jouet is here to continue to bear witness to its ongoing collapse.

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Chapter 4

Jacques Jouet's "Bad" Communists: Worksite Poetics in *Le Cocommuniste*

It might appear more than a touch *démodé*, in the 21st-century, to refer to someone as a "bad" communist. Debating what it means to be a "good" communist in postindustrial, postcolonial—or even postcommunist—France, is tantamount to denying over fifty years of local and international political history: from the crises of the French Communist Party (PCF) after World War II and May '68, to the rise and fall of international communism (with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall), or even radical Maoist wars on capitalism (in Cuba and Vietnam and throughout Africa). It is a debate that fails to account for communism's widespread failures, as well as its loss of significance—as a political party and an ideology—in the new millennium. This is particularly true in France where large populations of former PCF loyalists not only fled to far-right, neonationalist groups like the Front National, but where a more generalized polarization of the political field has led to more extremist discourse.[145] In light of the *lepénisation* of French political culture, one's status as a "good" or "bad" communist seems a rather moot point—hardly relevant when communism itself no longer seems central to French political culture.

And yet, being a "bad" communist is the somewhat strange choice that undergirds Jacques Jouet's 2014 novel *Le Cocommuniste.* Jouet is playing off of "coco," a slang word for communists marked by its predominately negative connotation (much like the pejorative "commie," or "anars" for "anarchists"). More importantly, its use positions Jouet not only as someone who is *still* interested in communism in the 21st century, but someone who is on the outskirts of communism at large. As a "coco," his communism is a far cry from the communist ideal. This is no wartime *résistance*, no postwar Sartrean *engagement,* nor even the standard devotion of any old *encarté.* But unlike many of his generation, Jouet has not quite forsaken communism, either.

In spite of Jouet's retrospective gaze, I will not be replaying the debates surrounding *engagement* or *dégagement* from my first chapter or even those surrounding the legacy of May '68 from my second and third. (All of which are to some degree outmoded in 21st-century France.) Rather, I will demonstrate how Jouet's understanding of communism is reliant on a particularly French communist imaginary, but also how it is conditioned by the 21st-century literary field. I will demonstrate that Jouet approaches communism from the position of the convalescent: the 21st-century subject who has either experienced or knows preceding histories of communism. Moving in and out of fictional and autobiographical voices, Jouet narrates not only the very particular French communist communities in which he circulated, but the larger, international communities that communism created. By virtue of convalescing, Jouet and his

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[145] For an extended discussion of the changing political field in France, see Emile Chabal's introduction to *France since the 1970s.* Chabal points to the pervasive language of "crisis" in contemporary France and draws attention to a few general trends: the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, growing political extremism, a more established left-right political divide, the rise of postcolonial discourse and politics, the decline of Marxism, and a return to republican discourse. See Chabal 1-17. See also Introduction.

narrators are also forever recovering from the history they record: coming to terms with the various catastrophes of communism and their aftermath.

Jouet's novel is a continuation of—and a foil to—Louis Aragon's four-part novel, *Les communistes* (1939). It is a continuation because like Aragon, Jouet goes to great lengths to portray the social, organizational, and experiential minutiae of various populations of *gauchistes* in and around French and international communism.[146] Jouet also arguably picks up where Aragon left off, adding material both before and after *Les communistes*'s timeline. While *Les communistes* begins with the fall of the Second International in 1916 and continues up until the general strike of 1939, *Le Cocommuniste* flits back-and-forth between a number of spaces, including Stalinist Russia and France before Karl Marx up until the present day. Jouet is attentive to the major events of 20th-century communism (including the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and glimpses of the Red Terror), but he draws special attention to communism's Frenchness; he tracks France's communist prehistory (prior to Marx's *The Civil War in France* and the Paris Commune), well into the present day. In this sense, Jouet draws on both the pejorative "coco," and a more affectionate, secondary use of the term, as a synonym for comrade, compatriot, or fellow. He does not shy away from narrating communist catastrophes alongside the communities it forged.

But while Aragon probes honestly into the many lives affected by the experience and practice of communism, most of Jouet's characters lack sincerity. His "cocos" are often unlikeable or satirized in some sense or another; they are not idealized; they do not offer models for how to best tow the party line. While Aragon's characters are interconnected by complex webs of social, familial, and class associations, Jouet's cast of *guignols* are better described as a hodge-podge of unrelated misfits: young PCF "militants" living in a bourgeois *pavillon* in 1970s France; a son-of-a-ring-master who acts as Stalin's fictional receptionist and voice box; a series of real-life ex-militants from the *bassin creillois*; a dictator from a fictional Latin American country; a lonely novelist in an unnamed Eastern European country after the fall of the Berlin Wall; and so on. Unlike Aragon, Jouet also routinely intervenes in his own text. Using an authorial "je," he narrates his writing process. He also consistently interrupts his own narratives with explanatory commentary, which situates his communists, socially and historically.

Like Wittig's *Les Guérillères,* Jouet does not portray communism in the "ideal," but rather, the "concrete" realities that caused communist ideologies to crack: "Le communisme dans l'idée; le communisme dans le concret. Vains dieux, confrontation!"[147] These are the limit cases that point to the central duality of the singular "le": the boundaries where universal abstraction ("the communist") comes into contact with its variable real-world incarnations (each a version of "the" or "a" communist in its own right). This confrontation between the ideal and the real, between ideology and material reality is meant to shed light on the many

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[146] Both authors have an encyclopedic understanding of the intricacies of local and international communist political organization—one that requires almost any reader to have a copy of Hamon and Rotman's *Génération* on hand.

[147] This phrase is also taken from the back cover of the novel.

"realities" of political thought, or the tension between communism as it is theorized (Rancière's *le politique*) and communism as it is experienced (*la politique*).[148] But not unlike the "grouchos" of Perec's *La Disparition,* Jouet's "cocos" are profoundly disillusioned or disillusioning. "Good" communists are often "bad" in practice, and the reality of political practice is little more than farce.

In the last section of the novel, entitled "Les chiens pavillonnaires, 2," Jouet returns to his native banlieue of Viry-Châtillon. As he walks the streets of his childhood home, Jouet, the authorial "je," begins reflecting on the aftermath of communism, from the perspective of a 21st-century convalescent. He uses a pictorial metaphor to embody the confrontation between ideology and materiality: a snapshot of two mass-produced water bottles (the emblem of rampant capitalism), bearing, due to the angle of the shot, both the red star of communism and the inscription "staline."[149] Taken in 2012, the photo might as well be a meme from "Humans of Late Capitalism" [150]; it is further proof of the paradox of postmodern life, by which global capitalism has usurped every other philosophy, only to spit it out in the form of a Threadless t-shirt or a celebrity retweet. These "modestes bouteilles" nevertheless remain linked, in Jouet's memory, to the 2012 earthquakes in Haiti, and for him, such natural disasters cannot but echo the catastrophe of 20th-century communism:

> […] pour le convalescent du XXe siècle que je suis—je ne sais comment le dire, sinon avec sincérité—la catastrophe du communisme, dévoiement, échec et défaite, a été aussi importante que la shoah. Parfois même, certains jours, davantage. Je comprends très bien que la shoah ait été plus importante que la catastrophe du communisme pour tous mes amis dont la famille a été détruite par l'Allemagne nazie avec l'aide de toutes les collaborations européennes et même mondiales, ici ou là, notamment la française même le nazisme. La catastrophe du sida a pu être pour beaucoup superlative, et la nabka de Palestine aussi. Comment trouver là une objectivité numérique, historique ou même philosophique ? (J. Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 438).

This convalescent contemplates communism from the perspective of its aftermath—from the perspective of what communism has done, created, or destroyed. For Jouet, the 21st-century subject differs from preceding political subjects, because this convalescent subject does not experience politics in the moment, but is characterized by *coming after*, by the fact of being "post": postcommunist, postmodern (or post-postmodern?), postindustrial, and postpolitical. The convalescent does not proceed in the here and the now, but rather, contemplates the past; whatever experience he has of the present is necessarily filtered through the past. In this respect, Jouet's perspective is fundamentally different from Aragon's because the revolutionary potential of communism is at least always partially conditioned, tainted, or foreclosed by its

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[148] See Introduction.

[149] See Annex 1, Image 1 and 2.

[150] "Humans of Late Capitalism" is Tumblr, Facebook, and Reddit online community that aggregates humorous pictures relevant to late capitalism via user input. User submissions usually include photos that juxtapose consumer culture with references to seemingly incompatible political or social philosophies. Examples might include: a board game entitled "class struggle," or a soft drink called "Leninade," which bears a communist sigil and begs consumers to "come and join the party." See Annex 1, Images 3 and 4.

past. Jouet's convalescent subject is recovering from history: he is far from naïve about the sheer prevalence of catastrophes in the 20th century (although he does restrict his gaze to mainly Western European crises). Jouet includes communism among these catastrophes, and while he is all too well of the dangers of comparing historical events, cannot help but privilege the communist crisis. As a convalescent, Jouet is particularly critical of communism as an ideology that has traditionally refused to "acknowledge its own history."[151] Jouet's project is then to narrate these histories, and track their continued effects in the 21st century.

Jouet's anxieties echo those of contemporary French thinkers (like Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean Rolin, François Bon, Antoine Volodine, and others) who understand the problem of communism's failure as one of the collapse of community. Where does community come from, when a principal political philosophy of understanding what is common or shared, is proven to be a failure in practice? What happens to communism's many communities—of *ouvriers, encartés, syndicalistes*, etc.—when the collectives and organizations that bound them have either died out or no longer hold sway over significant portions of the population? In short, what does it mean to be "communist" in the 21st century, after so many failed communes?

Seeing as there is no "objective, historical, or philosophical" approach to this problem, Jouet responds by taking refuge in formal innovation, in what I will be calling his "worksite poetics." In this chapter, I will investigate how this particular formal inclination takes shape in *Le Cocommuniste* and how it allows him to contemplate the aftermath of communism in the 21st-century. I draw the term "worksite" from, "Le chantier," the name of a poem and a collection from Jouet's mid-career writings.[152] Thematically, this term testifies to Jouet's lifelong interest in forms of community, particularly those of the working class. As the child of a hotel manager, Jouet was intimately familiar with construction sites and workers in his local banlieue of Viry-Châtillon. He describes the "chantier" as "une chose importante dans ma formation, un lieu, un phénomène, une permanence […]" (*Ibid* 160-161). This "univers complet," not only exposed him to regional travelers (coming from Alsace, Jura, des Landes, du Havre), but to an international community of manual laborers (hailing from Portugal, Algeria, etc.) (*Ibid* 160-161). Working seasonally in construction also exposed him to a particular form of communal experience, based in the shared work of manual labor, which would influence his entire oeuvre. Finally, as an Oulipian, Jouet is interested in literature as a mode of work, or workshopping (*ouvroir*); the workshop is a space where ideas are negotiated ("worked on" or "workshopped"), but never formally resolved. The process of writing literature is thus always provisional, always a trial run, always to be submitted to further testing.

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[151] Jouet describes his interest in communism as originating in his experience in community theater (which I will describe in more detail later in this chapter). He explains that the project of *Le Cocommuniste* was to unpack certain aspects of communism, notably: "Comment le 'matérialisme historique' faillit sur le plan matériel de l'économie réelle et de l'incapacité d'admettre son histoire (ce n'est pas la 'démocratie" qui m'intéresse là au premier chef) […] je suis parti du Parti sur la pointe des pieds, passablement éprouvé, convalescent politique, tout en gardant un intérêt aigu pour ces affaires" (Lapprand, L'oeuvre ronde 155).

[152] See Jouet, *Le Chantier*.

"Worksite" also speaks to Jouet's necessarily provisional, or "failed" style, which he calls self-consciously irresponsible, bulimic, and unwedded to notions of generic or formal purity (*Ibid,* n.p.). This includes his affinity for unscripted and unedited accumulation, as well as for procedural methods that produce writing on-the-spot (like the episodic daily writing of *La République de Mek-Ouyes*, or one of the many *ateliers* or conferences in which he writes *en live*).[153] I also am using this term to best approximate the provisional form of *Le Cocommuniste* itself, which is constantly shifting between genres (including poetry, theater, short story, essay, etc.) in order to accommodate the many "coco" voices and temporalities it portrays. Not only was the novel born of a failed project (much like Jacques Roubaud's *Le grand incendie de Londres*), but Jouet also opted to include previously published works alongside brand new material.[154] The novel is broken up into seven parts, each taking place in a different time and place, each portraying a different scene in the history of communism: "Les chiens pavillonnaires" (set in the 1900s, '70s, and present-day Viry-Châtillon); "La voix qui n'en faisait qu'une" (set in Stalinist Russia); "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre*" (set in Creil, from the 1950s to the present); "Roman de papier" (in a fictional Eastern European country after the fall of the Berlin Wall); "Enfantin" (set in France before Karl Marx); "Histoire de Povarine" (in modern-day Latin America); and "Les chiens pavillonnaires 2, retour en banlieue" (set again in present-day Viry-Châtillon).[155] This chapter will focus on the sections that deal specifically with the history of French communism: the two "chiens pavillonnaires" sections that bookend the novel and "Une ronde militante."

Treating a problem as grandiose as the 20th-century's many "bad" communists required constantly renegotiating, constantly playing with form.[156] Like Wittig, Jouet turns to different forms in order to voice different communities, at different points in time. For example, his

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[153] Many Jouet scholars have noted his affinity for unedited accumulation and place this stylistic tic under the broad generic rubric of the *roman-feuilleton*. See Schaffner 65-73. See also Lapprand, "Esthétique de l'écriture de Mek-Ouyes" 76. Warren Motte likens Jouet's work to Ross Chambers's notion of "loiterature," due to its digressiveness, but goes on to describe it as a "literature of exhaustion," a term he borrows from John Barth. Not only does Jouet seek to "exhaust" the possibilities of literature by writing in every generic format, but his work often involves procedures based in combinatorics. See Motte 45-53. Examples of Jouet's writing *en live* might include his standing as a long-time host of the radio show *Les Papous dans la tête*, his participation in the *jeudis de l'Oulipo* at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, or the first colloquium on his work, held in Poitiers on June 27th, 28th, and 29th, 2013 during which he completed the 13th episode of *La République de Mek-Ouyes.*

[154] Roubaud's *Le grand incendie de Londres* is also a novel, or rather series of novels, which grew out of other, failed artistic projects. See Roubaud *Le grand incendie.*

[155] The back cover of Jouet's novel makes this spatial-temporal organization very explicit : "La scène se passe: en banlieue parisienne dans les années 1970 / puis en URSS entre la mort de Lénine et celle de Staline (1870-1924 / 1878-1953) / puis dans le bassin creillois entre 1950 et 2010 / puis dans une 'démocratie populaire' après la destruction du rideau de fer / puis en France avant Karl Marx / puis en Amérique latine aujourd'hui / et puis encore, pour finir, en banlieue parisienne aujourd'hui."

[156] This is hardly Jouet's first multi-generic novel. In fact, *Le Cocommuniste* is structured very similarly his to *Bodo* (2009), which chronicles various moments in the history of postcolonial Nigeria, through essay, theater, fiction, and interviews. Nevertheless, Jouet explains that unlike Johnathan Littel in *Les Bienveillants* (2006)*, it would have been impossible for him to write 500 pages on such a violent and complex subject in a single formal mode: "Cela n'est pas moralement, formalement possible. Deux adverbes distants peuvent bien tendre à se rapprocher, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur Travelling?" (Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 77). Form, Jouet claims, harking back to the classic *Cahiers de cinéma* debate, is a moral question.

narrative of Stalinist Russia is a first-person love story from the perspective of Stalin's fictional receptionist, who just so happens to rub elbows with (soon-to-be-executed) Russian formalists; both "Histoire de Povarine" and "Roman de papier," however, are third-person narrations centering on a single individual (the dictator Povarine or the writer Milos) reflecting on their circumstances within fictional, unnamed countries. All of *Le Cocommuniste*'s narratives are also embedded in the explanatory discourse of the "convalescing communist." The novel is hardly limited to the fictional and autobiographical spaces it narrates, but includes several essays on the making of the novel itself. Finally, like Perec, Jouet fosters the formation of new, virtual communities around the creation of the novel itself. In particular, "Une ronde militante" combines formal and procedural experimentation, in order to document the lives of modern-day French communists. As a result, Jouet's "worksite poetics" is far from a single formal inclination or ludic impulse, but the joint venture of several incompatible forms, only loosely united by the shared nickname "coco."

This chapter will begin by drawing on essays and semi-autobiographical short stories from "Les chiens pavillonnaires," to show how Jouet characterizes himself as a friendly "coco," a "bad" communist, or a convalescing communist. I will situate *Le Cocommuniste* within Jouet's lifelong aesthetic project, entitled *La République Roman.* In particular, I will unpack the stakes of Jouet's return to republicanism as a mode of theorizing community. While this may appear to be a conservative return to universalism, Jouet's collective œuvre, entitled *la République du roman*, critically reflects on the novel as a model for community. The next part of my chapter will focus on the particularly French spaces in which Jouet circulated, in order to unearth Jouet's critique of certain strains of militant communism. Finally, in the end of the chapter, I will turn to "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre,*" the novel's most obviously ludic text, as an example of his "worksite poetics." Paradoxically, Jouet's notion of theater is central to his poetic and novelistic work. More particularly, Jouet understands theater to be an inherently documentary genre, and it is this documentary focus that governs the procedures of "Une ronde militante." By interviewing ex-communists and transforming these interviews into poetry, Jouet documents a particularly French, 21st-century communist problem: the abandoned communities of workers left in the lurch by the collapse of 20th-century industrialism.

Dog Days: "Bad" Communists of the Parisian Banlieue

It bears mentioning that the first, and most obvious, "bad" communist among Jouet's *guignols* is Jouet himself. Unlike many of his generation and those slightly older (but like Perec), Jouet was only loosely involved in the far-left communities of May '68. While he was studying at Paris VII-Vincennes at the time, he was not especially involved in *soixante-huitard* student collectives or the growing Maoist movements of 1960s and '70s France. Jouet describes his own participation in May '68 as that of a hapless participant-observer: "[…] je ne comprenais d'ailleurs pas grand-chose, tout en y participant tout le temps! Mais cela m'a permis de découvrir certains aspects de la République en chaos" (Lapprand, L'oeuvre ronde 151). Indeed, most of Jouet's reflections on communism are governed by this paradox: to speak of French communism is already to consider the many crises of the French Republic.

At face value, Jouet's interest in republicanism and the French Republic may appear conservative, given that late 20th century France saw a return to republicanism in the aftermath of May '68 and in light of the increasing polarization of the French political field. After May '68, many disillusioned former militants retrospectively denied that the events had any "political" value. In part, this grew out of a desire, as I briefly described in my chapter on Perec, to characterize May '68 as little more than a failed revolution, or a singular sociocultural event, with limited or no political repercussions on a local or international scale.[157] Wolin argues that during the 1970s, as France "returned to political normalcy," a "cynical interpretation" of May '68 developed, in which the revolution would be little more than "a way station on France's relentless march toward societal modernization" (Wolin, The Wind From the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s 104). Chabal situates this anti-'68 sentiment within broader trends; he explains, for example, that the collapse of Marxism in the 1970s paved the way for identity politics, but also quickened France's transition to neoliberalism (Chabal, Introduction 13). As the French political field became increasingly fractured, various strains of late 20th-century identity politics[158] were met with a reactionary neoliberal critique, which sometimes took the form of neo-republicanism.

In this branch of neo-republicanism, identity politics are seen as little more than *individualisme* and *communautarisme* (both of which are pejorative in French). Most investments in minority identities—be they sexual, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic—are presumed to be fundamentally at odds with universal values; they would lead to the formation of fractured, isolated communities, rather than a unified French state. As a remedy to identity politics, this branch of neo-republican thought places a renewed emphasis on *laïcité* and the need to articulate what qualifies as French identity (*Ibid* 13-17).[159]

Jouet does not conform to this vein of neo-republicanism, in part because his vision of *la république* is ahistorical and draws mainly on literary models. While Jouet often critiques the discourse of the French Republic (particularly in novels like *La République de Mek-Ouyes* or *La Montaigne R*), he does not explicitly theorize the republic in terms of *laïcité* or identity politics. His notion of a republic is rooted less in the modern political state and more in his understanding of his own novelistic practice.[160] In the preface to his collected œuvre, entitled *La République du roman*, Jouet describes his work as partially modeled after *La Comédie humaine*—particularly in its expansiveness and its desire to create a complex universe that holds up a mirror to the real world. But unlike Balzac or Zola, Jouet describes his own work as

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[157] See Ross 3-12.

[158] Chabal mentions the rise of post-colonial identity politics as well as anti-racist politics, both of which sparked reactionary responses (in the form of a desire to articulate the "positive" effects of colonialism and a nostalgia for French Empire). See Chabal 8-11.

[159] This branch of neo-republicanism can be characterized by a distrust of *individualisme* in any form and a desire to subsume any minority identity to a "universal" French identity. See Chabal 15-17.

[160] Camille Bloomfield notes that the political discourse in Jouet is often parodic; Jouet uses parody to critique "la rhétorique politicienne" and "la politique" (which Bloomfield uses to refer to the State and State-run institutions) (Bloomfield, Jacques Jouet 265, 271)

rigorously unscientific and antirealist, declaring that writing can only arrive "before or after the Real" (Jouet, La République préface n.p.).[161]

Jouet's republic is more Rabelaisian than realist: an "omnibus" or "catch-all" ("fourre-tout") universe that welcomes many competing voices without reserve (*Ibid,* n.p.). In *La République préface,* Jouet riffs on Rabelais's utopian community, l'Abbé de Thélème, by inverting the inscription on the abbey's door ("cy n'entrez pas…") into a simple command: "cy entrez" (*Ibid,* n.p.). While Rabelais gives a comical list of all those who shall not enter paradise (including Ostrogoths, clerics, officials, and judges, among others), Jouet openly welcomes all the misfits and rejects.[162] If Jouet declares that "Le roman est une affaire collective," it is because he understands the novel as an inherently collective form and therefore the most appropriate for considering collective experience (*Ibid,* n.p.). Much like the worksite, anyone may enter into the novelistic collective.

In this sense, Jouet's Rabelaisian republic is fundamentally different from reactionary French neo-republicanism, because it is not founded on the articulation and application of universal values, which would find their origins in the French Revolution. It more closely resembles what Chabal calls a "liberal-communitarian" form of republicanism in which the "positive recognition of ethno-cultural difference" would amount to a "pluralizing" of French national culture (Chabal, Introduction 17). Importantly, Jouet does not theorize who would qualify as the subject (or public) of the French state, but rather, draws attention to a diversity of extant communities that already make up modern-day France. They have the right, on principle, to exist in his republic; their entry into his novelistic universe is not conditioned on anything other than their presence.[163] In other words, in Jouet's vernacular, "republican" might well be a synonym for *le vivre ensemble*: "[…] le républicain au sens le plus large, c'est-à-dire, entre soi et non-soi, ce rapport d'équilibre social, et donc de déséquilibre" (J. Jouet, La République préface). Cocommunities are thus characterized by their diversity and inherent tensions, hallmarks of the experience of politics.

With this notion of republicanism in mind, I would like to examine the two stories that bookend the novel, "Les chiens pavillonnaires," and "Les chiens pavillonnaires 2, retour en banlieue," both of which take place in the banlieue of Paris. While the first centers on the bourgeois culture of *pavillons* in 1970s Viry-Châtillon, the second focuses on gangs in the postindustrial working-class community of present-day Ris-Orangis. I will analyze how both sections use humorous allegories about dogs to contemplate the effects of communism on the banlieue of Paris. Jouet's multigeneric, provisional writing style allows him to embed allegories of communism in explanatory commentary. This worksite style allows him to unpack the

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[161] Jouet's "La République préface: préface générale à la République roman," was published by P.O.L. in 2008 (available on the official Oulipo website). An earlier version appeared in the *revue de la BNF* n°2 in 2005.

[162] Jouet routinely references Rabelais in his work. Marrache-Gourad draws attention Jouet's use of the Rabelaisian figures for the reader, like the *vérolés*, in *La République de Mek-Ouyes*. See Marrache-Gouraud 49-52. For Rabelais's description of the Abbé de Thélème, see Rabelais 260-7.

[163] Bloomfield describes Jouet's double interest in communism and republicanism as in part biographical. Local communist politics are more influential over his early, pre-Oulipo political life; later in his career, he will shift his attention to theorizing the "Republic." See Bloomfield, "Jacques Jouet, écrivain politique" 269.

particularities of French communism. It also draws attention to his practice of borrowing voices, as well as his writerly gaze, from the position of a convalescent communist. While the first story depicts the clash between small-town mentalities and hardline miltantism, the second narrates the high-risk behavior of disenfranchised working-class youth. Both, however, populate Jouet's communist republic, offering a glimpse of the diverse political communities of the Parisian banlieue. I would like to argue that they also depict the Parisian banlieue "before" and "after" communism; they highlight the stark contrast between post-*soixante-huitard* militantism and the postindustrial, postpolitical crisis of France today.

Jouet arrived at communism through a very non-traditional path: community theater. While I hope to illustrate that theater is central to Jouet's novelistic practice, I will demonstrate that his involvement in communist community theater left him rather disillusioned with hardline militantism. Living in his native banlieue of Viry-Châtillon in the '60s and '70s, Jouet founded a theater troupe with a handful of friends, adapting everything from Pirandello and Aristophanes to Michaux and Tardieu, in the very particular sociopolitical space of the *Maisons des jeunes et de la culture* (MJC) (*Ibid*, 151-2). MJC were originally created in 1948 under André Philip's presidency, to diffuse republican values through popular education, but they began to multiply in the 1960s (Capdeville and Rey 300). They are functionally very similar to *maisons de la culture*, created under André Malraux's guidance, organizing cultural activities and events. But while *maisons de la culture* cater mainly to a university-educated audience, MJC actively court working-class youth (*Ibid,* 300). For this reason, MJC evoke a cultural middle ground, known for their "idéologie culturelle certes contestatrice mais encore traditionnelle dans ses formes d'expression" (*Ibid,* 300). As one can see from the playwrights he adapted, Jouet's theatrical training was not especially radical (playing with theatrical form would come later, with his exposure to Oulipo), but the sociopolitical context of the MJC was decidedly more leftist.

According to Jouet, the MJC of the 1970s were a hyperpoliticized social space, one that exposed him to a whole array of leftists: from *les scouts de la France* to *la ligue communiste*. In this way, the MJC were more "republican" than other communist spaces, made up of a diverse community of competing groups and philosophies, all somehow connected to communism. His experience in MJC lead him to become a member of the PCF, a somewhat odd choice, given that the standing PCF leadership was often at odds with the communist youth of the banlieue (like May '68 student leaders and organizations) (Lapprand, L'oeuvre ronde 152-155).[164] While Jouet did rally behind the PCF, he was never officially a member (never *encarté),* and he left the party after he stopped working in MJC in 1979. In this respect, Jouet not only took a non-

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[164] Jouet mentions in passing that he cannot explain why he joined the PCF and not some other party (Lapprand, L'oeuvre ronde 152-155). Elsewhere Jouet floats the idea that he joined the PCF because it was where he felt the least out of place or simply because he knew it would infuriate his father (*Ibid* 155). The PCF did not officially endorse the student strikes of May '68, leading to a crisis internal to its own student organization, *l'Union des étudiants communistes (UEC)*. The collapse of the official UEC lead to the creation of several revolutionary organizations, such as *la Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire (JCR)* and *l'Union des jeunesses communistes [marxistes-léninistes] (l'UJC[ML])*. Both of these would have been appropriate venues for Jouet's political fervor, given his MJC coterie. See Capdeville and Rey 325-326.

traditional path towards PCF membership, but he was also likely an outlier in his own group: the lone old-fashioned communist in an organization of far-left radicals.

Viry-Châtillon is one of the many working-class or petit-bourgeois banlieues that would veer right by the end of the century (becoming a Front National stronghold). In the 1970s, however, it offered Jouet with a concrete example of the possibilities of local political organization. For Jouet, MJC and community theater became a kind of "contre-pouvoir municipal," given that their organization was based on a structure that paralleled that of the local municipal counsel (Bloomfield, Jacques Jouet 268-9). Leading *ateliers* in the MJC also allowed Jouet to get up close and personal with ("toucher du doigt") the petite bourgeoisie, particularly through the gaze of his partner at the time, Michèle, whose father was a prison guard and whose mother worked as a store manager (Lapprand, L'oeuvre ronde 156-8). This experience, in turn, lead him to reflect on his own peculiar class consciousness, relative to Viry-Châtillon as a peculiar instance of the Parisian banlieue.

In the first part of *Le Cocommuniste,* entitled "Les chiens pavillonnaires," Jouet parodies his youthful naïveté with respect to politics and class experience. While "les chiens pavillonnaires" was initially conceived as a novel in its own right, Jouet was never able to write the novel, and instead, settled on a thirty-page short story with forty-plus pages of explanatory commentary. The short story involves a young militant couple named Jérémie Romillat and Monique Limoni (doppelgangers for Perec's own naïve bourgeois youth, Jérôme and Sylvie of *Les Choses*). The couple becomes embroiled in a *fait divers,* in which a dog breaks into their Viry-Châtillon *pavillon* while they are away and runs amuck in their house, compelling disgruntled neighbors to call the fire department. The firefighters' intervention only further upsets the trapped canine, and the dog's only refuge is to jump out of an upper-story window. But according to neighborhood lore, rather than fall to the ground, the dog magically takes flight: "[…] c'était un chien particulier," one firefighter reports, "Je n'en avais jamais vu de semblable puisqu'il avait su s'envoler" (J. Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 19). According to the firefighter's eye-witness account, the dog not only uses his ears as brakes, but inflates his cheeks to steer, taking off towards the east, against the dominant west wind of the night (*Ibid,* 19).

The dog's mythical fight and flight becomes a metaphor for the ways in which banal experiences can be infused with political meaning. As Jouet uses free indirect discourse to move in out of the minds of Jérémie, Monique, the neighbors, the firefighter, and even the dog, it becomes clear that any banal factoid can function as evidence of the dog's guilt and thus can be instrumentalized as political propaganda. All those involved have time to debate the true meaning of the dog's invasion, leading to comically incommensurate narrations of the night's events. While neighbors worry that the events prove that the couple's home is a mere "Maison du Peuple," "Pavillon du peuple," or "Petite URSS," for Jérémie and Monique, the dog is a stand-in for reactionary fascists; the couple suspects that the dog is no mere animal, but rather an alt-right informant sent to spy on them: "[…] une race de chien berger allemande puissance 10, loup-garou, loup nazi, loup français de droite extrême" (*Ibid,* 12-13). Eventually, the story closes with Jérémie and Monique feeling violated by the "fascist infiltrator" that has "sullied"

their home. Ever the faithful militants, the couple declare that "property is theft" and sell their house: "Sale chien pavillonnaire vend pavillon pour chien, à n'importe quel prix" (*Ibid,* 27).

The narrative of the dog-taking-flight feels like a straightforward enough allegory of the insularity of a given political community, and it demonstrates, with relative ease, the generational gaps and extremist political rhetoric that lead to a progressive polarization of the French political sphere. The long-term, conservative, middle-aged population is clearly at odds with twenty-something youth, who had only recently moved to the banlieue. If such incompatible political perspectives come head-to-head over the imagined flight of a panicked dog, no wonder the young couple fled the suburbs for the leftist sanctuary of the city proper. And if this story is only testimony to the early polarization of the Parisian banlieue in the 1970s, one can imagine that the situation was likely to worsen as the century progressed.

Jouet concludes the section by returning to his native banlieue, observing the local homes and inhabitants, and offering commentary on his own story. He suggests that Viry-Châtillon is emblematic of the paradoxical in-between state of *banlieue pavillonnaire*, that of "la banlieue la plus moyenne […] la banlieue la plus mediocre, la banlieue la plus pavillonnaire" (*Ibid,* 33). Born of the communist ideology of the "Ville Neuve," or self-sufficient workers' cities, by the 1970s *pavillons* hosted a formerly working-class population that had undergone significant bourgeoisification. Located somewhere along the spectrum from the mass housing complexes of the *Habitations à Loyer Modéré (HLMs)* and squalid *bidonvilles*, *pavillons* evoked the ambiguous in-between status of petit bourgeois self-sufficiency. In this ambiguous state, two different understandings of bourgeois privacy cohabit: that of intimate familial space ("l'intime cosy") and that of protective enclosure ("l'autodéfense nettement moins souriante") (*Ibid,* 36). This tension between comfort and defensive isolation in the bourgeois imaginary aptly characterizes not only the middle-aged population of "Les chiens pavillonnaires," but the couple themselves, suggesting that they are not as free-thinking nor as radical as their rhetoric suggests.

For Jouet, this liminal space thus replicates the paradox of the young couple's militancy. He targets, in particular, their reluctance to acknowledge their own class hypocrisy. For both Jouet and the young couple, France of the 1970s was a space in which being politicized was the default: "La politique n'était pas gratuite, mais elle était obligatoire" (*Ibid,* 35). Communism, in this light, was likewise little more than a reflex, than an obligatory response:

> Ce qu'il advient à ce moment par le mot *communisme* était une réaction rationnelle, rationnelle et rationaliste, ou du moins qui se voulait telle, et devait, dans notre naïveté, s'imposer comme une évidence, pour faire les parties communes, les choses partagés qu'on dit aussi *parties* [longue liste de choses "publiques"] n'aient pas moins d'importance aux yeux du privé que le midi personnel qu'on voit à sa porte et qu'on appelle ses biens. (*Ibid,* 37)

Communism, for the young Jouet and his compatriots, had been fully sublimated from the realm of experience into the realm of ideology. It presented itself as a sign of rationality, a self-evident solution, and a means of theorizing *la chose publique*. This theoretical solution,

however, had little to do with actual material existence—like that of the couple, who by many accounts, are fairly well off.[165] In addition, Jérémie and Monique (like Jérôme and Sylvie, or Jouet and Michèle) are still clearly embroiled in petit bourgeois notions of success, emblematized by the ownership of a *pavillon* property in and of itself. As a result, their sense of class consciousness is only "too conscious":

> […] la 'conscience de classe' n'était justement que trop consciente, incapable—les camarades ne l'envoyaient pas dire—de gagner vraiment les réflexes et l'inconscient, peut-être l'inconscience. On ne peut pas *devenir* d'origine ouvrière. Il faut dire que les intellectuels à l'usine, à *l'atelier,* des années 1970s n'emportaient pas beaucoup plus d'enthousiasme et d'estime dans les allées du Parti, à tort ou à raison. L'instinct de classe, oui, mais où est la raison de classe? (*Ibid,* 38)

For Jouet, the couple is emblematic of an intellectual class for whom communism was always already discursive and rhetorical. Their language of class consciousness was in some respects patently disingenuous, mere lip service to material realities they had not experienced and could not possibly understand. "One cannot become working class," Jouet warns.[166] One cannot falsify a class experience that is not one's own; one cannot claim ownership over a class identity just because it is a fashionable or a political necessity. And if these intellectuals could not come to terms with their own class identity, they could not profess a class instinct, but more importantly, they could not reason as a class; they could not effectively or coherently critique their class situation. For Jouet, this language without material experience creates a dangerous precedent. It produces thinkers well-equipped in the language of class consciousness, who lay few actual stakes on the line. After all, Jérémie and Monique sell their house not because they are facing any real threat (of eviction political ostracism, etc.), but because of perceived slights of a supposedly fascist dog.

Jouet clearly bases this portrait of communist intellectuals on his own experience in the MJC, especially the MJC directors' union.[167] He claims that while the union was majority *Confédération Général de Travail (CGT)*, it was made up of few traditional industrial or manual workers. The language of unionization, as a result, was thus little more than an alibi: "Oh! ce n'était pas un syndicat bien crucial, au sein du mouvement ouvrier... puisqu'il n'avait rien d'ouvrier" (*Ibid,* 73). While these directors spouted one-liners about the necessity of proletarian culture, it was clear that they were not actually invested in popular education. Jouet contrasts their behavior with the ideal of Lenin: a bourgeois intellectual, who was well-versed in

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[165] For example, Monique had recently returned from a trip to East Germany, and the couple, according to neighbors, appear to live off of little more than poetry and *Humanité* tracts. See Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 11, 15.

[166] Jouet returns to this problem later, when describing the class hypocrisy of he and Michèle in their youth: "On fréquenta les débats de société dans les MJC ou les centres sociaux. On vendait le journal de classe, sur le marché, sans trop savoir de quelle classe on était. Voulait-on être de la classe ouvrière ? Encore une fois, ce n'était pas possible" (Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 50).

[167] Jouet does little more to specify *who* these intellectuals actually were. He only notes that he was never really an "écrivain communiste" and that his participation in the short-lived group *Poètes d'aujourd'hui* (from 1976-1979), could only have resulted in the "organic intellectualism" of someone who writes articles for minor local newspapers (like Viry-Châtillon's own *La Marseillaise de l'Essonne).* See Jouet, *Le Cocommuniste* 75.

literature and culture, but nevertheless remained dedicated to educating and promoting the working class: "Lénine mettait les ouvriers eux-mêmes en première ligne de leur ligne, leur émancipation, leur promotion [….]" (*Ibid,* 38). While Lenin placed workers in charge of their own destiny, this generation of intellectuals functionally usurped workers' self-determination, by decontextualizing the language of class consciousness. Unionism was little more than an opportunity to show off one's rhetorical flair, a mere vehicle for transmitting PCF rhetoric: "[…] un dogme à transmettre, voire à imposer au nom d'une clarté axiomatique dont les prémisses étaient pourtant discutables et auraient dû pouvoir être discutées, ce qui n'était qu'à peine le cas" (*Ibid,* 75). Rather than interrogate how to put communist rhetoric into practice, MJC intellectuals squabbled over what language to use, transforming it into a unilateral tool for enforcing and controlling party dogma. The language of emancipation effectively became another marker of bourgeois power.

While Jouet is fairly critical of naïve, obligatory militantism, he ends "Les chiens pavillonnaires," on a more positive note. If he inherited anything from being socialized by communism, on the outskirts of Catholicism and "familial commercialist capitalism," it was to be wary of "clan mentalities" (*Ibid,* 73). If dogmatic militantism offered a concrete example of the group-think of close-minded intellectuals, communism nevertheless allowed him to envision success as something that was never solitary, nor competitive (*Ibid,* 73). Alongside his "decisive" encounter with Oulipo in 1978, it also encouraged him to continually seek out his own fraternities or communities, to "faire le choix du travail, du terrain et des collègues" (*Ibid,* 75).[168] Jouet's encounter with communism also encouraged him to revolt against the silence, or rather, whispers imposed by bourgeois decency, lack of power, or political circumstance:

> Surtout tâcher de ne rien perdre de ce qui est à voir du territoire invisible et banal dans lequel se promène la majorité non point silencieuse mais qui ne peut parler qu'à voix basse pour d'évidentes raisons de discrétion naturelle, de manque de haut-parleurs ou de clandestinité. (*Ibid*, 75)

While Jérémie and Monique's political fervor might be misguided, it is still better than the stifled rumors of the neighbors, who fear speaking out loud. Like Oulipians, Jouet is wary of public political performance and the necessity of speaking one's politics out loud. But, he is careful to note that misguided and obligatory politics are both are far superior to being actively silenced: to be denied a voice—or even a mere voice box.

With this in mind, one cannot help but wonder if the true victim in the *fait divers* is not the dog himself. The reader does hear snippets of the dog's internal monologue (namely that as man's best friend, he should be freed), but we have little understanding of his actual motivations or stakes in his own entrapment. And yet, is the dog not caught between two different clans, with no clear possibility for escape, apart from a mythical flight from reality? Jouet's choice of animal is proof that his communist imaginary is distinctly literary: dogs are

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[168] Jouet takes for granted that this ability to choose already indicates he has a certain class status. As I argued in Chapter 1, Oulipo is still mainly composed of middle-aged bourgeois white Parisian intellectuals, who sometimes have an ambiguous relationship to class and political practice.

common figures for communists, throughout American, Russian, and French fiction.[169] In the Soviet literary tradition, dogs tend to evoke, not Soviet technological prowess (after the dog-astronauts of the Space Race), but the failed communist ideal: Bulgakov's 1927 *The Heart of a Dog*, for example, uses the figure of the dog to satirize the failure of the ideal Soviet Man. But which failed communist does the dog figure here? The dog is clearly not Soviet: he has no masters and no loyalty—no obvious dedication to any one brand of communism. It feels more likely that the dog, like Jouet, is one of the hapless masses, someone who intervenes in the communist experiment without really understanding what is going on. With this in mind, the conclusion to the allegory is self-consciously ambiguous: is the dog's escape meant to portray a hopeful future, a vague sense of possibility for communism? Or is it mere fantasy… the only means of salvaging the French Communist tradition and ripping it from the political turmoil of the *pavillon* in-between?

In the guise of further explanation, Jouet prefaces this declaration with yet another fictional allegory for communism, still within the frame of the first section of the novel, "Les chiens pavillonnaires." This time the allegory comes in the form of an imagined dialogue between himself, an aviator, Vladimir Lenin, and Lenin's partner, Nadezhda Krupskaya. The dialogue harks back to an earlier moment in Viry-Châtillon's history, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the banlieue housed the Port-Aviation, one of the first major aerodromes in France. The city still bears the marks of this history, notably in its streets named after famous aviators (which Jouet enumerates at great length). Lenin, as an admirer of the aviation industry, is said to have visited the Port-Aviation; Eugène Lefebvre, or Charles de Lambert, one of Port-Aviation's first pilots, was also rumored to be distantly related to Russian nobility and thus could have fled Russia after the 1905 revolution (*Ibid,* 63-64). Jouet uses these historical factoids as a means of interrogating how turn-of-the-century Russian history and Leninism would have impacted the communist microcosm of Viry-Châtillon.

Throughout the episode, Lenin and Krupskaya engage in an intellectualized debate regarding how the aviation industry would best serve the revolution, but their idealism is constantly undone by the aviator's practicality. When Lenin hopes to use planes in war, the aviator warns that planes are too fragile and bombs are too heavy; when Lenin describes the valor of French pilots, the aviator reminds him that German pilots are better trained (*Ibid,* 64-65). Eventually it becomes clear that Lenin and Krupskaya are merely exchanging rhetoric or coming up with new book ideas—like a sequel to *Que faire?* (1905) about aviation. Jouet is clearly delighted to transform Leninist slogans ("La révolution, c'est la guerre") and rhetoric (like "strategy, tactics, and means") into wordplay, and his discussion of Leninism and Bolshevik

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[169] There are numerous examples of communist dogs throughout literature. A few notable examples might include: the puppies of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), who are reared by the pig Napoleon (a stand-in for Stalin) as guard dogs; Georgi Vladimov's *Faithful Ruslan, The Story of a Guard Dog* (1979), about a guard dog in a Gulag, who looks back on his past, only to be summarily executed. In the French context, one might mention: Jean Rolin's *Un chien mort après lui*, François Bon's *Calvaire de Chiens*, or Antoine Volodine's *Terminus Radieux* and *Dondog*. Jouet's novel is not only well-versed in the Soviet literary tradition (citing novelists and Russian formalists alike, including Gorky, Bulgakov, Pasternak, Mayakovsky, and Gogol), but also includes a number of minor communist authors, such as the Hungarian poet Gyula Illyés, who wrote a poem entitled "Les chiens volontaires."

politics is not especially sophisticated. But Jouet is not aiming to be a realist, so it comes as no surprise that he concludes this brief interlude on the Soviet Republic by turning, once more, to Rabelais's Abbé de Thélème:

> La révolution passe par le 'Cy n'entrez pas!' de Rabelais, hélas. Ici n'entrez pas, koulaks et trotskistes, les blancs et les cosaques, sortez de dessus l'échiquier (légitime défense). Cy n'entrez pas, cagots et matagots! poètes formalistes, déformez-vous pour former et formateur. Sortez d'ici, ratiocineurs et nostalgiques, comploteurs et opposants! [....] Tous les métiers sont dans la République, toutes les passions. On peut danser à l'improviste dans un restaurant polonais sans être irresponsable. Il y a même des grèves de droite [....] S'il n'y a pas de la place pour tous –et pas forcément programmée: une place potentielle...—, le communisme est indigne de confiance. C'est dommage qu'on ait si mal engagé l'affaire. Le communisme n'aura pas été le stade suprême de la République. Mais n'anticipons pas. (*Ibid,* 67-68)

Clearly, Jouet uses both Lenin and Rabelais as an excuse to return to the precepts of his own *République du roman.* He laments that the communist project excluded so many, from Trotskyist and Russian formalist dissidents, to pretty much anyone who could be labeled outsider or an enemy of the party (taking the extreme example of someone who dances in a Polish restaurant). He reiterates the main tenant of his own republican project: that any and all may enter. He even expands this tenet by referencing Oulipian potentiality, or the notion that a given form is characterized by all the possible novels it could produce and all the possible meanings a future reader could ascribe to it.[170] Any *potential,* or possible, subject should have a place.

While I will close this section with a reading of the last section of *Le Cocommuniste,* also entitled "Les chiens pavillonnaires," it is clear that even within the limited context of the first section of the novel, there are numerous competing perspectives on communism. From Lenin to the PCF, to Rabelaisians and aviators, to bourgeois *pavillonnaires*, MJCs, and dogs, Jouet chose Viry-Châtillon to be a microcosm of communist history at large. The hyperbolic manner in which communism influenced just one limited space and region, points to its broad historical relevance, reiterating Jouet's initial claim that communism was a catastrophe, a shock felt everywhere in the world: "depuis le Mexique jusqu'au Bengale, Viry-Châtillon, Pékin, Tirana, Cuba et le Bénin de Kérékeu" (*Ibid,* 72). Jouet may be attentive to communism's international effects, but his perspective is a far cry from *soixante-huitard* Third-Worldism; the dog's flight and the array of communist rejects challenge any illusions of a united international communist front. Like the "elles" of Wittig's *Paris-la-Politique*, Jouet's militant communists are much more interested in squabbling over banalities.

These competing communist voices also intentionally stage the republican logic of the novel, reminding us that the novel is not a mere defense against those shushing or shushed voices, but that the novel is intended to be less a *porte-voix* than a *prête-voix* (*Ibid,* 78). The purpose of the novel is not to speak *for* others, but to *borrow* their voices, however

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[170] See Introduction.

temporarily. In this way, Jouet's thinking rejoins that of Perec and Wittig, as he is critical of those who pretend to speak on behalf of others, but actually use the voice of others to their own ends. His borrowing of others' voices is an attempt to take on the role of the *porte-parole*, while still being conscious of its ethical consequences and limitations.

In practice, however, being a *prête-parole* means that Jouet borrows the voices of only extreme, caricatured examples of communists. In other words, he sidesteps the ethical quandary of *speaking for* by only ventriloquizing *guignols*. Voicing these caricatures dictated the use of the allegorical form (apt for representing clichés or types); they are also meant to paint the dangers of dogmatic militantism in its extremes, looking forward to the book's other sections on communist dictatorships (in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America). Jouet suggests that the boundaries between misguided dogmatism and murderous dictatorships are more porous than they may seem. Even caricatures reflect aspects of real life. But, there are limitations to the representativity of these humorously "bad" communists. In both "Les chiens pavillonnaires," Jouet's practice of *prête-voix* is necessarily fraught, based on inventing voices whose motivations are somewhat flat or disingenuous at best. Borrowing is always conditioned by the disillusionment of the convalescing communist.

The last section of *Le Cocommuniste,* "Les chiens pavillonnaires 2, retour en banlieue," is structured similarly to the first, including another allegory of communist dogs with explanatory commentary, and more reflections on the political makeup of Viry-Châtillon. The main difference is that this section is situated in the present day, when Viry-Châtillon has become a Front National stronghold, and only superficially bears the markers of its communist past (in its street names, for example).[171] The allegory of this section bears none of the (albeit muted) optimism of the first; it definitively takes place *after* the heyday of communism, at the height of France's neoliberalism, during the Sarkozy era (2007-2012). Its narration, even more than the first "chiens," is marked by the fact of convalescing, which is *en medias res;* this is a France that is in the process of recovering from communism—and capitalism—but this convalescence is indeterminate, with no obvious end in sight.

The allegory of "chiens, 2" begins with a description of an aging ex-communist, Elias Souvarine, who bears the name of Stalin's first French biographer, Boris Souvarine.[172] While Elias had the opportunity to work on a model prison (one possible *chantier* for the late 20th-century working class), he has spent most of his life building upscale offices or employed by a company named COMMUMMOC, which rehabilitates dilapidated former *cités ouvrières* (*Ibid* 439, 442). Souvarine's places of work already speak to a postindustrial banlieue in crisis. The *pavillon* has been exchanged for other failed communist experiments, which are now decaying in the absence of industry. The only career paths for the working class are found in the harbingers of high capitalism: prisons, offices, and the concrete jungle.

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[171] Jouet is struck that a major thoroughfare still bears the name "Avenue de l'Union Soviétique" and that it has not been rebaptised something more reflective of the modern French state, like "rue des Droits-de-l'homme-garantis-par-l'ONU" or "boulevard de la Démocratie-Protégée-par-la-CIA") (Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 434).
[172] See Souvarine.

Souvarine superficially bears a resemblance to Jérémie—especially in his political mediocrity. Souvarine was an avid reader in spite of his working-class childhood, and while he was involved in union politics, he was never officially unionized ("encarté dans un syndicat") (*Ibid* 440-441). Like many ex-militants, Souvarine's life seems to have climaxed at his revolutionary youth; he is known for having "brillé dans une grève" (*Ibid* 440). Even then, his revolutionary heroism is mild at best; he stopped construction in its tracks, complaining about "racism" in the worksite's hierarchy[173], but ended up being malleable enough that the bosses could take advantage of him. Elias had the merit of not being *too* revolutionary:

> [Les patrons] ont tout de suite vu que c'était un homme à qui on pouvait parler et qui savait la méthode pour relancer sans ambiguïté la machine après un accord. Le quotidien du chantier n'en irait que mieux. Ils en étaient venus (sans le dire) à bénir le conflit. (*Ibid* 441)

Souvarine is emblematic of the pliable, middle-of-the-road pseudo-revolutionary: the working-class counterpart to Jérémie and Monique's mediocre bourgeois militancy. Souvarine may have a memory of his most militant moment, but this hardly makes up for a lifetime of inactivity.

The allegory does not center on Souvarine, but his nephew, Jean-Chrétien Blanche-Belly (JCBB), the child of an unemployed alcoholic father and a working mother of three, who lives near the Ris-Orangis, a commune southeast of Viry-Châtillon. JCBB is a glorified man-child, who voluntarily sleeps in a cabinet, like a working-class Harry Potter, or as Jouet describes him, a self-styled "chien de fusil, chien de fœtus" (*Ibid* 443). JCBB may be a dog, but he's hardly a communist, or even the child of communists. Unlike the allegory of the flying Doberman, his story is all too cliché. A jobless, wayward *jeune de banlieue* sees a clique form around him; this clique, in turn, progressively radicalizes, developing into a full-fledged gang (although Jouet never uses this word, preferring more neutral terms like "groupe"). This gradual, but inevitable transformation is punctuated by the repetition of the line "un groupe se forme": the group shares a lazy routine of cigarettes-and-loitering-in-the-metro, a hoodie-and-bling uniform, a dislike of work, and most especially, a hatred of the police (*Ibid* 445-6).[174]

While eventually the group's activities will escalate, the gang becomes infamous for a hazing ritual described in the press as "The Stapler Gun Affair" ("l'affaire des agrafeuses"). The affair begins with the group robbing a truck loaded with hardware, stealing only stapler guns ("agrafeuses pistolets") (*Ibid* 447). The group stows the loot in Corbeil-Essonnes (another commune southeast of Viry-Châtillon), in an industrial brownfield ("friche industrielle"), generously given to them by the state for their "activité culturelle de façade: un groupe de rock d'ailleurs moyennement créatif" (*Ibid* 447). In the comfort of their postindustrial wasteland, the gang, made up of seven young men, designs an initiation ritual, which involves playing a game

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[173] Elias Souvarine's ethnic and/or racial origins are not explicit, but he does defend African workers from unfair treatment by their Portuguese foreman and ostensibly French bosses. See Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 441.

[174] The gang's uniform is the only aspect of the group that bears a communist past; the gang members have a taste for metal and copper, brute force, and "[… la] culte des insignes, têtes de mort, croix diverses (mais pas nazies), Guevara, Mandela, dont ils ne connaissent pas tous la biographie" (Jouet *Le Cocommuniste* 447-8).

of roulette with the stapler guns. With JCBB's encouragement, each gang member takes a turn at stapler-gun roulette without incident, until they get to the sixth member:

> Nul ne pouvait dire s'il était honnête, que le tireur avait eu peur au dernier moment. Et par conséquent, le convaincre de lâcheté eût été expéditif. L'agrafe projetée se planta dans la peau, mais superficiellement. Ce n'était pas de jeu. Il ne restait qu'une chose à faire, et c'était de récidiver, tirer un deuxième coup avec plus de détermination encore en plaquant fort le fer contre la peau. Le garçon tira trois fois de suite, pour qu'il ne soit pas dit que son malheureux premier coup était une faiblesse. (*Ibid* 450)

Not only was this anonymous young man daring enough to pull the trigger, but when the staple only somewhat injured him, he had the gusto to try two more times. The sixth gang member's courage develops such a mythical status that several neighborhoods (like Les Tarterêts) and departments (Melun) try to claim him—and he even becomes associated with the legendary magic of the Fontainebleau forest. The myth goes so far as to claim that the member was willfully uninjured: "La plaie ne s'infecta pas car le héros le lui avait interdit" (*Ibid* 454).

In the aftermath of the game, however, myth is brutally contrasted with reality. It turns out that the staple has been lodged in the young man's skull, approximately one millimeter away from his brain. After sustaining this traumatic brain injury, he can no longer speak (*Ibid* 454). The seventh roulette player is so traumatized by merely watching the injury that he has a minor breakdown and refuses to participate in the ritual; the group punishes him by stripping him naked and coating him in yellow paint (*bid* 451). It is hard to imagine a more bizarre or unsettling high-stakes game of chance. The youth are so self-destructive as to choose a version of roulette that is more likely to cause long-term debilitating damage than death. In the aftermath of the affair, several state-run committees (a "cellule psychologique" and a "super-cellule psychologique") are convened to analyze the youths' behavior; they conclude, quite bluntly, that the young men did not want to "run the risk of aging" (*Ibid* 454).

Jouet's doppelganger, Souvarine, offers a final verdict on the Stapler Gun Affair, situating this self-destructive game within the larger crisis of the French Republic:

> Il y a quelque chose de bouché au royaume de la République, dit Souvarine. Le capitalisme fait de la richesse et ne voit que la solution de richesse pour emporter les pauvres dans la prospérité. Il n'y a de miettes de pain que s'il y a d'abord de la brioche. Mais quand le capitalisme ne marche pas, il n'y a pas de solution de rechange. Pour l'heure, il marche confortablement sur le cadavre du communisme. Il peut le fouler aux pieds car il a réussi à faire croire que ce n'est pas lui qui l'a tué, qu'il est innocent de sa mort, que le communisme est mort de sa belle mort, tout seul dans son lit, de sa maladie congénitale. Les gaz émis par le cadavre sont faibles. Aucune chance qu'il provoque le renversement du riche.

> Alors, s'il en est ainsi, pourquoi ne pas jouer à ce jeu de la chance et de la malchance ? La chance est une blessure bien saignante et concrète. Du moins se passera-t-il quelque chose et l'on existera par soi-même. (*Ibid* 453)

Jouet suggests that in modern-day France, characterized by the collapse of communism and the dominance of neoliberal capitalism, there is no future for these disenfranchised youths. They have no possibility of upward social mobility, or even of acquiring a few scraps of success. If their future already foreclosed, why not play a sadistic game of roulette? Indeed, why should they bother aging when they have nothing to gain—and nothing to lose? Jouet uses the metaphor of a cadaver to describe the extent of communism's collapse and the aftermath of this collapse. Communism's demise has been so complete, that even its decomposing remains have little effect. Jouet hints at the complicity of capitalism in communism's demise, but also implies that communism itself is to blame, suffering, as it was, from an inherited disease.

After a series of crimes, the young men become embroiled in a car chase and kill a police officer. Eventually, the group decides to take their vengeance on the police by coordinating a dog attack on the officer Javert (named after *Les Misérables*'s villain). With the help of one "Bouba" (ostensibly named after the rapper)[175], they decide to go after the officer while he's filling his gas tank. The rapid beast that they acquire loosely recalls the fascist dog of the first "chiens pavillonnaires":

> C'est une bête exceptionnelle, presque aussi grande que son maître, d'un gris métallisé, et des muscles d'athlète, deux roustons pleins comme des œufs de cane. (*Ibid* 459)

But the plan falls apart when the Doberman attacks the wrong target, going after, not Javert, not a *pompier,* but a *pompiste* (a gas station attendant). Javert acts quickly, throwing his cigarette butt at the dog, and the dog and everything in the surrounding area catch fire. In the end, the dog dies in front of the telephone booth from which JCBB has been coordinating the attack; JCBB finds himself trapped in the fire, his exit blocked, quite literally by the dog's cadaver: "Et maintenant, je veux sortir, mais je ne peux plus sortir. Le cadavre me dénonce. Le cadavre se venge" (*Ibid* 461). While the episode ends ambiguously (with JCBB proclaiming he will endure a "baptism by fire"), we will learn that JCBB survives and ends up in prison, where he eventually converts to Islam. The city will only bear traces of these two affairs, these dog days, in the form of errant dogs roaming the *cité*: "La cité pavillonnaire fantôme était habitée par des chiens errants" (*Ibid* 475).

This final dog allegory is unsettling in the way that it juxtaposes bizarre or ridiculous violence (stapler gun roulette and a gang-dog-attack) and blatant clichés about gang life (with all of its bling and fury). Implicit in this narrative is the question of culpability and of race or ethnicity. On the one hand, the gang members appear responsible for their own self-destruction, as they are actively courting danger. On the other hand, Jouet does not go to great lengths to humanize the police. In fact, he implicitly critiques the progressive militarization of the police, variously referring to them as "les flics," "les cow-boys," "les taureaux de la République en uniforme renforcé," or even "ceux qui se déguisent en Monsieur Tout-le-monde et frappent de biais" (*Ibid* 446). The gang members' names are somewhat ambiguous, implying they are of French and African, or possibly Eastern European origins (JCBB, Boris Kéramand,

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[175] Booba is the stage name of Elie Yaffa, a French rapper who first gained critical acclaim in the early 2000s, when he was performing with the group Lunatic.

Joris Batifoglio, Youssef Bemba, Micha Lebleuze, and Momo Sakkoki), but they are not explicitly linked to a single ethnic group. Rumors of a gang-rape (involving a young woman with the star of David in staples on her body) imply they are anti-Semitic, possibly Muslim (*Ibid* 456). Their parents, while grief-stricken, have suffered too much from national hatred ("mépris national") to act upon their sons' behalf (*Ibid* 461). Souvarine's nephew (in spite of the gang's possible anti-Semitism) is no radical; JCBB seems more interested in piercings and his girlfriend than any political agenda. In the end, Jouet makes light of these dark allusions to religious, racial, and police violence; he does not actively condemn them, but he does not hide their traces.

Jouet's commentary on the episode is uncharacteristically brief compared to the first "chiens." This time, the scales are tipped in favor of the story (42 pages to a mere 3 pages of commentary). He remarks that returning to the banlieue is often unsatisfying and underwhelming ("pas effectif" or "pas enthousiasmant") (*Ibid* 481). In the guise (once again) of further commentary, he relates to the reader two brief affairs: a break-in from when he was a director of the MJC at Ris-Orangis, in which local youth engaged in a food fight after hours, and another occasion, on which he farted loudly while being robbed in the Parisian metro (*Ibid* 482). These *fait divers* may not amount to much, but they suggest that even outlandish allegory has some grounding in everyday life. Indeed, Jouet's long-winded meta-commentary often frames his narratives with carefully documented research. He self-consciously steps outside of the most basic level of narrative, pausing to situate his fiction within larger historical trajectories or crises of the present. More often than not, Jouet juxtaposes his own experience with the stories he tells, providing his life as yet another historical case study. When his commentary is not unpacking history or his own life, it leads readers through his figural and abstract thinking.

His dog allegories, like the "chiens pavillonnaires" themselves, are also conspicuously unfinished. The metaphor of the dog is unstable, with unclear referents. At points, dogs appear to figure hapless observers or participants (the dog trapped in the *pavillon*) or volatile, disenfranchised youth (the gang members). At other times, the dogs figure communism's collapse in the face of capitalism (the dog's cadaver) or the discarded remnants of communism in the banlieue (the errant dogs). Any which way, Jouet's allegory of communist "dog days" is provisional; this *chantier* is never quite finished, never established into a fully-realized novel. But, I would like to argue, Jouet's novel is self-consciously incomplete. After all, what better allegory for the collapse of communism than an unfinished novel, made up of riotous caricatures, born of a failed project? By the end of the novel, the communist project appears to be *a priori* failed; the only thing that remains in progress is a never-ending convalescence from communism's past.

Jouet uses the two "chiens" narratives to track the long-term effects of communism on the French banlieue. He draws a stark contrast between historical extremes: the apex of French communism and the height of its collapse. In the second half of this chapter, I will address a very different example of Jouet's representation of French communism and of the practice of borrowing others' voices. "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre,*" unlike the two "chiens pavillonnaires," is not reliant on *guignols*, but rather interviews that Jouet conducted, with real people about their lives as communist activists. This documentary aesthetic offers a

substantially different vision of what it means to borrow a voice, not through allegory, but through documentary poetry and theater. "Une ronde militante" also offers a foil to "les cocos-guignols," turning to that secondary, more affectionate use of the term: these are the people whose lives were forged in and around communism, whose experiences were shaped by their *militantisme* or *syndicalisme*, whose very identities and notions of self were constructed in and around the communal project of 20th-century communism. While these portraits, too, offer little hope for the future of communism, they do speak to the power of community (even in communism's collapse) and the potential for communal practice. Jouet's novel becomes a last refuge for the dying voices of ex-communists; it is a last-ditch attempt at documenting a community that is quickly disappearing.

Worksite Poetics: Jouet as a "Bad" Oulipian and Community Organizer

It is tempting to continue enumerating Jouet's demonstrations of communist "failures," especially in a novel that abounds in allegories for "bad" communists (and communist dogs). But, given that one of my central interests has been formal experimentation as a means of treating politics, it seems more appropriate to linger over the novel's most ostensibly formalist experiment, "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre*" and its attempt at documenting, or borrowing, the voices of real-life "cocos." The play and poetry collection makes up the third section of *Le Cocommuniste* and demonstrate the centrality of theater—especially community theater—to Jouet's current work. After all, one primary generic mode by which Jouet understands the novel is, oddly enough, as a venue for theater. For Jouet, theater distinguishes itself from other (Oulipian) formal experiments in its ability to document contemporary history and politics. (I will continue to interrogate the presumed incompatibility between Oulipo and politics later in this chapter.) Jouet's *Bodo* (2009), for example, centers around the Nigerian theatrical tradition of *wassan kara,* in which everyday people reenact important historical events.[176] Like *Bodo,* "Une ronde militante" presumes that theater is a privileged form for popular expression: the space in which the people can speak *for* themselves or "loan" (*prêter*) their voices to the actors on stage.

Jouet draws his understanding of popular theater from Antoine Vitez, a mid-20th-century actor, director, and activist. Vitez was not only an important dramaturgical theorist from the 1960s on—the very moment at which Jouet was working in the MJCs—but he was the personal secretary of Louis Aragon (1960-1962) and would be a militant communist up until the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. Alongside his work in theaters in Marseille, Cannes, and Ivry, and for the *Comédie française*, Vitez was important for having developed a compromise between several widespread acting methods of the time (Vitez, Ecrits sur le

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[176] *Bodo* showcases a famous instance of *wassan kara* from 1978*,* in which the people of Zinder reenacted Charles de Gaulle's visit to Niger, in the aftermath of Nigeria's 1960 independence and years of political turmoil (from 1967-1970). The novel uses theater to delve deep into the complicated politics of postcolonial Nigeria: the tension between the demands of independence and colonial legacy, between local customs and the increasing internationalization of Africa, and between various forms of political rule (from local chiefdoms to sultans, from representative democracy to military coup d'états). See Jouet, *Bodo* 11-15.

théâtre 1-15).[177] Most importantly, Vitez penned several manifestos about "le théâtre élitaire pour tous," in which he drew on Brecht's belief that theater involved a form of social responsibility. Vitez argued that aesthetically and theoretically complex theater should be made readily available to the masses as a public good.

In a series of articles published in *Le Journal de Chaillot,* Vitez outlines his theory of "elitist theater." In a 1981 article entitled "Elitaire pour tous," Vitez laments the increasing pressure to commercialize and monetize theater in early 1980s. He calls for a return to "un théâtre élitaire pour tous," waxing poetic about theatrical projects staged in Nanterre in 1968 and Ivry in 1972. For Vitez, these are times and places in which "popular" theater excelled without necessarily being a "theater of the masses." Theater was not mainstream or tailored to a popular aesthetic; actors remained unknown in spite of their great talents; and theater was performed spontaneously in the most banal of spaces (like farms, attics, fields, schools, dining rooms, or even showers) (Vitez, Ecrits sur le théâtre 177-178). In a 1982 article entitled, "Un théâtre élitaire pour tous.... six mois après," Vitez goes so far as to describe theater as a "public service" on par with gas, water, or electricity. He equates this publicization of theater with the abolition of feudal privileges on August 4th, 1789; popularizing theater would be yet another step towards equality in a long history of class struggle.[178] Vitez concludes his manifesto about the power of theater will a call for a "Grand Théâtre d'Exercice," for the theater as a space of encounters (*rencontres*) and for the discussion of ideas (*Ibid,* 186). Theater, in its most stripped-down state, was thus by and for the people without sacrificing any aesthetic or critical complexity.

With this notion of popular theater in mind, Jouet's understanding of the novel as a venue for theater becomes clearer: it is another avenue for his republican project of allowing any and all to enter. Jouet would likely distance himself from the grandiose tone of Vitez's manifestos[179], but not their overall claims: that theater be a public good, accessible to all; that theater be unbeholden to high or low culture; and that be a space of encounter and exchange with the public. And unlike his MJC compatriots, whose notion of proletariat culture was little more than lip service to their own bourgeois aesthetic tastes, Jouet is unafraid of combining high and low culture (J. Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 73). His worksite style allows him to shift between genres, registers, and voices, without reserve. The connection between theater, politics, and Jouet's formalist writing is also much more seamless than it initially appears, given that he left communism and the MJC in 1979, not long after he first encountered Oulipo (in

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[177] For example, Vitez seconded Constantin Stanislavski's rejection of theatrical tradition in favor of character development. Like Vsevolod Meyerhold, Vitez also embraced the conventional nature of acting and the non-identification of actors with characters. See Vitez *Ecrits sur le théâtre* 1-15.

[178] For this reason, Vitez claims that theater must also always be on the forefront of what is culturally and politically relevant, always a step ahead of whatever has been canonized or recognized as high culture. Vitez cites the example of surrealism, noting that no one would have paid good money to see their *manifestation* at Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, but that in retrospect, everyone knows this was an important cultural event. See Vitez 177-178.

[179] When discussing why he did not pursue formal theatrical training, for example, Jouet pokes fun at the culture of May '68, which he describes as infused with an ideology of "non-apprentissage, de la spontanéité, de la création collective (et toutes ces conneries-là)" (Lapprand, L'oeuvre ronde 155).

1978), and not long before he officially became a member (in 1983). Oulipo offered him that very choice of "*travail, terrain, et collègues*" that he found was lacking in his political activities.

In many respects, Jouet is an unusual, or even "bad" Oulipian, given that he entered Oulipo at a transitional phase in the group's history. He is a third-generation Oulipian, joining the group thirty-three years into its existence, after the death of some of its most important figures, like Queneau and Perec. Mourning these losses (especially that of Perec) affected the overall ambiance of the group and ushered in a moment in which more new blood was necessary to the group's continued existence. Jouet also joined well after the controversial moment I analyze in my first chapter, after the group was "outed" and was continuing to "out" itself in progressively more public spheres. Jouet's first exposure to Oulipo was through a workshop at Royaumont in 1978, one of the early public *ateliers* offered by the group. These *ateliers* were decidedly less popular among original members of the group, like Noël Arnaud and Jacques Bens.[180] Given the sheer number of *ateliers* and public events in which Jouet participates, as well as his side careers in radio, it is hard to imagine Jouet as secretive, or at all uncomfortable with public presence as an author.

Jouet is most notably a "bad" Oulipian, however, because he is the only Oulipian unequivocally involved in politics—something which Oulipian scholars never fail to note.[181] While the project of my first chapter was to offer a more nuanced history of Oulipo's apoliticism as a mode of intervention in the politico-literary field, it is nevertheless worth signaling the paradox of Jouet's position within the group. Unlike previous generations of Oulipians, who tended to act on the margins of the political sphere and shied away from public political engagement, Jouet carried his youthful experiences into his later career and continues to speak openly about his political opinions and practice. As Camille Bloomfield notes, the group's collective apoliticism seems to be in conflict a priori with individual political engagement: "Comment être un écrivain politique dans un groupe apolitique?" (Bloomfield, Jacques Jouet 266). For Bloomfield, this tension poses several important theoretical questions: 1) how does Jouet reconcile his political engagement with the apoliticism of his entourage?; 2) does joining Oulipo mark a progressive depoliticization (or "désengagement") in Jouet's career or, does it allow him to invent a new way of being ("une nouvelle façon d'être") in the group?[182]; and 3) should we, as a result of this tension, presume that there is a conflict or opposition between Jouet's formalist writing and his more political works? (*Ibid,* 267-269).

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[180] For more on Oulipo's *ateliers* and its relationship to pedagogy, see Chapter 1.

[181] In the only collective volume on Jouet's work, for example, Oulipo scholars routinely highlight this tension between the group's apoliticism and Jouet's politicized oeuvre. Often, Oulipo scholars seek to draw a comparison between Perec's interest in *le quotidien* or *l'infraordinaire* and Jouet's politics, but Jouet himself has routinely rejected this analogy in interviews. See *Jacques Jouet* (2015) and interviews from *Jacques Jouet* (2015) and Lapprand's *L'oeuvre ronde* (2007).

[182] In her other work on Oulipo as literary group, Bloomfield enumerates a number of "façons d'être ensemble en littérature," including: group's sociological, historical, and geographical context; its "configuration humaine" (whether or not it has hierarchical leadership, etc.); collective discourse; its "principes de cohesion" (or the rules by which it recruits and maintains members); etc. (Bloomfield, L'Oulipo dans l'histoire des groupes 31). By "façon d'être dans le groupe," she means the ways in which individuals negotiate their roles and identities with respect to

I tend to agree with Bloomfield's final assessment: being a "political" Oulipian is far from an insurmountable problem and it does not speak to a divide between Jouet's political and formal oeuvre. Some texts are more formal or more political than others, some texts, like "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre,* are both formally and politically inclined. The answer lies in the group's particular social functioning. While collectively Oulipo has only recently begun to take public political stances (most notably against the Front National)[183], the group has never impeded individual members from being involved in politics; the group's project may be to seek out and catalog new forms, but it has never unanimously dictated *how* to use these forms, or what kind of content or works such forms might produce. Jouet's mode of *engagement,* however, clearly differs from a mid-20th-century Sartrean stance, as Bloomfield notes:

> J. Jouet pourrait donc représenter une figure contemporaine de l'engagement: un engagement discret, mais durable et profond, loin de la conception sartrienne voyante, un engagement qui s'écrit sous le signe du collectif et de la communauté. Celui qui écrit depuis le métro, haut-lieu du quotidien, celui qui invite constamment ses lecteurs à s'approprier les textes et à écrire à leur tour approuverait certainement cette phrase de Sony Labou Tansi: 'A ceux qui cherchent un auteur engagé, je propose un homme engageant.' (Bloomfield, Jacques Jouet 277)

Jouet's *engagement* is less overt and less public than Sartrean *engagement* because with the progressive devaluation of the PCF and communism at large, *engagement* itself has changed in the 20th-century. The figure of the engaged author has become much less central to French literary culture and to the French political scene at large, making it less clear what it might even mean to be "engagé" in the 21st-century. For Bloomfield, Jouet is not "engaged," but "engaging," because he takes a more indirect stance; his work approaches politics through the practice of documenting everyday life. This documentation has its roots in the idea of "potentiality" as a practice of appropriation; each author, and more importantly, each reader, can appropriate an Oulipian form and use it to their own ends. Jouet's community practice is two-fold: it involves documenting the everyday experience of communist communities, but also creating writing procedures that enable a shared, community voice ("un engagement qui s'écrit sous le signe du collectif et de la communauté").

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the group's functioning at large. For more on Oulipo's particularity within group literary history, see Bloomfield, "L'Oulipo dans l'histoire des groupes," 29-42. See also Chapter 1.

[183] On March 26th, 1997, members of the group (including Jouet, Jacques Roubaud, Michelle Grangaud, and Hervé Le Tellier) made a collective statement against the congress of the Front National in Strasbourg. They emphasized the importance of remembering the atrocities of Nazism in World War II, offering a brief history of the way in which it had personally impacted various Oulipians. They mentioned Georges Perec, whose mother was deported; co-founder François le Lionnais, who was interned at Dora; Italo Calvino's work in the Italian Resistance; Noël Arnaud's foundation of a clandestine publishing house, *La Main à la Plume*, which was the first to publish Paul Eluard's poem, "Liberté"; etc. See Consenstein 227. Roubaud also published an op-ed in *L'Humanité* that ridicules Le Pen's immigration policy; Roubaud suggests that by Le Pen's standards, Le Pen himself would not qualify as *français de souche.* See Roubaud "Le Pen est-il français?"

The project of "Une ronde militante" offers one example of contemporary *engagement,* as it was originally conceived as combination of popular or political theater and formal or procedural writing. In 2008, Gérard Lorcy, a member of the *ô Fantômes* theater company in Picardie, commissioned Jouet to write a play about militant communism and its transmission over the last 50 years. Lorcy then organized a tour of Picardie, in which Jouet would interview a series of elderly ex-militants living in the *bassin creillois*. As a result of his Vitez-like "encounters" with these men and women—predominately communistes and *cégétistes*—Jouet was asked to write a fictional piece about the tension between the ideal and the concrete in French communist history. The play's promotional, pedagogical materials describe the project as follows:

> […] une fiction nourrie d'une confrontation aux utopies socialistes et communistes telles qu'elles sont vivantes dans les mémoires d'individus qui les ont portées, qui les portent encore d'une manière ou d'une autre.[184]

Jouet hopes to tell the history of communism from the perspective of those who bore its memory—and continue to bear it today. In October of 2009, Jouet completed the play, and the company embarked on a series of public readings; the company eventually staged the play in October of 2011, at la Faïencerie, the Théâtre de Creil. Between the performance of the play in 2011 and the publication of *Le Cocommuniste* in 2014, Jouet added a series of poems to the play and the interviews. The poems, play, and a short introduction, together make up the sixth section of the book, "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre.*"

Formally, the poetry collection is a compromise between Jouet's extant poetic and political oeuvre. The poems' content speaks to Jouet's interest in workers' strikes and working-class discourse and identity (especially in works like *Aérations du prolétaire* (2004) and *Cantates de proximité* (2005)).[185] The form of the poems is only loosely Oulipian[186]; they do not use any canonical Oulipian forms, but they do recall Oulipian forms in which an addressee is incorporated into the poem's procedures.[187] The poems bring to mind other poetic works in

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[184] The *Compagnie ô Fantômes* staged the play as a means of teaching the history of communism. Pedagogical materials can be found in the Oise Department's pedagogical portal; this suggests that the play was likely shown to audiences from local schools. See Jouet and Compagnie ô Fantômes, "Une ronde militante, comédie politique."

[185] *Aération du prolétaire* (2004) is a collection of prose fiction alongside photographs by Louis Oligny, featuring strikes in the North of France. *Cantates de proximité* (2005) features "portrait-poems" of *salariés en lutte* in the region surrounding Lilles. This vein in Jouet's work, along with his use of interviews, has led some scholars to compare him to his contemporary François Bon. See Bloomfield, "Jacques Jouet, écrivain politique" 274-5 and Lapprand, *L'œuvre ronde,* 19-20.

[186] It is not altogether obvious how Jouet distinguishes between his Oulipian and non-Oulipian texts. He does seem to qualify as "Oulipian" those texts that have an explicit constraint, are governed by an Oulipian constraint, or are published in Oulipo's collective volumes. That said, he sometimes does not label other formally innovative texts Oulipian. Jouet is careful to point out that *Bodo,* for example, is not an Oulipian text; it appears that it is not Oulipian because it does not use Oulipian forms, but also in part because of its documentary aesthetic, or its reliance on historical artifacts. Jouet, *Bodo* 11-15

[187] Usually, this is done by building procedures around an addressee's name. In a *beau présent*, for instance, each line in a verse is written using only the letters of the addressee's name. *Epithalames*, a variant of the *beau présent*, are written on the occasion of a marriage, using only the letters of the newlyweds' names. See Oulipo, "Beau présent."

which Jouet used interviews as part of a procedural practice for creating poetry, particularly the volume *107 âmes* (1991). For the creation of *107 âmes*, Jouet had random friends or acquaintances act as intermediaries, sending a basic administrative questionnaire to anonymous people; Jouet used these questionnaires to write minimalist poems (each three stanzas of six lines). If *107 âmes* hopes to poetically "concurrencer avec l'état civil," then "Une ronde militante" hopes to rival with the party registry. Each of the fourteen poems is named after one of the fifteen militants with whom Jouet spoke, among whom one finds eight men and seven women (one poem is based on an interview with a couple). The poems are ordered chronologically, beginning with the oldest interviews (in January 2009) and ending with the newest (in June 2009). Finally, the title of each poem includes not only the name(s) of the interviewees and the date, but the location of the interviews, all of which took place in and around the Creil and the *bassin creillois*.[188]

While the interviews are central to both the form and the content of the poems, they are only loosely related to the play. The form of the play is instead borrowed from *La Ronde* by Arthur Schnitzler: it is a series of scenes composed of two characters, in which each successive scene features one character from the previous scene and one new character (i.e. scene 1 would include characters A + B, scene 2 would include characters B + C, and so on). This formal structure quite literally obliges actors to *prêter la parole*: lending their voice to more than one character and allowing each character to speak in his/her turn. Lorcy's *mise-en-scène* of Jouet's play followed six actors (three women and three men) who play seven characters over the course of seven sequences. The play uses the structure of these shifting characters and voices to move through time, beginning in the 1950s and ending in the present. It also follows the lives of a young couple, a union representative who battles with workers on strike, an ex-minister who engages in an imaginary dialogue with the phantom of Krupskaya, and a young girl who interviews her grandfather.

Both the play and the poems are invested in a particular kind of documentary aesthetic, based on the assumption that the interviews can be used as a historical artifact or document from which micro- and macro-narratives of communism may be recreated. In his essay "L'esprit documentaire," published in *Littérature* n°166 (June 2012), Jouet explains that he draws his notion of the documentary from Hans Magnus Enzenberger, a 20th-century German author and poet. Enzenberger distinguishes between "romans documentaires" and "roman documentés." On the one hand, Emile Zola wrote "documentary novels": he engaged in the process of documentation and produced original documentary materials (by, for example, conducting an entire study to write about mines) in order to write. On the other hand, Enzenberger writes "documented novels": he composes his novels by borrowing historical documents from a given time period and juxtaposing them with his own essays or reflections (Jouet, L'esprit documentaire 85). The "documentary spirit," for Jouet, can involve both engaging in original documentary practice (Zola's "romans documentés") and borrowing extant historical

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[188] The fourteen interviews were fairly evenly distributed across the first six months of 2009: January (four interviews), February (two), April (two), May (three), June (three). Most of the interviews took place in Creil (six), but others were fairly evenly distributed among the surrounding areas: Villiers-Saint-Paul (three), Creil (six), Montataire (two), Nogent-sur-Oise (one), and Liancourt (one).

documents (Enzenberger's "romans documentaires").[189] What is important is that the "documentary spirt" forces the author or the poet to engage with "concrete" experience in the real world.

The editors of *Littérature n°166*, Camille Bloomfield and Marie-Jeanne Zenetti, suggest that this kind of "writing with document" allows Jouet to showcase several modes of "engagement": a will to produce collective writing, which would give voice ("donnerait la parole") to people rarely represented in literature; an invitation, directed to those whose names appear in the text proper, to read poems, chapters, or plays on their own behalf; and a desire to be an "on-the-ground" or an "all-terrain" writer (*Ibid,* 84). In "Une ronde militante," Jouet not only showcases and speaks on behalf of working-class people, but he asks that they participate in their own representation, by interviewing them and inviting them to attend readings and plays. He also does not hesitate to engage in "on-the-ground" research, by going to the geographic location (Creil) and the intimate spaces (the actual homes of ex-activists) of the people whom he hopes to represent.

While "Une ronde militante" is only loosely based in Oulipian forms, it could be said to draw on Oulipian procedural practices, based in documenting everyday life. Beginning with Perec, Oulipians were interested in tracking the changing spaces of everyday life, most notably in the form of the *tentative*. In *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975)*,* Perec returned to the Place Saint-Sulpice regularly and wrote, attempting to document what he called "l'infraordinaire," or minute, everyday details, which would go unnoticed to the untrained eye. While Jouet claims not to be interested in Perec's everyday life, he has undertaken large-scale procedural projects based in experiencing space; in *Poèmes de métro* (2000)*,* for instance, Jouet developed procedures for writing poems in the metro, using an algorithim developed by Pierre Rosenthiel, which established the most efficient method for visiting every metro stop in Paris.[190] "Une ronde militante, *poésie"* professes a similar spatial aesthetics of the everyday to the extent that Jouet engages in on-the-ground research; writing poetry requires that Jouet visit the spaces of the people he represents.

Arguably, "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre*" includes both *original documentation* and *extant documents*. In fact, this is one way of distinguishing between the poetic and theatrical aspects of the project. While the play is only loosely reliant on the interview-documents, the poems explicitly bear the traces of the interview (name, date, interviewee) and are produced, like *107 âmes,* from the interview itself. The play is infused with a more diffuse "documentary spirit" than the poems, one that speaks to the grand narratives produced by literature and communist discourse. As Jouet explains in his essay "Un beau métier," the "documentary spirit" serves to undo the "idealistic narrative topoi" of stories and of epics; it intentionally renders literary idealism imperfect by forcing it to come to terms with the experience of the real-world (Jouet, Un beau métier 57-58). As a result, "Une ronde militante,

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[189] The poetry collection, *L'Histoire-poèmes* (2010), is probably the best example of *littérature documentaire* in Jouet's oeuvre. Each poem in the collection is supplemented with a number of footnoted sources, which include a wide variety of documents, like interviews, memories, historical events, etc. See Jouet, *L'Histoire-poèmes.*
[190] See Jouet, *Poèmes de métro.*

poésie et théâtre" echoes in miniature the project of *Le Cocommuniste* at large, as I described it at the outset of this chapter: the idea is to bring the play into contact with the poems, the ideal into dialogue with the concrete, or the discourse into contact with the reality.

With this in mind, I would like to conclude with a seemingly counterintuitive claim: not only is theater central to Jouet's understanding of the novel,[191] but the poetry of "Une ronde militante" is actually more *theatrical* in Jouet's sense than the actual play of "Une ronde militante." As this overview of Jouet's attitudes towards theater shows, Jouet is interested in theater as a popular and collective format that allows him to borrow the voice of the people and communicate with them directly, via encounters with the public. But while "Une ronde militante, *théâtre*" may loosely reproduce certain popular theatrical genres, like the parodic theater of *wassan kara,* it is much more in keeping with Jouet's novelistic practice. That is, like *Le Cocommuniste* at large*, La Montaigne R,* or *La République de Mek-Ouyes*, it mostly represents *guignols* on stage, whose purpose is to act as voice-boxes for political discourse and the grand narratives of communism. It returns to famous historical figures who have already spoken in other sections of the novel (like Lenin and Krupskaya in the imagined dialogue of "Les chiens pavillonnaires") or to communist types (the union rep, the ex-minister) who are meant to illustrate a social position, created by communist organizations or ideology, more than any actual, real-life person.

The poetry of "Une ronde militante," on the other hand, is intimately reliant on Jouet's interviews with militants.[192] The poetry collection echoes, in many respects, the project of *107 âmes*, speaking to the intimate, human experience buried within seemingly banal facts. According to Motte, *107 âmes* fundamentally reconfigures our relationship to the ordinary, asking what it means to "dire/tell" the most boring or banal facts of everyday life. Stylistically, the collection delves into the problem of iteration, of how to repeat (without repeating) the seemingly neutral facts of census data (like birth/death, age, sex, children, etc.): "How many ways can one state a person's age, for instance, or a person's marital status?" (Motte, A Soulful Jouet 552) But thematically, both *107 âmes* and "Une ronde militante, *poésie*" reveal the personal beneath the demographic data: suggesting that even the most banal of facts can be revelatory, can be personalized by human experience.[193]

In the very first poem of the collection, militant Alain Covet, tells an all-too-familiar story of the son of a worker, who is destined to become a worker himself. While Alain shows promise in school, at each step, his working-class origins prevent him from moving up the social ladder:

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[191] As Jouet notes in the introduction to "Une ronde militante, *poésie et théâtre,* while a novel can contain (*accueillir*) theater, theater can hardly contain a novel. See Jouet, *Le Cocommuniste* 159.

[192] To my knowledge, however, Jouet has not talked about how he did these interviews and/or incorporated them into his poetry. It is unclear whether or not he documented them in any format (notes? recordings?) before writing the poetry, or if he followed a specific procedural practice for moving between the interviews and the poetry.

[193] The revelatory aspect of the banal might recall projects like Perec's *Je me souviens* (1978)*,* which tracks banal memories (of a brand, space, or toy) that are nevertheless specific enough as to be historically situated, or shared by a particular generation.

"Cassé le rêve d'être instituteur [….] Cassé le rêve d'être ingénieur […]" (J. Jouet, Le Cocommuniste 164). Alain's entire life can be simplified to his passage through union ranks:

> Il a 14 ans. Il est ouvrier. Il est syndiqué.
> Il a 18 ans, collecte les timbres pour le syndicat.
> Il a 22 ans, candidat délégué—trop jeune peut-être, mais élu !
> Il en a 24, secrétaire général CGT de l'usine.
> Il en a 27, secrétaire de la Fédération de la Chimie.
> Il en a 34, secrétaire général de l'Union internationale des Syndicats des Industries chimiques, au sein de la Fédération syndicale mondiale FSM, c'est à Budapest.
> Dès lors, il faut courir le monde pour un syndicalisme digne de ce nom
> Chili, Irak, URSS, Côte d'Ivoire […] (*Ibid,* 164)

Alain's passage is made all the more expected by the formulaic use of the third person ("Il a X âge …"). Alain's life, as it was lived *through* the union, seems to prove one of the revelations that Jouet experienced after the interviews: that activism in working-class movements (whatever form it took) was emancipatory, especially for women:

> J'ai notamment gardé de ces rencontres, en dépit de l'échec (provisoire ou non) de l'idée communiste, que le militantisme au sein du mouvement ouvrier, social, citadin, associatif, mutualiste, était un formidable moyen d'émancipation. C'était particulièrement sensible dans les discours des femmes dont l'enfance compagnarde bretonne ou normande avec sa chape de religiosité et la bonnichification à douze ans comme alternative à l'école n'était pas un bon souvenir, loin de là. (*Ibid* 158)

Participating in these activist venues (broadly construed) gave these individuals a path towards social mobility. By progressing through the ranks, Alain not only gained experience and authority, but was able to travel the world. As another interviewee, Jean Pitkevich, describes it, activism was a form of self-actualization: "On ne naît pas militant, on le deviant" (*Ibid* 171). While one cannot escape one's class background ("becoming" working class as Jérémie desires), one can invest energy into changing it ("becoming" an activist).

Women who might otherwise have been expected to marry young or devote themselves to religious life sought out activism as an alternative to their presumed social roles. Several of the women describe how marrying a worker allowed them to become involved in activist organizations, especially those that promoted women's and family rights. The interviewee Lucienne Boubennec explains that she got married at 17, out of her fear of becoming a maid (the "bonniche" or the "bonnichification" of which Jouet speaks). Eventually, she became involved in *Femmes solidaires* and *Union des Femmes françaises*, as well as a number of international causes (*Ibid* 167). Another woman, Françoise Decleene, equates marrying a worker with marrying a cause : " […] épouser un ouvrier. / Et d'épouser aussi la solidarité, le partage / les manifs, les grèves de 68, quand les hommes se redressent" (*Ibid* 182). The poem about Odile Anciaux describes how moving away from her childhood village (in Caux, Switzerland) for her husband's boilermaker job, coincided with her increasing activism:

> Elle serait demeurée petite-bourgeoise étroite et râleuse
> sans l'arrivée au plateau de Creil en 1951, émancipation qui suppose d'agir
> dans l'amicale de locataires, et les parents d'élèves, et l'APF
> Association population familiale
> Et au CA de la CAF, la commission sociale
> Pour le concret de l'aide aux familles
> prêts de machines pour les plus démunies : à laver, à tricoter, à coudre.
> Inimaginable de vivre l'Evangile dans la bourgeoisie [….]
> La maladie s'invitant, Odile ne se bat pas que pour sa porte
> Elle fonde l'association Oise-Alzheimer […] (*Ibid* 175)

Over the course of her husband's career (during which he was involved in several unions and the *Parti Socialiste*), Odile became increasingly invested in family-oriented activism; she was invested in local branches of social welfare programs (like the *Association population familiale* (*APF*) or the *Caisse d'allocations familiales* (*CAF*)) and job-training programs that specifically targeted women (teaching them how to wash, knit, and sew). These family programs became Odile's new "evangelism," her life's purpose. After her husband's Alzheimer diagnosis, Odile then shifted her gaze towards elder care (*Ibid* 174). Yet another interviewee, Christiane Carlin, describes her realization that women's emancipation would always be double: "Une femme se bat doublement / une veine bleue dans la continuité du sourcil / pour être femme égale, maîtresse de ses être et corps / et saisir quelques rênes" (*Ibid* 173). The women will have to fight for emancipation on multiple levels: at home, at work, and over their own bodies.

But while the interviewees' ascension through the ranks is ostensibly heart-warming—testimony to their ambition and success in spite of their class position or sex—it is also colored by the circumstances of the interviews themselves. At the beginning of Alain's poem, we learn in passing that the interview is taking place in the *Secours populaire,* next to a copy machine; presumably Alain's fate has changed drastically, and he is most likely homeless, in spite of his former success (*Ibid,* 163). Odile, on the other hand, is now retired at 83 years old; she is apparently dying ("Tout est prêt for l'extrême sentence") and is nevertheless refusing treatment ("Ne veut aucun acharnement thérapeutique") (*Ibid* 175). As the poem concludes, Odile's laughter has acquired a bitter irony: "Le rire est malicieux" (*Ibid* 175).

Frequently throughout the poems, the past is also reflected in the present. Yvonne Martin, for example, describes her experience of squatting during the 1950s housing crisis:

> […] où qu'on sera les squatteurs de Montataire / après qu'on a fait sauter les cadenas de logements vides / tribunal, huissiers, condamnation, mais expulsion non / "oh ! grimpez pas chez nous, M. l'huissier, ou je vous fous un coup de serpe !" (*Ibid* 176)

Yvonne is able to make light of her family's poverty; she recounts how they broke into empty housing and made it their own, refusing to submit to local authorities. Her optimism appears unshaken throughout the poem, even in the face of the most daunting of circumstances. (She also makes light of Stalinism, falling back on the proverb: "On ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser

des œufs" (*Ibid* 176)). Upon visiting the modest home of Jean Blanpied, however, the narratorial "je" cannot help but see the continuation of the housing crisis into the present:

> Je remarque à quel point les luttes pour loger des familles sans abri en / squattant des villas niçoises au début des années 1950 sont d'une / brûlante actualité historique. (*Ibid* 165)

The interviewees' fond memories approach the extreme: starry-eyed recollections of activism that fail to account for history. The narratorial "je" thus returns to voice the skepticism of the convalescent; he sees beyond his interviewees' relentless optimism, drawing attention to the troubling *actualité* of specific class struggles (like the question of housing). This gesture does not seem unkind—the convalescent must come to terms with history—but brings home the tragedy of his subjects' circumstances. Even today, they cannot see how history failed them.

As one can see, these poems, while relatively short and unstructured, are overwhelmed—even overburdened—with acronyms. While the poems barely mention any famous historical figures (only a handful of politicians and political theorists)[194], over forty acronyms or allusions are included in about twenty pages of poetry. Among them, one finds several political parties, administrative programs administered by the French state, exams, organizations, unions, and confederations.[195] A reader with little to no exposure to worker organizations is immediately forced into the position of an outsider, finding the poems near illegible. Similarly, Motte describes *107 âmes* as telling the "distance between Jouet and his subjects" and points out that "[Jouet] recognizes the social marginality of his subjects, representing that otherness soberly and with dignity" (Motte, A Soulful Jouet 556). This is also the case for "Une ronde militante, *poésie*": the gap between Jouet's own limited union experience (in the MJC directors' union) and Alain's, for example, is self-evident, even blatant.

Jouet implies that to live as a worker in France is to speak an altogether different language, dominated by the organizations in which one circulates. Among acronyms for union or workers organizations, one finds: relatively well-known, large-scale unions (like the *CGT, Confédération Générale de Travail*, or the *CFDT, Confédération française démocratique du*

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[194] For example, Lenin and Stalin are mentioned, as well as ex-president François Mitterrand. The two other political figures mentioned are lesser-known, including Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first president of Côte d'Ivoire, whose work was important in the decolonization of Africa and the politics of *Françafrique*, and Charles Fiterman, a working-class French politician, who served as minister of transport under Mitterrand and was a high-ranking member of the PCF, until he switched to the Socialist Party in 1998.

[195] The political parties include standbys like the PCF, the PC (*Parti Communiste*), and the PS (*Parti Socialiste*), as well as lesser-known acronyms, which could ambiguously refer to several organizations; this is the case with "PSU," which could refer to the "*Parti socialiste unifié*" (both a leftist non-communist organization in France and a leftist Moroccan party) or to the "*Parti socialiste unitaire*" (a French political party created in 1948). Among the administrative programs offered by the French state, one finds those related to teaching and secondary teacher training, like the *Affaires scolaires*, the *CAPES* (*Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré*), or the *CE1 & 2* (*Cours élémentaires*), which are all fairly well known. One also finds several allusions to state social service programs, some of which uniquely serve a working-class population (like *APF, Association populaire familiale; la Bourse du Travail; CA, Commission Sociale; CAF, Caisses d'allocations familiales; la Sécu, Sécurité sociale; le Secours populaire;* etc.).

travail); several specialized unions (*CEL, Coopérative de l'Enseignement Laïc, Fédération de la Chimie*, or *L'Union internationale des Syndicats des Industries chimiques*, or *SNES, Syndicat national des enseignements de second degré*); international unions (*SOLIDARNOSC*, a Polish trade union and a ruling party in the Soviet era); and religious unions and organizations (*Action catholique ouvrière* ; *CFTC, Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens; JOC, Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne;* or *JEC, Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne*). The poems point not only to the organizations that shape, or rather that once shaped, worker experience, but the industries, companies, and policies—foreign to most readers—that were once influential over working-class lives.

The poems include several allusions to manufacturing industries that no longer exist in Creil or postindustrial France, including companies specializing in steel (Arcelor, and its predecessor Usinor), oil (Astral), metallurgy (Chausson), and chemicals (Ugine Kulhmann, later PUK or Péchiney Ugine Kulmann). For Jouet, the mere mention of these companies evokes a lost era, prior to the deindustrialization of France at the end of the 20th-century:

> Tous noms qui évoquent beaucoup de labeur, de fabrication de biens sans doute utiles et pas mal de grèves historiques avant la liquidation progressive de la plus grosse partie de la production. (*Ibid,* 157)

The memories of these workers thus bear several histories now past. Their militant communism and their industrial livelihoods are now the relics of a bygone era. Their language is so far gone as to have become illegible: a dialect of 20th-century France only preserved here in the novel.

Even more poignantly, the interviewees themselves are human artefacts. After all, the interviews were coordinated by Jean-Pierrre Besse, an organizer for AMOI, or the *Association pour la Mémoire ouvrière et industrielle du bassin creillois*. Most of the interviewees are retired, elderly, and lonely. They speak almost exclusively in the past tense. In a sense, these militants—like their language, their activism, and their jobs—are already positioned as the memory of a working class that does not exist today. But as the convalescent reminds us, if their memory and memories are in the process of being lost, their crises are ongoing, as many of the problems of the working class stretch into the present day.

The poetry of "Une ronde militante" is thus about memorializing, or bearing witness to, the memory of French communism and the people it influenced. While the text routinely draws attention to the failure of this memorialization—to the way in which these subjects are already in the process of being forgotten—it does forge a provisional community through the text. This memorialization is collaborative, including the voices of ex-activists who would otherwise remain unknown, lost to the annals of history. Like Perec's *La Disparition,* Jouet's *Le Cocommuniste* displays a glimmer of possibility: the text's potential as a space for a collective voice. *Le Cocommuniste,* however, is not so much collectively written as it is curated to reproduce several competing collective voices. Jouet's convalescent is the overarching editor or of this miniature "republic." He ventriloquizes and comments on *guignols*, historical figures, and real people, asking them to coexist, however momentarily, in the space of his text. He brings these extreme and everyday voices into contact with one another, establishing points of

contact between people who did not know each other and might never meet, but nevertheless circulated in the same spaces and partook in the same history.

While convalescing from communism may be inevitable in the 21st century, the text's provisional nature—its status as a worksite—bears positive *potential*. Communism's failure may be past, but the way this text and its histories are taken up by readers, the way they impact future communism's on-going history is yet unwritten. The work of the text is full of potential for new, recuperated communities. Like Wittig's own textual reality, it suggests that writing is work with material implications. In this way, Jouet's enduring contribution as the "political" Oulipian is thus to connect Oulipo's *ouvroir* to actual work, transforming procedural practice into a *chantier* of its own.

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Annex 1:

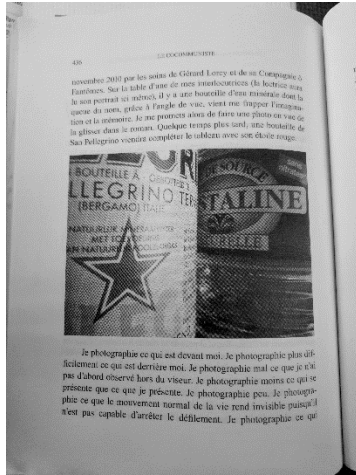Images 1 & 2: "Staline," image reproduced from *Le Cocommuniste* (436).

Image 3: "Class Struggle, the Board game," image reproduced from the Tumblr site of "Humans of Late Capitalism," https://humansoflatecapitalism.tumblr.com/, accessed February 23, 2017.
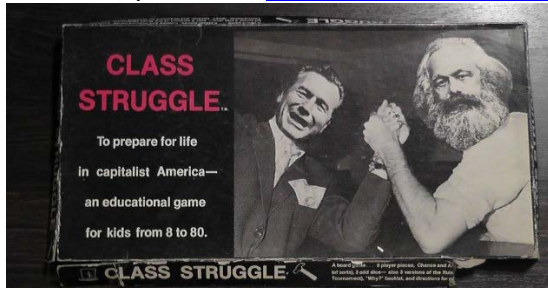

Image 4: "Leninade," image reproduced from the Tumblr site of "Humans of Late Capitalism," https://humansoflatecapitalism.tumblr.com/, accessed February 23, 2017.

Epilogue:

Virtual Playgrounds: Form, Space, and Community

In *Serious Play,* I have argued that playful authors use formal innovation to investigate contemporary politics and to create virtual communities. As we move further into the 21st century, several questions remain about the future of community, literary play, and the political field. As I described in my chapter on Jouet, the 21st-century French political field is marked by *lepénisation,* or political parties (especially on the right) that are becoming increasingly extreme (Chabal, Introduction 1-6). With this extremization, the political field has become less diversified, creating a more stark division between left- and right-wing parties. While the political field is still marked by several competing political discourses—like *laïcité,* republicanism, or postcolonial and identity politics—overall, Marxism's demise has made room for a more openly neoliberal, capitalist France.[196] As the historian Emile Chabal notes, however, one of the reasons the discourse of crisis has become so pervasive is because the French political field has become difficult to interpret.[197] In light of the last few election cycles, scholars have begun to question their ability to predict our political future: what will become of politics in 21st-century France?

As contemporary politics are hardly resolved, it will be interesting to see how this changing political landscape impacts literature. In the 1980s and 1990s, French politics became less fractured, and literature slowly detached itself from the political field. Even publishers that traditionally published engaged texts, like Minuit, began to focus on other projects.[198] Politics did not exactly fall out of the author's gaze, but generally speaking, they were certainly less central to her literary identity and practice. For some critics, however, this autonomy meant that the literary field was paradoxically even more fractured than before. Gone was the possibility of group practice, much less a more expansive movement or school.[199] Literary projects were done in isolation and were more removed from one another. In such a setting, Oulipo would appear to be an outlier for continuing to be interested in group literary practice when it is no longer feasible or fashionable. The relative absence of group literary practice, however, does not preclude an interest in politics or community.

Indeed, in the early decades of the 21st century, one could argue that there is a renewed sense of political urgency. In response to growing extremism, even overtly apolitical authors and groups have decided to take a stance. Both Oulipo as a group and individual Oulipians, for

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[196]In the 1960s, "neoliberalism" was never publicly endorsed as a political philosophy; however, the stigma has since subsided. See Chabal 13-14.

[197] Chabal points to a proliferation of terms that attempt to describe this particular moment, see Chabal 3.

[198] For example, Minuit's "literature of impassivity campaign" includes authors, like Jean-Philippe Toussaint or Jean Echenoz, who are predominately known for their deconstruction of narrative forms. See Hippolyte 7.

[199] Hippolyte argues that French writers of the 1980s and '90s generally shunned group practice and that writers and publishers were struggling to adapt to a changing publishing environment. See Hippolyte 6-7.

example, have made public statements against the Front National.[200] While literature may have been relatively detached from the political field from the 1980s to the early '00s, recent events in French history suggest this may change. From the 2005 "riots" on the outskirts of Paris, to increasing Islamophobia and anti-Semitism throughout France, tensions have been brewing.[201] After the shooting at Charlie Hebdo on January 7th, 2015, artists have had to come to terms with the reality that art (whatever form it may take) can have very real, and even deadly, consequences.

In this respect, the crises that my authors tackle are far from over. Moreover, these crises were (and are) never exclusively catastrophes of communism, but of capitalism. In general, 21st-century French authors—like François Bon, Antoine Volodine, or Jean-Marie Gleize—are increasingly documenting and memorializing former communist communities in order to highlight today's postindustrial, neoliberal spaces. The lost possibilities of communism are not only mourned, but the material effects of their capitalist plundering are tracked and interrogated. The project of these authors is to understand how communism's many failures brought on a collapse of community, and how this collapse left communities vulnerable, especially those of the *banlieue.* Once again, theories of the political (*le politique*) have come into contact with the experience of politics (*la politique*); but today, more than ever, this experience is colored by hopelessness.[202] Contemporary French authors are not only looming over the dog's cadaver, as Jouet would say, but peering into the bittersweet lives of those errant strays.

Of course, 21st-century communities are not only responding to political crises, but to the increasing virtuality of lived experience. While all of my chapters analyze the creation of virtual communities, none of them treat the quintessential 21st-century virtual space: the internet. From hypertexts to social media, the internet has long been heralded as the destroyer of community—and the future of literary form. Both of these prognostications have been somewhat overblown. In spite of multimedia forms, more traditional literary forms persist; social media has hardly replaced in-person interactions. In French literature, the internet has arguably served to expand the author's public media presence. It has been particularly fruitful for certain formal practices, like everyday writing.[203] The digital age has enabled the diffusion of

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[200] On March 26th, 1997, members of the group (including Jouet, Jacques Roubaud, Michelle Grangaud, and Hervé Le Tellier) made a collective statement against the congress of the Front National in Strasbourg. Roubaud also published an op-ed in *L'Humanité* that ridicules Le Pen's immigration policy. See Consenstein 227 and Roubaud. See also Chapter 4.

[201] "Les émeutes de 2005" colloquially refers to a series of incidents (especially arson) and civil unrest in Clichy-sous-Bois from roughly October to November 2005. Some scholars, like Etienne Balibar, have cautioned against the use of the term "riot" as it demonizes civil unrest and fails to contextualize its historical conditions. See Balibar.

[202] For a discussion of Rancière's notions of "le/la politique," see Introduction.

[203] Author Eric Chevillard, for example, has embraced on-demand internet culture by writing a daily literary blog, "L'autofictif," since 2007; he has since produced several print volumes from the website, beginning with *L'autofictif* in 2009. François Bon was an early adopter and evangelist of digital culture. He has run a literary news

Oulipian forms, allowing for a proliferation of Oulipo-inspired writers and groups in other art forms and countries.[204]

Virtual culture has had significant consequences for play. In the 21st century, playing and gaming increasingly dominate our everyday social practices, from language learning (DuoLingo) to dating (Grindr). New media forms, like fan fiction or video games, are gaining traction as modes of critical cultural commentary.[205] New digital tools, like virtual cartography or RF tags, have brought procedural practices into other artistic domains. Procedural practices involving space, for instance, have proliferated in virtual memorial projects; *Stolpersteine* or *RaspouTeam* ask that audiences literally walk in the footsteps of history.[206] While the future of form and politics are uncertain, the seriousness of play is almost a moot point.

The 21st century's political uncertainty and hopelessness, met with play's reaffirmed seriousness, mean that politicized formal innovation is ripe with *potential.* As new procedural practices come to light, older modes of formal play, like pronoun manipulation, may continue to be taken up by authors and readers to document and unpack the many forms of 21st-century politics. As social media changes how we decide who speaks for whom, for instance, questions of jurisdiction have returned with renewed vigor; the various "on" of our political moment have become all the more malleable, and their referents have become even more difficult to pin down. If I included Wittig in my corpus, however, it was as a reminder of formal play's *potential:* the writers and communities it can influence and forge. Formal play does happen outside of Oulipo, and it does not always arise in obvious people or spaces. Indeed, new authors, like Anne Garréta, have understood and built on the implicit affinities between Wittig's gender politics and Oulipo's formal play.[207] More importantly, Wittig's presence sheds light on the ways in which each of my authors reasserts the same fact: formal play can affect material

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website since 1997; its current iteration, *Le tiers livre,* now includes a YouTube channel and has become a publisher in its own right. See Chevillard, L'autofictif (website and book) and Bon.

[204] Oulipian-inspired groups have sprung up in other arts forms with limited success. The most notable among these is Oubapo, or *Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle*, which formed in 1992 and brought together graphic novelists from the publisher *L'Association*, like Etienne Lécroart, Lewis Trondheim, and Jean-Christophe Menu. Among authors who use Oulipian forms, one finds the Canadian author Christian Bök, or American poets like Harryette Mullen, Juliana Spahr, and Stephanie Young.

[205] There has been a substantial amount of scholarship on video games in the last decade, but for a discussion of fan fiction, see Jenkins.

[206] *Stolpersteine* (literally "stumbling stone") are a WWII memorial project inaugurated by German artist Gunter Demnig in 1992; these engraved cobblestones bear the names of victims of Nazi extermination or persecution and appear in the last known residences of victims. RaspouTeam is a Paris-based artists' collective that uses new technologies (like QR codes) to draw attention to the radical history of Paris, such as the Paris Commune or the October 1961 Massacre of Algerian protestors. See Demnig's *Stolpersteine* and RaspouTeam's "Désordres publics." See also Burton's *Blood in the City,* which reverses the procedures of history by documenting historical violence not chronologically, but topographically, through various sites of memory.

[207] Anne Garréta wrote a novel, *Sphinx* (1986), in which both the protagonist and the protagonist's love interest have no linguistic gender markers. As a result of this play with gender, Garréta was later inducted into Oulipo in 2000. See Garréta.

reality. It can shed light on how language shapes our reality and our experience. By creating virtual communities, formal play also has the potential to change this reality.

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