

Oulipo Compendium

Harry Mathews + Alastair Brotchie (editors)

Atlas Press 1998

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2005 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

The Oulipo is a (largely French) group devoted to "potential literature", broadly the use of rigorous formal constraints in literature. In the *Oulipo Compendium* Harry Mathews, a member of the Oulipo himself, has produced the best guide to the group and its ideas available in English.

The *Compendium* opens with a translation of Raymond Queneau's *100,000,000,000,000 Poems* (ten sonnets with interchangeable lines) and an introduction to the Oulipo by Jacques Roubaud. The bulk of it takes the form of an alphabetical encyclopedia/glossary. There are many entries on people, notably on members of the Oulipo such as Le Lionnais, Queneau, Perec, and Calvino. There are descriptions of key Oulipian works, some of them quite extended: there are three pages on *Life a User's Manual*, for example, and fifty five pages are devoted to issue-by-issue summaries and descriptions of the issues of the *Bibliothèque Oulipienne*. And there are explanations of Oulipian forms and constraints and methods: the *perverb*, $N + 7$, the *lipogram*, etc.

Entries are often accompanied by extracts or examples. There are also a good number of longer works outside the basic alphabetical structure, next to the entries they illustrate. The number of original works and new translations in the *Compendium* make it an important anthology in its own right, not just a reference work.

There's no attempt to cover everything that partakes of Oulipian features — the focus remains on the Oulipo itself — but some "anticipatory plagiarists" such as Giordano Bruno and Lewis Carroll are covered. As well as the Oulipo, eighty pages are devoted to related endeavours: the Oulipopo (crime fiction), the Oupeinpo (painting), and assorted Ou-x-pos.

One notable feature of the *Oulipo Compendium* is that it is entirely comprehensible without a knowledge of French. Examples are given in

English, with an attempt made to give some idea of even peculiarly French forms, and all the works included are in translation and listed under their English titles.

The *Oulipo Compendium* is an essential volume for English-speakers wanting to understand the Oulipo. I borrowed it from the library and would like my own copy, but unfortunately (as of January 2005) it is out of print — and secondhand copies are \$130 at Amazon!

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