Notes on Michele Audin, *One Hundred Twenty-One Days*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

**Being Coy about Technical Language**

Michele Audin's "One Hundred Twenty-One Days" (2014, English 2016) is an Oulipean experimental novel, the second in English by a female member of Oulipo. It is about the lives of several French mathematicians, and the author herself is a mathematician. The book is divided into eleven Roman-numbered chapters, each of which takes a different form: diary, myth, dossier, chronology, etc. After chapter XI there is a "Supernumerary Chapter," dated 2009-2013, in which Audin herself lists some of the book's sources (including Dante, Berlioz, Beckett, and dozens of others), and gives the chapter that contains material from each, even though it is often impossible to say how the source material appears in the chapters. The "Supernumerary Chapter" also includes all the place names mentioned in the book, in alphabetical order, even though that information is impossible to use. The book ends with an Index of Proper Names, exactly as in an older French-language book.

The translator, Christiana Hills, appends a brief essay that mentions, in passing, that she read most of the books mentioned in the "Supernumerary Chapter" and did extensive research on the geography, biography, and chronology of the book, but she doesn't say how any of that helped the translation, or might affect the reader's experience.

The central non-mathematical, non-Oulipean theme of the novel is the distance between the nominally unpolitical world of mathematics and the atrocities and horrors of both World Wars. Some of the mathematicians in the novel are in the resistance in WWII; some are collaborators; one is Jewish; another is horribly wounded in WWI. There are intrigues and politically motivated actions of various kinds -- but despite it all, the mathematics proceeds.

I have a specific criticism of the book, to do with the way it excludes the actual language of the one discourse it privileges the most, mathematics. I'll expand on that in the last section.

1. Reading the book as politics and history

It is possible to read this as primarily a book about the identities and lives of people compromised by war. In France, Audin is known for refusing the Legion
of Honor because, she said, Sarkozy failed to answer a letter she wrote asking for information about her own father's disappearance (he was a well-known mathematician). A review by John Taylor in Boston's "Art Fuse" describes the novel along these lines, as a matter of politics and identities:

"[Audin's] spirited Oulipian gambits stand out and may irritate some readers. They keep the emotions from building up and making this novel thoroughly gripping. Feeling is in shards, as it were... a strong point is being made: what matters is not emotional connection, but rather gathering scattered bits of fact, piecing some of the puzzle back together, and restoring the identities and thus the full-blooded faces of those whom the Nazis sought to efface."  
(http://ow.ly/8gzI30bIGGf)

2. Reading the book as a structural accomplishment

It is also possible to read the book more as a structural puzzle. Felix Hass does this in a review in "Bookslut":

"You cannot read Audin’s masterfully written book as you would any other work of fiction. Rather, you need to approach it as you might a book of science or mathematics. You underline, you comment, you take notes. In a mathematical proof, you might try to fill in a technical step that was left to the reader by the text itself. With 'One Hundred Twenty-One Days,' you want to capture detail mentioned about seemingly unimportant characters, to serve as cross-references when they are broken out as heroes of a new chapter, which, on first glance, might strike you as an entirely new book.... So, at the end, it is not a man's rebellion against or another man's complacency with fascist oppression, nor is it a triple homicide committed by a third or the combined mathematical genius of all three that lends itself as the focal point of Audin's novel. Rather, she wants us to see that it is a young woman's love, her '121 days of happiness' which is truly remarkable, 'the fabric of history.' Audin lets her fictitious author put this theory forward in one of her last pages and underlines it by her choice of title. Still, it remains difficult to see the importance of this love episode, which is laid out in merely one of her eleven chapters." (http://ow.ly/RJpl30bIGTT)

In this kind of reading, the book becomes a puzzle that is solved: the vicissitudes of history and politics are less important -- or more fragmentary -- than a moment of love. The reading isn't satisfying, for at least three reasons: as Hass says, it isn't convincing given the book's complexity; Oulipo isn't about solving mysteries; and it doesn't account for the results of mathematics itself, which is held apart from history throughout the book.

3. Combining both strategies of reading

Other reviews I've seen do not decide between these two. Michael Orthofer's review in "The Complete Review" hedges the issues raised by these two kinds of readings. He says the book "can't easily be reduced to a 'story about' some-(or
many) things," but those things are what interest him, and in the end the book is a "puzzle." Another inconclusive review is Karl Wolff's in the "New York Journal of Books"; Wolff concludes by asking "What is storytelling, if not a futile grasp to interpret the accumulated detritus, ephemera, the junk of civilization?" -- a question that is not specific to this book.

According to John Russell Clark, in "The Kenyon Review," "the novel's implicit view of history" is that "it is vastly more complex than any single point-of-view, or any one narrative (or, shit, any fifty narratives, 121 narratives) could ever come close to grasping." But again this observation doesn't account for this particular book: it could be said of any complex book on twentieth-century politics.

In theory, I think the two strategies of reading could be combined in a rigorous way, but I haven't seen a review that does so. Perhaps there's a dissertation in the making on the subject. Hills, the translator, notes that she used Google maps, Pinterest, and other sources to try to elucidate the book's metafictional sources: much more could be done in that vein, and it might well be possible to work on the very Oulipean problem of justifying the exact form, in all its artificiality and constraints, as an optimal solution to expressing the book's real-world themes.

4. Representing mathematics

A review by Corine Tachtiris in "World Literature Today" notes that "With powerful effect, Audin demonstrates that math can be both poetic and political." I don't agree with this simply because mathematics is actually not present in the book. A book as vertiginously complex as this one, with a full range of Oulipo-style research, constrained writing, appropriated styles, multiple chronologies, and extremely densely allusive prose, should be able to present mathematics more fully. Instead we get hackneyed gestures in the direction of mathematical beauty: a character muses that pi is exquisitely beautiful; there's a chapter on numbers that includes a dozen mathematical constants with no explanation; and there are hints of genius throughout.

But why should mathematics be reduced to those sorts of "Beautiful Mind" kinds of reductions? There are many ways to show the significance of constants like the square root of two, e, and pi, without requiring advanced mathematics or even trigonometry. There are continued fractions, infinite series, analogies and illustrations of all sorts. This is also a book of extraordinary literary complexity. Many passages in it are not wholly comprehensible because they depend on texts (as in the "Supernumerary Chapter") that provide structure, content, allusion, and wordplay without actually revealing themselves. Why, then, not include actual equations? If readers are temporarily but repeatedly lost by the book's allusions and its collage of literary styles, why shouldn't they be temporarily blocked by the presence of "illegible" equations? What is Oulipo if not the presentation of "inert," unexpected, illegible, "inexpressive," appropriated, rule-bound material in the body of fiction? Why not complement the "technical"
apparatus of the novel with actual mathematics (or chemistry, or engineering, or any other "technical" discourse)? Why should an Oulipean project -- or any other demanding, experimental, complex work of fiction -- restrict itself to literary discourse?