

Peter Consenstein

City University of New York

Oulipian Melancholy

Résumé

Jacques Roubaud et Anne Garréta publient *Éros mélancolique*, un roman fermement implanté dans l'ère digitale, en 2009. D'une manière typiquement oulipienne, ils rebattent toute forme romanesque, profitent de toute possibilité structurale et avancent une histoire d'amour dont le récit poursuit une temporalité du SMS et du fichier ci-joint. Puisque ce roman capte la réalité contemporaine et temporelle qui passe devant nous à un mégabyte à la seconde, ce qui distingue la fiction de la réalité s'estompe. Les influences variées du roman dévoilent au lecteur ce que Roubaud et Garréta appellent un « ogre décharné lying at the heart of the web ». En même temps, le lecteur fait la connaissance des personnages sympathiques qui souffrent d'un « amour de loin ». Une mélancolie particulière et tout du vingt et unième siècle, une mélancolie productive et plaintive, réaliste et déstabilisante, émane de ce roman. La combinatoire littéraire que Roubaud et Garréta mettent à l'œuvre produit un autre exemple de la littérature potentielle où se reconfigure un nouveau jeu d'amour qui donne un nouveau sens au mot « queer ».

Abstract

Jacques Roubaud and Anne Garréta published *Éros mélancolique*, a novel ensconced in the digital era, in 2009. In typical Oulipian fashion, they shuffle through past manifestations of the novel, exploit its structural possibilities, and then invest a love story with all that is at stake when writing on the digital edge of time. Because contemporary temporal reality passes in front of us at a megabyte a second, their novel makes a blur of the lines between fiction and reality. The novel's complex sources force the reader to stare directly into the eyes of what Roubaud and Garréta term the "ogre décharné lying at the heart of the web." At the same time, readers encounter sympathetic persona who suffer an unrequited love. The novel develops a particular twenty-first century melancholy that is productive and mournful, realistic and destabilizing. The ingredients that Roubaud and Garréta combine deliver another version of potential literature, one that now reconfigures normative practices of love and gender, and gives "queer" new meaning.

Mot clés: Roubaud, Garréta, Eros, queer, amour, mélancolie.

« discovery »: someone without a name temporarily uploaded the pdf file in question. The preface forces the reader to question what is real and what is not, to engage in a virtual reality, and in so doing to smack headlong into the fragility of fiction.

The text then takes a sharp turn. The preface is followed by an eight page diversion, printed in another font and not in italics, entitled « L'archive fantôme la mémoire digitale. » The title's use of parataxis reflects the joining and the rejoining of the pathways of memory, while this section's use of another font visually puts the reader into contact, in a somewhat uncomfortable fashion, with the availability of different fonts provided by word processing and the current virtual state of electronic text. These eight pages describe how a computer belonging to a middle aged executive is stolen while he slept on a TGV. The executive's ability to conduct affairs is compromised, the PowerPoint presentation scheduled for the next meeting is lost, his digital memory is gone and his professional life upended. He buys a new computer on EBay and then starts working with it instead of a company replacement. The new computer's ghost memory—undetectable, prosaic, incongruent and corruptive—interferes with the protagonist's files, emails and records. In both of the pretexts to *Éros mélancolique*, untraceable digital memory disrupts the daily routine: determining the future becomes a shaky enterprise.

The third pre-text, six pages entitled « Le négatif la chambre noire, » set up the main story and also relate how the digital era and memory interact. The reader meets a forlorn man who, while wandering the streets of Edinburg, purchases a wooden box found in the window of an antique shop. Losing and finding, like continuity and discontinuity, establish themselves as main motifs as does the quest for love. The box contains two Leica III cameras, nine lenses, and a hidden compartment containing nine metal film containers, each filled with negatives. The negatives, viewed under a bright light, are of typewritten pages, « 9 séquences de 36 pages » (29) and they are entitled « Éros mélancolique. » The numbers remind us of the nines that governed others of Roubaud's works and of the mathematical aspect of Oulipian writing; I will return to them. These six pages of « Le négatif la chambre noire » present an unnamed man who suffers with lost love, an 'amour de loin,' and who wanders the streets of Edimbourg seeking « traces » of his lover and curiously, « à la recherche de leur évanouissement » (26). This particular « évanouissement » involves a twenty-first century loss of love linked to various memory paths and their effect on self-consciousness. Our protagonist experiences his pain through the virtual and the digital: he writes text messages to the woman he loves but does not send them, he saves them. He then scans the negatives he found in the wooden box into a format legible by his computer and saves them. Digital methods of recollection and recall mediate both interior and exterior experiences, love and discovery respectively. To « save »—a text message or a pdf—now equals both the deposition of memory into a repository as well as an « évanouissement, » a blackout, a conscious act of forgetting.

The files containing the text « Éros mélancolique » are presented after these three disjointed and paradoxical pre-texts. « Éros mélancolique » is supposedly authored by A. D. Clifford,³ and the main protagonist is named James Goodman.⁴ It covers 248 pages of this 299 page book, and there are constraints that structure the narration and others that govern the life of the protagonist. One of the most apparent constraints is how the narration is

structured by the number nine. The text contains nine titled chapters that are also chronological; each chapter title is followed by a month in parenthesis, beginning with the month of March and ending with the month of November. Each of the nine chapters is divided into nine more titled sub-sections, totaling eighty-one. Nine also dominates as it pertains to the number of paragraphs per sub-section; the great majority of sub-sections are comprised of nine paragraphs. The number surfaces throughout the narration: for example, the pages that display only a margin of text, seemingly caused by a faulty pdf file, often contain exactly nine characters and when Raymonde, the blond at the center of Goodman's love intrigue, comes to his apartment, she arrives at nine pm. Although nine is not a « nombre de Queneau, » it is a number that surfaces in both *Le grand incendie de Londres* and *Quelque chose noir*.⁵ As both of these works relate personal events in Roubaud's life, the number nine ignites a level of reminiscence of past works, literature and its web of reality: it is part of Roubaud's identity. The number nine also creates echoes of Queneau, Perec, and all of the Oulipo.

Mr. Goodman, the main protagonist in A. D. Clifford's « Éros mélancolique, » is also a persona in many of Roubaud's texts (such as *Monsieur Goodman rêve de chats*⁶ and *Ciel et terre et ciel et terre, et ciel: John Constable*).⁷ Goodman represents Roubaud's Scottish alter-ego and in *Éros mélancolique* Goodman came to Paris to write a thesis entitled « The Chemistry of Light » (41), which reminds us of Roubaud's own interest in light and photography, evident, for example, in his *Échanges de la lumière*.⁸ The writing of Goodman's thesis is determined by an « orgie numérolgique, » it is « numériquement pure » (34) and it follows plans that are « si longuement, si anciennement mûris » (33) that they determine the number of days it will take to write the thesis. March 5th is the day Goodman begins writing; unfortunately, by March 14, « il renonça » (57). It is during the month of May that Goodman decides to implement a different project, the creation of a « composition print » (117), a project inspired by Oscar Rejlander—a verifiable 19th century Swedish-born photographer—to whom Goodman is distantly and fictively related. The composition print is composed of a series of negatives all printed onto one sheet of photographic paper. Goodman's project entails taking photographs of the same object from exactly the same spot according to a strict time schedule. The project will take 177 days (126) allowing for sixteen days of family vacation. The schedule for taking the photographs is built upon a twenty-four by twenty-four grid, the columns indicating the number of weeks whereas the rows represent the twenty-four hours of the day. (Much like it recalls *La Vie mode d'emploi*⁹ by Georges Perec). The field of vision of the photograph is also divided into a similar grid that governs the displacement of the exact center of each photo taken. The constraint is designed to govern both the time and space of the photographic series, its goal is a « Projet de saisie du temps par la photographie » (292).

Approaching the final four weeks of his project, Mr. Goodman discovers that he committed an error. During the week of July 14th, perturbed by all the noise-making on Bastille Day, Mr. Goodman skipped a line (292). Profound self-doubt sets in, as the project of seizing time by photography must be « scrupuleusement et fidèlement suivi » (292). The questions he asks himself can also be asked of the entire Oulipian project:

qu'est-ce qu'une œuvre composée sous contraintes, selon un système de contraintes très complexe et très contraignant, qui ne respecte pas les contraintes que son auteur s'était données? Fallait-il dissimuler le système? et du même coup dissimuler la faille énorme qui s'y cachait? Fallait-il le révéler, présenter, en même temps que le tableau achevé, un exposé des principes de sa composition, et, comme s'il s'agissait d'une œuvre architecturale, un cahier des charges comportant, ou non, l'aveu des défauts de structure, et si non, laisser à ceux qui prendraient connaissance des deux parties le soin de les découvrir? (293)

Mr. Goodman's response to these questions is capital: once again, « il renonça » (294). He accuses himself of a « *dereliction of duty* » (294) and is reminded of what Saint François de Sales understands as dereliction: « un état de solitude, un abandon de Dieu » (294). Palpable melancholy results. But let us take stock of what is most obvious, of a Proustian twist of fate: both failed projects, the thesis and the composition print, governed Goodman's life, filled his time and provided us with a text worthy of our time and contemplation. Let us then consider Roubaud and Garréta's construction of melancholy.

Melancholy plays a formal role in the constraint Goodman implements to construct his photographic composition. According to the story, at 11:00 pm on a July night of 1944, he heard the following words pronounced about his mother Esther: « Mais elle a peut-être tardé et n'a pas pu rentrer à cause du couvre-feu... Et elle aura passé la nuit où? Il est onze heures. Esther ne reviendra pas » (135). 11:00 pm becomes Goodman's « heure noire » (135) and will be avoided in the constraints governing the photographic composition. Before divulging how the « heure noire » is integrated into the constraint, let us follow Goodman's struggle with the « black and white » of melancholy.¹⁰

Goodman describes a Sunday during which he encountered light emanating from snow and being reabsorbed by a « soleil blanc » (137). In this instance, Goodman understood snow as a substance that does not absorb or hide light; instead, it recasts light upon a star causing it to receive light instead of giving it. The white of this star has the qualities, according to Goodman, of « disparition » and « privation » (137). This light compensated for the dark hour of his mother's disappearance by emitting the brightness—not the darkness—of disappearance and deprivation: the knowledge of disappearance has enduring qualities that do not themselves disappear. The darkness of a black hour, of a soul deprived of light, God and mother, is not saved by a star that absorbs light, it is counterbalanced by it, and this is what Goodman called the « paradoxe ultime du blanc et du noir » (137); black does not exist without white, white does not exist without black and together they do not resolve loss, deprivation or disappearance. Black is not representative of evil, just like white is not representative of purity: they are not in opposition. The paradox resides in the counter-instinctual notion that neither black nor white is either good or evil; they collude, need each other, are sometimes in balance and sometimes out of balance.

Mr. Goodman, recognizing both the paradox of white and black as well as the need to represent the loss that occurred in his life at 11:00 pm, made sure to integrate these events, events that are integral to his identity, into the constraints that govern his « composition print.

» Goodman's first thought was to represent 11:00 pm with « une heure manquante, » but it would have been « trop évident » (150). Next he considered « un carré noir mélancolique, » but chose instead a « carré blanc » because it was more « absolument mélancolique » (150) than a black square. He then decided to intersperse the introduction of the white square with an image of a tree, a « micoculier, » that represented a positive childhood memory. The constraint is not purely mathematical or formal; it is imbued with melancholy, a search for balance and identity.

It is melancholy that ties the threads of this book together as well as the threads of my presentation. Historically speaking, melancholy was viewed as an imbalance of the four humors—yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood. It evokes furor and discontent as well as possible joy and greatness. Melancholy arises from expectations that are never fully met and is fueled by possibilities of what may be. There is the « éros mélancolie » of courtly love, to which Roubaud dedicated an article of the same title in 1982,¹¹ as well as the melancholy of inner fears and desire. There is the melancholy that results from the encounter between inner world and « reality, » or the exterior world; within this encounter, melancholy participates in how truth is gauged and is thus influential within an epistemological framework. Aristotle, in Problems XXX, asks why « all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are melancholics . . . ? »¹² Melancholy is not necessarily detrimental; great artistic and intellectual efforts that serve to reconcile opposing forces do produce greatness. In the artistic assessment and representation of inner and outer worlds, melancholy creates flexibility in the construction of one's identity.

Garréta called *Éros mélancolique* a « roman d'éducation sentimentale, classique et queer. »¹³ That *Éros mélancolique* recalls Flaubert as well as the classical novel is not surprising, given the background of its authors. However, the adjective « queer » might come as a surprise. When Garréta uses the term « queer, » against expectations, it is not used to determine and claim an identity. Garréta uses the term « queer » to define the struggle and quest for identity, a struggle that has melancholic hues. Melancholy is part of this novel's effort to, according to Garréta, « compliquer les identités sexuelles » just as the games and constraints that define Oulipian writing participate in an effort « Se déprendre de l'emprise normative, » because Oulipo itself, she declares, is a « projet queer? Un projet dé-normatif. » In fact, in *La Décomposition*¹⁴ Garréta dreams of a novel that communicates « L'impersonnel absolu » (133), an ideal starting point for constructing identity.

Mr. Goodman invested himself emotionally into a project that would seize time through photography and he failed. He threw himself headlong into a relationship that he did not consummate, enticed, as he was, by a voice that excited his desire and proved melancholic. Eros in transformation, our digital era for example, sweeps the identities of individuals into their tides and we gaze through the lenspieces of art and creation watching time effect change inside and out. The Internet age, suggests the post script of *Éros mélancolique*, technically re-transfigures memory, upon which identities are built. Melancholy sets in and the authors of the Oulipo organize the narrations of this change in unique fashions. The author of the postscript—I hear Garréta—lists the names that people *Éros mélancolique* (Rejlander, Goodman, Coxeter, etc.) and challenges the reader to:

Google them, Yahoo them, interrogez l'ogre décharné lying at the heart of the web, et qui dévore les traces pour en bâtir son labyrinthe de téraoctets. Archive dévorante qui dissout le passé, l'être passé, dans une mise à jour perpétuelle. Les pages web sont sans âge, éternellement jeunes. Ensevelissement de la mémoire dans son exhumation continuée. . . (296).

We can consider Oulipian writing to be a search for balance that is based upon de-normative applications of technical reconfigurations. These reconfigurations result from productive melancholy and represent a means of gathering and testing knowledge. Such experimental labor ('ouvrir') reflects a friendly and unfriendly relationship with time, the instability of the present moment and a method of rejecting and embracing both past eras as well as future endeavors. Such labor communicates the disquieting passing of time.

¹ Paris, Grasset, 2009.

² In "Le second manifeste," François Le Lionnais writes: "On peut se demander ce qui arriverait si l'OuLiPo n'existait pas ou s'il disparaissait subitement. À court terme on pourrait le regretter. À terme plus long tout rentrerait dans l'ordre, l'humanité finissant par trouver, en tâtonnant, ce que l'OuLiPo s'efforce de promouvoir consciemment. Il en résulterait cependant dans le destin de la civilisation un certain retard que nous estimons de notre devoir d'atténuer" (23), Oulipo, *La Littérature potentielle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, 19-23.

³ When researching A.D. Clifford on the Internet through Google, other search engines and numerous library sites including the New York Public Library, The British Library, the Bibliothèque nationale de France and various university libraries, I discovered that a certain A.D. Clifford discovered a tick with a man named Roubaud (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argas>). As well, Roubaud, in his article "Hypothèses génétiques concernant la peréquation de la forme roman," *Le Cabinet d'amateur*, 4, Automne 1995, 9-23 references a book authored by A.D. Clifford whose actual existence I am unable to ascertain. Jean-Jacques Poucel found an A.D. Clifford in Roubaud's *Autobiographie chapitre 10*, prose quarante quatrième in *Jacques Roubaud and the Invention of Memory*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina Press, 2006, p. 171.

⁴ In fact, *Éros mélancolique* is one text of four, including the last section [Fade to Gray]. It could actually be displayed as "Éros mélancolique." This too is a reference to Roubaud's *Le grand incendie de Londres*, Paris, Seuil, 1989, in which 'le grand incendie de Londres' is considered one branch of the overall project.

⁵ Paris, Gallimard, 1986.

⁶ Paris, Gallimard, 1994.

⁷ Charenton, Flohic, 1997.

⁸ Paris, A.M. Métailié, 1990.

⁹ Paris, Hachette, 1978.

¹⁰ Not only does the “black and white” remind us of the stones on a Go board, a game that governed the writing of Roubaud’s first important work of poetry, but Esther is the name of George Perec’s aunt, the woman who adopted and raised him.

¹¹ Jacques Roubaud, “Galehaut et l’Eros mélancolique,” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé*, 61:4, 1982, 362-382.

¹² In Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, Nendeln/Liechtenstein, Kraus Reprint, 1979 [1964], p. 18.

¹³ Gildas Le Dem, “Anne F. Garréta danse avec les spectres,” (interview du 18 Mars 2009) http://www.univers-l.com/eros_melancolique_interview_anne_garreta_page1.html, visited July 24, 2011.

¹⁴ Paris, Grasset, 1999.