

WLT AUTHOR FACTS

AUTHOR Jacques Jouet (b. 1947)

COUNTRY France

PRINCIPAL GENRES Fiction, Verse

THE REPUBLIC OF Jacques Jouet

LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE

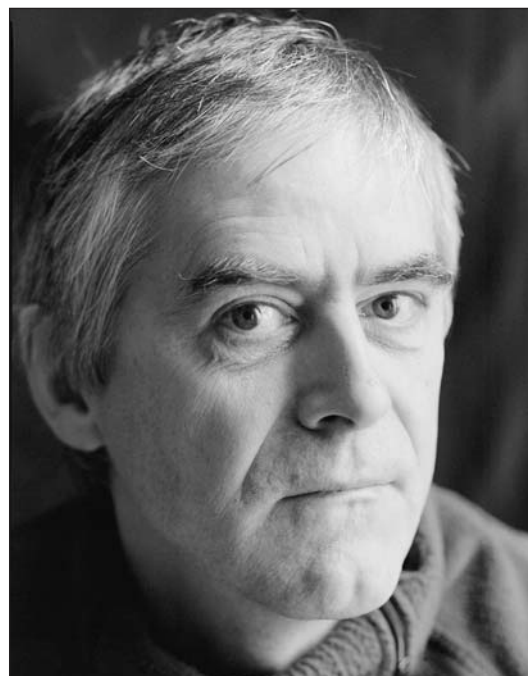
SINCE THE VIOLENT FALL OF ITS MONARCHY IN 1789, France has been committed to the idea of the republic. So much so that in this interval it has known no fewer than five republics—which it is the joy and sorrow of French schoolchildren to isolate, enumerate, and explicate. Jacques Jouet, formerly a French schoolchild, is the author of a series of works to which he has given the general title *La République roman*. The works that make up that growing republic vary widely in form, content, and length. What they share is a republican ardor of a special sort.

Jouet's literary productions are ample, diverse and extend, in fact, beyond his republic. He began as a poet and continues as one, most monumentally in *Navet, linge, œil-de-vieux* (Turnip, linen, œil-de-vieux), a collection of poems—in a day when volumes of poetry tend ever more toward brevity—that numbers no fewer than 938 pages. Jouet is a practicing playwright, and his plays have been staged all over the world—from Paris to Ouagadougou. He is the author of a lexicographical work cataloging French figures of speech that involve parts of the body (of which there are not a few).¹ All told, he is today the author of some forty books spanning the genres of poetry, drama, criticism, fiction, and biography. And in that impressive production, *La République roman* occupies a special place.

It consists to date of nineteen works of short and long fiction. It began in 1994 with the amusingly titled *Le Directeur du Musée des cadeaux des chefs d'État de l'étranger*; took hold with the second work, *La montagne R*, in 1996;² and has since become populated by works of all sorts—from, to pick the productions of a single year, the slim and patterned *Annette*

et l'Etna (2001) to the gargantuan and sprawling *La République de Mek-Ouyes* (2001). (For a complete list of the works making up Jouet's republic, see inset.) The second of these works, *Mountain R*, has just been translated by Brian Evenson and is the first of Jouet's works to be translated into English. The *R* of its title stands for Republic. The title is an ideally descriptive one in that *Mountain R* is the story of a mountain and the republic that surrounds it. The mountain is an artificial one, and so, too—though in another sense—is the republic. Both these things, it turns out, are of the essence of the work.

Like a play, the novel is divided into three parts and, like a play, consists primarily of dialogue. The first part, entitled "The Speech," is just that—a long and amusing speech made by the president of the republic before its national assembly in which he announces his plan to construct an artificial mountain some five thousand feet in height to be dedicated to the glory of the republic. The second part of the novel, "The Construction Site," is dated many years later and consists of a long, amusing, and harrowing conversation between a retired contractor involved in the construction of said republican mountain and his daughter. The third section, "The Trial (Short Excerpt)," relates an interrogation carried out by a special committee investigating the matter of the mountain. The interrogatee is a writer who was perhaps once the contractor's daughter's lover, and definitely once in the earlier republic's employ—either doing nothing at all or writing speeches for the now ex-president—such as, perhaps, the one with which the novel began.



Jacques Jouet, Paris, December 2001

Courtesy: Photographie Despatin & Gobeli

"We must do something. We must. Something must be done, something must be accomplished. It must not be said that we have not done anything. We must do more, and do it better than anyone has ever done. And moreover, this extraordinary something, we *will* do it. We have already conceived it, and are here to make it official. This something even has a name, and its name is *The Mountain . . . Republic Mountain . . . it is Mountain R!* Now there's a name that says it all. Mountain with a capital *R*. We shall call it henceforth *Mountain R*. The Republic is magnificent—long live the Republic!—but it looks like a flat-chested girl."—from *Mountain R* (tr. Brian Evenson)

When *La montagne R* was first published in 1996, the Fifth French Republic was particularly active in the construction of monuments. It saw the building of no artificial mountains in the name and service of the republic, but it did stand at the peak of the construction of the *grands projets* that marked the presidency of François Mitterrand, which included the much criticized Opéra-Bastille, Louvre Pyramid, and new Bibliothèque Nationale (national library). It was also the time, like every time in modern times, of republics in Europe and elsewhere unworthy of the name—of republics more concerned with symbolic gestures than the needs of its citizens, republics more concerned with circuses than bread, republics often indifferent to the *res publica*. *Mountain R*, writ-

ten as it was at this time, must then, it seems, have been a political novel.

Jacques Jouet is not the first Frenchman to create such a fictional republic. In July 1842 Honoré de Balzac, half-dead from caffeine abuse, finished his *Comédie Humaine*. The inspiration for his title was not a humble one. It had a great precedent in another great comedy—Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante, in fact, never referred to his work as anything other than as his *Com-media*; the *Divina* came from a different hand.³



Balzac did not, however, know this and did not need to. His concern was with this world and with life in France's new republic. In the preface he wrote for a comedy that then spanned some ninety works and featured more than two thousand characters, he praises the wonders of electricity, laments that Walter Scott had not been born Catholic, and announces that his great work was written to serve as a history of *mœurs* for France's young republic—a history of morals and manners such as those he found so sadly lacking in those other peaks of civilization that Rome, Greece, Persia, and Egypt marked. Whereas Dante wrote an account and an allegory of the divine side of the world, Balzac aspired to write an account and an allegory of its human side. Were Jacques Jouet not both so tasteful and so modest a writer, he might have titled his series of works "The Republican Comedy," as his *République romaine* has a similar aspiration—to offer a comedy both light and dark, sinister and innocent, of this world and its republics.

In 1960 a conference was held at Cérisy-la-Salle entitled "Une Nouvelle Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française" (modeled on Du Bellay's 1549 call for the enrichment of the French language). The conference was to honor the French man of arts and letters Raymond Queneau and, in particular, the colloquial richness he had discovered in his literary works such as the recently published *Zazie dans le métro* (1959). This ten-day conference was to give birth to one of the most curious French literary groups in a century rich in curious French



Works by Jacques Jouet

Le Directeur du Musée des cadeaux des chefs d'État de l'étranger (1994; The director of the museum of gifts from foreign heads of state)
La montagne R (1996; Eng. *Mountain R*, 2004)
La scène usurpée (1997; The usurped scene)
L'évasion de Rochefort (1997; The escape from Rochefort)
La République romaine (1997; The Roman republic)
Fins (1999; Ends)
Ce que rapporte l'Envoyé (1999; What the envoy brings back)
La voix qui les faisait toutes (1999; The voice they all made)
Une réunion pour le nettoyage (2001; A reunion for cleaning)
Annette et l'Etna (2001; Annette and Etna)
La République de Mek-Ouyes (2001; The republic of Mek-Ouyes)
Sauvage (2001; Savage)
Qui a appelé les bananes "bananes"? (2002; Who named bananas "bananas"?)
Mon bel autocar (2003; My handsome bus)
Aération du prolétaire (2004; The airing of the proletarian)
Jules (2004)
Cognac (2004)
L'aubergiste du magasin général (2004; The innkeeper of the warehouse)
Gulaogo, une histoire africaine (2004; Gulaogo: An African story)

literary groups. Consisting of a mixture of mathematicians and poets, the “Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle” (Workshop of potential literature), or “OuLiPo” for short, was born. The mathematicians and writers who made up the group agreed to meet once a month. While not secret, the group was private, and went some seven years before it inducted a new member. As a young man, Queneau had been a surrealist and, like many a member, left with the door slammed behind him. Tempered by his experiences with the temperamental Breton and others in his surrealist republic, Queneau decided along with co-founder François Le Lionnais that there would be no exclusions from the group—the maximum that would be allowed would be “excused absences” for those who passed away. Queneau and Le Lionnais now hold such exemptions—as do Marcel Duchamp, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, and others.

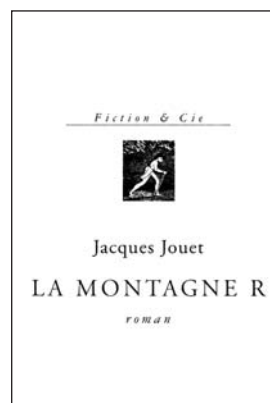
Jacques Jouet was thirteen at the time of OuLiPo’s founding and thus ineligible for entry. By 1983 things had changed, and Jouet found himself invited into the amicable circle that OuLiPo still forms. But what did this mean? What does OuLiPo do? What binds them together? OuLiPo was formed not to compose literary *works*—this was something that the members of the group believed that writers could do well enough on their own. It was formed to compose literary *constraints*—constraints through which literary works might be written.⁴ Whether they *were* written or not was another question—and in the first instance, not the essential one. These constraints varied from the very simple to the very complex. The most famous case of the former is that of Georges Perec and his *La disparition* (1969; Eng. *A Void*, 1994)—a book of more than three hundred pages in which no word containing the letter *e* appears.⁵ To remain with the example of Perec, his final novel, *La vie, mode d’emploi* (1978; Eng. *Life, A User’s Manual*, 1987), is a fine example of the latter, composed as it is through the constraints formed by the use of a complex algorithm governing the recurrence of a whole network of objects, situations, themes, citations—and more—in the work.

Constraint, as Jouet has often remarked, modifying a phrase from Francis Ponge, is “la corde la plus tendue du sens” (meaning’s tautest string).⁶ For Jouet, this elegant formula expresses the relation of constraint to the work that it produces. Though a constraint might begin as something arbitrary and seemingly external to the work it is used to create, for Jouet it does not remain external to the work and its develop-

ment. What might begin as formal constraint soon begins to inform and form semantic content. To say that constraint is “meaning’s tautest string” is then to claim that the use of constraint is no idle, mechanical, or sterile exercise in the manipulation of words but rather the setting of obstacles, the composing of riddles for both the writer and the reader to solve.⁷

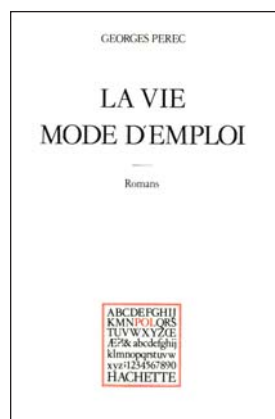
Such obstacles are not foreign to Jouet’s republic. In *Fins* (Ends), a work not yet translated, two Parisian couples pull meaning’s taut string in a variety of ways. The first way is in a formal constraint that governs the book’s division into paragraphs. It is based on one of the most time-honored and difficult constraints of Western poetry—the sestina (a form that involves the regular permutations of six rhymes). In *Fins*, the recurrent elements are not rhymes but sentences. The novel contains 216 paragraphs, each of which is composed of from one to six sentences. The first paragraph contains one sentence, the second two, the third three, and so forth through the sixth paragraph. In the seventh paragraph, another permutation begins, in which the order is shifted: 6, 1, 5, 2, 4, 3. The second permutation begins in the thirteenth paragraph, with a shift that is symmetrical to that in the second set: 3, 6, 4, 1, 2, 5. The pattern is followed until the exhaustion of all the combinatorial possibilities ($6 \times 6 \times 6 = 216$). And it is here that the taut string of meaning begins to resonate. This formal constraint engenders a semantic one. Jouet’s fellow Oulipian Calvino famously wrote a work consisting only of the beginning of a series of stories.⁸ Each of the 216 paragraphs in *Fins*, while fitting into the larger story of which it is a part, is composed as an *ending* to the brief narrative which that paragraph traces.

An even more recent addition to the republic, Jouet’s *Annette et l’Etna* (Annette and Etna), engages in another constraining resonance. *Mountain R*, however, pulls other strings. Raymond Queneau, of whom Jouet wrote a critical biography, once said rather dismissively of the composition of novels: “Anyone can drive along before him, like a gaggle of geese, an indeterminate number of apparently real characters, across the field of an indeterminate number of pages or chapters.”⁹ Jouet is fond of the remark; not only has he approvingly quoted it, he seems even to have taken it up as a sort of motto for certain of his works. Whereas *Fins* and *Annette et l’Etna* are Oulipian works pulled tight with the strings of constraint, *Mountain R* ushers its apparently real



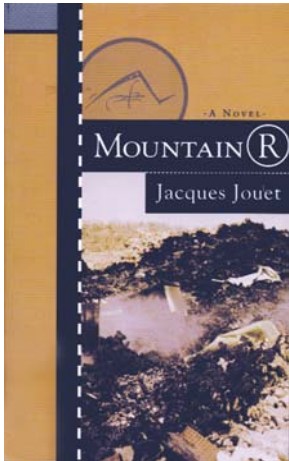
Title-page detail from Jouet’s *La montagne R* (1996)

Courtesy: Seuil



Cover of Georges Perec’s *La vie, mode d’emploi* (1978)

Courtesy: Hachette



Cover of Jouet's *Mountain R* (2004)

Courtesy: Dalkey Archive

characters like a gaggle of geese across a determinate number of pages (143) and chapters (3).¹⁰ But if it is not a work of constraint, is it then, as contemporary events made it seem, a political one?

In his *Raymond Queneau*, Jouet says of the young Queneau, then a member of the surrealists (in 1927), that "Queneau shows a clear apolitical bent even at a time when he is, to all appearances, quite politicized" (Queneau a une nette propension apoliticienne, à une époque même où il semble très politisé).¹¹ While this is an astute and accurate description of Queneau's works of the period, it might with equal justice be applied to Jouet's own development. It would be wrong to conclude, as the raising of the question of the republic in his work would seem to encourage one to do, that Jouet's works are primarily political ones. Upon closer inspection, one sees that Jouet is ultimately less interested in denouncing the "Irrépublique," as he at one point calls it, or in bringing about "une nouvelle République réembastillée," as he remarks elsewhere, than in exploring the literary freedoms and constraints that a fictional republic offers.¹²

Vladimir Nabokov, a great lover of novels and puzzles, once said that "a great writer's world" is "a magic democracy where even some very minor character, even the most incidental character . . . has the right to live and breed."¹³ In the case of Jacques Jouet, we might modify this formula to say that what Jouet's works form is a magic *republic* where good writers and bad politicians, good daughters and bad fathers, mysterious mountain-climbers and secretive curators have an inalienable and enlightening right to live and breed. **WLT**

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¹ See *Les mots du corps dans les expressions de la langue française* (1990).

² Jouet notes that his sense that what he was at work on was a cycle began with this second novel. On this point, Jouet's "Préface générale à *La République roman*" is instructive.

³ But an illustrious one—that of Boccaccio, who added the qualifier *Divina* to the comedy in his hagiographical work on Dante. In the 1555 edition of Dante's work that Lodovico Dolce was asked to prepare, the latter took up Boccaccio's suggestion and published the work under the title *La Divina Commedia di Dante*.
⁴ For a recent and exemplary definition, see the communally signed "Introduction à l'usage des néophytes et des grands débutants":

OuLiPo. Qu'est ceci? Qu'est cela? Qu'est-ce que Ou? Qu'est-ce que Li? Qu'est-ce que Po?

Ou, c'est *Ouvroir*, un atelier où l'on œuvre. Pour fabriquer quoi? De la Li.

Li, c'est la *littérature*, ce qu'on lit et ce qu'on rature. Quelle sorte de Li? La LiPo.

Po signifie *potentielle*. De la littérature en quantité illimitée, potentiellement productible jusqu'à la fin des temps, en quantités énormes, infinies pour toutes fins pratiques.

The essay is signed "L'Oulipo le 20/02/2002" (Oulipo, *Abrégé de littérature potentielle*, 2002).

⁵ Two translations of this work exist: a published one entitled *A Void* and an unpublished one entitled "Vanish'd."

⁶ In another version of this remark, Jouet has asserted that "form" is meaning's tautest string (cf. Marc Lapprand, "Jacques Jouet: Un oulipien métrologue," *Magazine Littéraire* 398 [May 2001], 63–65). Ponge's original remark concerned classicism, which he called "la corde la plus tendue du baroque" (the tensest string of the Baroque) in his *Pour un Malherbe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 238.

⁷ See Jacques Jouet, "With (and without) Constraints," tr. Roxanne Lapidus, *SubStance* 96 30:3 (2001), 4–15.

⁸ This novel is *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), whose working title was "Incipit." Much earlier, in *Giornata d'uno scutatore* (1963), Calvino noted that "all that really counts for any given thing is the moment in which it begins, the moment in which all its energies are still contained, in which all that exists is the future" (Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945–1985*, ed. Mario Barenghi [Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1995], 2:17).

⁹ "Raymond Queneau," *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950). The essay in question, "Technique du roman," is from 1937.

¹⁰ In the essay quoted earlier, Jouet remarks that "one must reaffirm the nonexistence of the constraint in order to elicit a new constraint" (Jouet, "With (and without) Constraints," 15).

¹¹ Jacques Jouet, *Raymond Queneau* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1988), 14.

¹² *Fins* (Paris: POL, 1999), 23, 28.

¹³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 124.

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