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OpLePo

Calvino Oulipiano: Rules and Inventions¹

When we talk about Italo Calvino (1923-1985) we talk about a writer-world, in the sense that he helps us to know the World, inside and outside of books,² and also in the sense, I add, that Calvino is “a world of things”: writer of narrative texts linked to the resistance, texts of social commitment, fantasy; essayist; scholar of fairy tales; author of works for music; translator; cartoonist; author of song lyrics; author of the story or screenplay of several films; etc.³

In my presentation, I address an aspect wrongly considered minor in Calvino’s literary activity, namely that of play, linked in particular to his participation in the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) activity. Calvino was admitted to the Oulipo as a “foreign member” with the title of *Brigadier*, through the good offices of Raymond Queneau, on 14 February 1973, Valentine’s Day, as shown in the minutes of the meeting on that date: “Calvino, Matthews: members étrangers à l’unanimité.”⁴

The Oulipo (translated into Italian by Calvino as “Opificio di Letteratura Potenziale”; *ouvroir* in French designates the sewing workshop in a nunnery or in a charitable institution) is “a singular coterie of men of letters, dedicated to devising bizarre inventions starting from

¹ Editor’s Note: To preserve original attributions and avoid citation errors, full bibliographic footnotes have been retained instead of converting to parenthetical references. Translated by Claire Kolb

² This is a definition from Marco Belpoliti, *Instructions for Use*, introduction to the *Calvino A-Z Encyclopedia*, edited by Belpoliti himself, Electa, Milan 2023, pp. 18-21.

³ These numerous aspects of Calvino’s multifaceted personality are masterfully narrated in the *Fabulous Calvino Exhibition. The World as a Work of Art. Carpaccio, de Chirico, Gnoli, Melotti and others*, edited by Mario Barenghi, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, from 13 October 2023 to 4 February 2024. *Fabulous Calvino* comes from the title of the article by Gore Vidal published in the New York Review of Books of 1974, regarding *Invisible Cities*.

⁴ Michele Costagliola d’Abele, *L’Oulipo e Calvino*, Peter Lang SA, Editions scientifiques internationales, Bern 2014, pag. 88; Costagliola d’Abele consulted the annual files of the Oulipo minutes from 1971 to 1985, for a total of 169 dossiers mensuels; In Autumn 2005, the Oulipo Archives were transferred to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and are kept at the headquarters of the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, in Paris, accessible only with the prior authorization of the secretary of the group. On the relationship between Calvino and Oulipo, see also: Marcel Bénabou, *Si par une nuit d’hiver un oulipien*, magazine littéraire, 274, février 1990, pp. 41-44; Raffaele Aragona, *Italo Calvino oulipien*, in Marie Caroline, Jean-Loup Champion, *Oulipo*, Éditions de la BnF, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 2014, pp. 122-126; Marcel Bénabou, *L’Oulipo between France and Italy. The Example of Calvino*, in Raffaele Aragona, edited by *Italo Calvino. Potential Paths*, inline edition, Bologna 2023, pp. 19-31; Domenico Scarpa, *Oulipo, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, in Id., *Calvino fa la conchilla. The Construction of a Writer*, Hoepli, Milan 2023, pp. 470-475. There is a counterpart of the French group in Italy, Oplepo, founded in Capri in 1990 by Raffaele Aragona, Domenico D’Oria and Ruggero Campagnoli.

severely constraining formal rules, marked by a strong mathematicizing taste,”⁵ born within one of the numerous Working Sub-commissions of the College of ‘Pataphysics.

The “potential” character of the literature practiced by Oulipo lies in the fact that it is a literature that still does not exist, still to be created, to be discovered in already existing works or to be invented through the use of new linguistic procedures, a literature driven by idea that creativity and imagination find a stimulus in respecting rules, constraints, constraints (*contraintes*), explicit or hidden, such as that of writing a text without ever using a specific letter or more than one (lipogramma). Calvino’s Oulipian experiments can be divided into:

- writings attributable to the type of creations that go by the name of Syntactic Oulipo (OuSin), i.e. those texts whose fabrication is based on a series of formal constraints,⁶ in other words texts “constructed starting from a series of restrictions which act on lower linguistic levels which do not concern, that is, the sphere of meaning; their aesthetic value, consequently, is not determined by semantic effects, but rather derives from more specifically linguistic-structural and prosodic⁷ components.” This is *the Illustrated Little Syllable* (by Georges Perec), *Poème à lipogramme vocaliques progressifs* and *Georges Perec oulipien*;
- Oulipiens writings of lesser scope, short compositions made up of Oulipian exercises, poems, stories that date back to the Parisian period of Italo Calvino, of fundamental importance to “better evaluate the horizon in which his books of the decade 1969-1979 are inserted, from *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* to *If a Traveler on a Winter’s Night*.”⁸ This is the case of *Hommes illustres + 7* and *The Fire of the Abominable House*;
- Projects announced but not implemented;

⁵ Mario Barenghi, *Poems and Inventions Oulipiennes*, in Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, edition directed by Claudio Milanini, edited by Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto, with a bibliography of Italo Calvino’s writings edited by Luca Baranelli, third volume, Mondadori, Milan 1994, pp. 1239-1245. The exercises and first creations of the Oulipo members appear in Oulipo, *La littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, Paris 1973.

⁶ On the distinction between Semantic Oulipo (OuSem) and Syntactic Oulipo (OuSin), see Jacques Roubaud, *Calvino and the search for semantic Oulipo*, in Raffaele Aragona, edited by, *Italo Calvino. Potential paths*, cit., pp. 171-176.

⁷ Michele Costagliola d’Abele, *op. cit.*, page 156.

⁸ Claudio Milanini, *Introduction* to Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, cit., pp. IX-XXXIII, quoted from page. XXI.

– Finally, the two Oulipian novels, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) and *If a Traveler on a Winter's Night* (1979).

The Illustrated Little Syllabus (by Georges Perec) was released in a first version (19 exercises) in issue 1 of *Il Caffè* in March 1977, accompanied by a series of nineteenth-century stencils. Like Georges Perec's *Petit abécédaire illustré* which inspired it,⁹ Calvin's *Syllable* is also composed of very short texts whose key is given at the end: each of them is semantically equivalent to another text of a few syllables which in turn is equivalent phonetically to the succession of a consonant and five vowels as in the syllabaries: BA-BE-BI-BO-BU, CA-CE CI-CO-CU, DA-DE-DI-DO-DU, and so on for all the consonants of the alphabet."¹⁰ An example for everyone, the one relating to SA-SE-SI-SO-SU:

To convince the owner of a nightclub to hire her, a stripper assures him of her effectiveness in arousing spectators' excitement.

– Sa? Sessi isso su!

A Poème à lipogramme vocaliques progressifs,¹¹ written in November 1977

to pay homage to Queneau, in which the vowels within the first line of the first quatrain all appear in the first word (*flowerbeds*), then disappear one after the other in the following words (*obliterate, yellow, grass, sa*), i.e. they contain 4, 3, 2, 1 vowels; in the second verse the words contain 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 vowels; the second quatrain opens with the series “aa, ee, ii, oo, uu” and then uses only the vowel “e.”

The poem *Georges Perec Oulipien*, composed between 17 and 21 March 1983, uses only the letters of the title (the Oulipian procedure is called “beau présent”), released in the collective plaquette *A Georges Perec*, Bibliothèque Oulipienne N° 23 of 1987.¹²

⁹ Published privately in 1969, then in Oulipo, *La littérature potentielle*, cit., pp. 235-240 and pages. 301.

¹⁰ Italo Calvino, *Piccolo Sillabario Illustrato* (by Georges Perec), *il Caffè*, 1, 1977, pp. 7-18; Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, cit., pp. 334-341; also in Ruggero Campagnoli, Yves Hersant (ed.), *Potential Literature* (Creazioni Ri-creazioni Ricerche), Clueb, Bologna 1985, pp. 224-231, and Ruggero Campagnoli, edited by, *Oulipiana*, Editorial Guide, Naples 1995, pp. 55-61.

¹¹ Oulipo, *A Raymond Queneau*, Bibliothèque Oulipienne N° 4, Paris 1977, pp. 49-73; then in Oulipo, *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, préface by Noël Arnaud, volume 1, Éditions Ramsay, 1987, Éditions Seghers, Paris 1990, pag. 63; with the title *Progressive Vocal Lipograms*, *L'Europeo* (Magazine), 23 August 1979; and in Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, cit., pag. 333.

¹² Oulipo, *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, précédé des Deux Manifestes de François Le Lionnais, volume 2, Éditions Ramsay, 1987; Éditions Seghers, Paris 1990, p. 110.

It is interesting to note that these Oulipian texts, *Poème à lipogramme vocaliques progressifs* and *Georges Perec oulipien*, are the only poems written by Calvino. In reality, some poetic proofs are preserved in Calvin's manuscripts, such as the sonnet *Nocturne*, or the "hermetic lyric" *Chiarodiluna*, which has this annotation: "No, no! Compassion! I will not do it again! I promise I won't do it again!" Calvino's poetic attempts are "sporadic and all variously occasional and provisional."¹³

L'Hommes illustres + 7 is an extension of the so-called "S + 7 method," invented by Jean Lescure, one of the first members of Oulipo. The Lescurian method consists in replacing each noun in a text with the one that is in the next seventh position of a chosen dictionary. Calvino's exercise, published in the *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (1981),¹⁴ starts from a dictionary of characters and replaces the seventh character name that follows in alphabetical order in the starting dictionary in a passage full of proper names.¹⁵

The story *The Fire of the Abominable House*, from which Calvino would have liked to make a real novel entitled *L'ordre dans le crime* (The Order in Crime); the story was published in the Italian edition of "Playboy," February-March 1973. The first pages of the story appeared in the French version, *L'incendie de la maison maudite*, in paragraph 5 of the IV section, dedicated to OULIPO ET INFORMATIQUE, of the *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (1981).¹⁶

Two novels belong to the last group of "Oulipian exercises," in which the combinatorial element, i.e. the variations on a theme, a procedure dear to Queneau in the *Exercices de style*

¹³ Mario Barenghi, *Poems and inventions oulipiennes*, cit., pag. 1239.

¹⁴ Oulipo, *Atlas de littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, Paris 1981, pp. 169-170. The volume is edited by Calvino himself, who also chooses the title (preferred to *Traité* or *Précis de littérature potentielle* and *Littérature: mode d'emploi*) as demonstrated by Marcel Bénabou, *L'Oulipo tra Francia e Italia*. The example of Calvino, cit., pp. 19-31, see page. 27.

¹⁵ Mario Barenghi reports that there is a typewritten text by Calvino dated 2 November 1977 with the indication anecdote P + 7 for Oulipo, where presumably P stands for Character (Mario Barenghi, *Poesie e invenzioni oulipiennes*, cit., p. 1244).

¹⁶ Oulipo, *Atlas de littérature potentielle*, cit., pp. 319-331. Originally the novel planned by Calvino was called *Les mystères de la maison abominable*: On 8 November 1972, participating as a guest of honor in a monthly meeting at François Le Lionnais, Calvino, after having been introduced by Queneau, the which "marks the existence, in some of Calvino's works, of Oulipian-type concerns," presents the participants with a novel project: *The Mysteries of the Abominable House*. In his project "four particularly perverse characters commit twelve crimes, but it is not said who commits what; it is the reader's job to find out"; the eminently combinatorial character of the proposal suddenly captures the attention of the Oulipians and lays the foundations for Calvino's inclusion in the group, which is officially ratified during the meeting of 14 February 1973" (Michele Costagliola d'Abele, op. cit., page 201, my translation from French).

and the *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, plays a decisive role.

The first is *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*,¹⁷ originally published in the *Tarocchi* volume. *The Visconti deck of Bergamo and New York* (1969),¹⁸ therefore before Calvino entered the Oulipo, where the narrative path is entrusted to the combination of the cards of a tarot deck, used, Calvino says in the presentation of his book, as a combinatorial narrative machine.

A group of wayfarers meet in a castle: each has an adventure to tell but cannot do so because he has lost his ability to speak.¹⁹ To communicate, the wayfarers then use tarot cards, reconstructing their vicissitudes thanks to them.

The other novel that smells of “oulipianness” is *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.²⁰ There are two writings²¹ in which Calvino took the trouble to explain the structure of the novel, or more precisely “hyper-novel,”²² which has as its protagonists a female Reader and a male Reader who attempt to read a novel (precisely entitled *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*) and who for various reasons (defects, thefts, seizures, censorship of the various copies) are always forced to interrupt reading the book they are reading. Parallel to the reading of the various incipits of the novels of imaginary authors, there is the love story of the Reader (explicitly called the Reader) and Ludmilla (the Reader) which follows a traditional narrative scheme in which the happy ending is not lacking (the two protagonists they get married).

A sort of anticipation, in a small way, of the structure of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

¹⁷ Italo Calvino, *The castle of crossed destinies*, Turin, Einaudi, 1973.

¹⁸ Italo Calvino, *Tarot. The Visconti deck of Bergamo and New York*, Franco Maria Ricci editore, Parma 1969.

¹⁹ This contract is defined by Marcel Bénabou as lipofonia, coining a neologism that follows the rules of lexical formation of the term lipogramma (Michele Costagliola d'Abele, op. cit., page 111 and page 180).

²⁰ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter Night a Traveler*, Einaudi, Turin 1979. In a squared piece of paper, kept in a folder bearing the words materials discarded from *If on a night*, Calvino wrote down a list of possible titles of this novel: Debut, Prelude, Here the adventure begins, Who begins well, The entrance, Alfa, Everything is about to begin (cassato), Who opens, closes, The start, Raise the anchor, Sailing to the winds, The beautiful day can be seen from the morning, Overture, The initiation, Primordi” (Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, second volume, cit., page 1386).

²¹ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Narrator*, Alfabeta, I, 8, December 1979, pp. 4-5; then, as *Presentation, in If on a winter's night a traveller*, Oscar Mondadori, Milan 1994, pp. V-XV; Italo Calvino, *Comment j'ai écrit un de mes livres*, Bibliothèque Oulipienne N° 20, Paris 1983; then in Oulipo, *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, volume 2, cit., pp. 25-44; There is an Italian translation of this text in Ruggero Campagnoli, edited by, *Oulipiana*, cit., pp. 153-170.

²² This is what Calvino calls him in the American lesson on multiplicity (Italo Calvino, *American Lessons*, Garzanti, Milan 1988, page 117). Remember that Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* is subtitled: *Romans*, in the plural.

is found in Calvino's story *The Decapitation of the Leaders*, published in 1969 in *Il Caffè*,²³ in which he proposes a model of utopian society, i.e. a political system based on the ritual killing of the entire ruling class at regular intervals. There are four "outline chapters," explains Calvino, of a book that he is planning and which he will not finish. He then adds:

Each of the chapters that I am now presenting could be the beginning of a different book [as in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, ed.]; the order numbers they carry do not therefore imply a succession.

A curiosity, to conclude. Calvino's "combinatorial" passion is demonstrated, albeit marginally, by the 39 anagrams (in the anagram the same letters of a word or phrase are recombined in order to obtain words or phrases with different meanings) of his name, made by Calvino: Vito Alcalino, Avo Antillico, Clio Tavolina, Latino Cavoli, Nicola Volati, Catilina Volo, Tonio Cavalli, Lola Cativoni, etc.

²³ Italo Calvino, *The beheading of the Chiefs*, *il Caffè*, 4, ag. (Dec.) 1969, pp. 3-14; then in Id., *Before you say Hello*, cit., pp. 126-139, here the word chiefs has a lowercase c. On the influence of the idea of an upside-down world codified by Mikhail Bakhtin on the writing of this unfinished novel by Calvino, see: Marco Piana, *L'utopia corporea. Italo Calvino and the world upside down*, Carte italiane, volume 9, 2013, pp. 53-71.

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