



# Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature

*Daniel Levin Becker*

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What sort of society could bind together Jacques Roubaud, Italo Calvino, Marcel Duchamp, and Raymond Queneau—and Daniel Levin Becker, a young American obsessed with language play? Only the Oulipo, the Paris-based experimental collective founded in 1960 and fated to become one of literature’s quirkiest movements.

An international organization of writers, artists, and scientists who embrace formal and procedural constraints to achieve literature’s possibilities, the Oulipo (the French acronym stands for “workshop for potential literature”) is perhaps best known as the cradle of Georges Perec’s novel *A Void*, which does not contain the letter e. Drawn to the Oulipo’s mystique, Levin Becker secured a Fulbright grant to study the organization and traveled to Paris. He was eventually offered membership, becoming only the second American to be admitted to the group. From the perspective of a young initiate, the Oulipians and their projects are at once bizarre and utterly compelling. Levin Becker’s love for games, puzzles, and language play is infectious, calling to mind Elif Batuman’s delight in Russian literature in *The Possessed*.

In recent years, the Oulipo has inspired the creation of numerous other collectives: the OuMuPo (a collective of DJs), the OuMaPo (marionette players), the OuBaPo (comic strip artists), the OuFlarfPo (poets who generate poetry with the aid of search engines), and a menagerie of other Ou-X-Pos (workshops for potential *something*). Levin Becker discusses these and other intriguing developments in this history and personal appreciation of an iconic—and iconoclastic—group.

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