



Great Fire of London: A Story with Interpolations and Bifurcations

Jacques Roubaud, Dominic Di Bernardi (Translator)

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Part novel, part autobiography, *The Great Fire of London* is one of the great literary undertakings of our time. Both exasperating and moving, cherished by its readers, it has its origins in the author's attempt to come to terms with the death of his young wife Alix, whose presence both haunts and gives meaning to every page. Having failed to write his intended novel (*The Great Fire of London*), instead Roubaud creates a book that is about that failure, but in the process opens up the world of the creative process. This novel stands as a lyrical counterpart of the great postmodern masterpieces by fellow Oulipians Georges Perec and Italo Calvino. First published by Dalkey Archive Press in 1991, now available again.

Great Fire of London: A Story with Interpolations and Bifurcations Details

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From Reader Review Great Fire of London: A Story with Interpolations and Bifurcations for online ebook

Ben Winch says

Since my discovery of Gerald Murnane via Barley Patch in 2015 I've been drawn increasingly to prose works which straddle the line between fiction and autobiography, and in some ways, Jacques Roubaud's *The Great Fire of London* is the quintessence of these, and the work I have read which is closest in tone to my own experiments in "autofiction".

Autofiction. I remember my skepticism when I first heard that word. Did we really need a trendy descriptor for what, if it simply meant another "I" novel, was probably the most prevalent and uncreative genre among beginner writers? But if autofiction means, as I hope it does, an "I" novel that interrogates itself, that examines, like Murnane or Roubaud, the *process* of writing about oneself (the tricks played by memory and by the pen, the inadequacy of language to transmit experiences, etc) then I think it's useful, so long as it doesn't exclude those writers (like Murnane, like Roubaud) who venture *outside* of its dictates, who treat it as a *trait* and not genre.

Briefly then, *The Great Fire of London*, as well as being autofiction, is a book, like fellow Oulipan Marcel Benabou's *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, about the *absence* of a book – about a book which never came into being. Or so it claims. Meanwhile, and to my mind more convincingly, it's the automatic, diaristic, daily writing exercise of a man grieving, or refusing to grieve, for his young dead wife, and desperate to make of this exercise something meaningful. And it's fascinating to see, close-up and transparent, the processes through which Roubaud's thought journeys on its way to believing that his project is a novel. Can it be? That these apparently random missives (though only apparently random since Roubaud's, as he has claimed in interviews, is an Oulipan work of planned constraints, even if those constraints are mostly not visible) – can it be that these missives on anything from the texture of croissants to his childhood in Languedoc to the making of jelly, the layout of his kitchen, his liking of English women writers, his status as walker, swimmer, reader, lover and professor of arcane poetic forms – can it be that all of this is more than the sum of its parts, a novel? We see Roubaud's struggle to believe it, see him gain confidence as the pages amass, and ultimately, in a pivotal section which I'll admit I found virtually unreadable, we witness (what purports to be) a point-by-point quasi-mathematical breakdown of everything that the inchoate "The Great Fire of London" (as opposed to the completed *The Great Fire of London*) might have been and isn't. For me, an unnecessary exercise and one that increased my belief neither in the viability of the project or in the loss to literature of that project's non-existence.

(What is or was "The Great Fire of London"? A book conceived of by Roubaud after waking from a dream, a simple dream which he relates here many times, and whose power and significance I never quite grasped. Is the dream – of another woman and another city – emblematic of all that might have been but isn't? Is it symbolic, even, of fiction? I don't know, and honestly I'm not much interested. I'm not even sure that the concept helped give his book unity. It seemed a stretch, maybe even a con, though whether Roubaud was conning the reader, himself, or both I'm unsure. Also the famed "bifurcations" and "interpolations" did little for me; I found the format unwieldy and many of the sections unnecessary, either in that I could have lived without them or that I could happily have seen them subsumed in the main body text. That said, I appreciate the transparency of their placement as I appreciate Roubaud's transparency throughout. And if, as Murnane would claim, a book's narrator is both its main character and its most valuable invention then *The Great Fire of London* is a success. It gave me a vivid, intimate glimpse of the life, thought and, to a degree, passions of a character named Jacques Roubaud, who in many ways (his appreciation for the anonymous booklined idyll

that is his experience of London, for example) was both illuminating and familiar.)

An inspiring work whose most enduring image may well be of the solitary writer at his desk in the pre-dawn hours, this is in some ways the great writers' handbook, though maybe paradoxically only when Roubaud *stops* discussing his writing, or at least his grand conceptions of it. The lesson: write what you can, not what you can conceive of. A lesson that, maybe, was hard-won for Jacques Roubaud.

Chris says

This was originally published at The Scrying Orb.

In his youth, Jacques Roubaud had a dream that changed his life. The dream, which was honestly little more than him getting off a train in London and observing the passerby, revealed the following:

- He must write a novel, titled *The Great Fire of London*.
- He must compose an extensive poetry project, which he called the Project.
- The novel and the poetry must be intertwined completely.
- The poetry Project must also be a math project (Roubaud's second career was mathematician)
- The essence of the dream must be realized through the above (by the way: the dream included London but no fire nor poetry; it was a pretty unremarkable dream to impart such a grand vision)

Jacques never wrote the book.

He waffled over its complexity for thirty years, performed endless research on ancient troubadours and the evolution of language. Made lists, excuses. Then his wife suddenly died; He declared the completion of the Project & *The Great Fire of London* impossible. Following three years of total bereavement — non-being as he terms it — he started writing again. He adopted an inflexible regimen of waking up around 3am (on a very precise schedule based on seasonal light) and writing in the same small notebook in the same black ink whilst refusing to ever go back and edit. The result was the book I actually read, not *The Great Fire of London* but instead: The great fire of London. (A capitalization distinction the publisher refused to acknowledge on the cover of the book)

So here we are, meet the great fire of London, the first book since *The Dictionary of the Khazars* that forced me to use three bookmarks.

That is why every path that opens up but is not immediately followed, nor forever abandoned, will be signaled in the text, unobtrusively, with directions that allow it be found again somewhere in the book, a book which like all others however can be read sequentially, for themselves. The reader, armed with eyes and patience, if he's the sort who isn't too put off by the more or less simultaneous exploration of divergent branches (a simple extension moreover of silent skipping with your eyes from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, from one page to another (an ascending movement this time), not to mention the concurrent reading of several books, or of notes, of glosses...), will be able, theoretically, to make a more varied, less "pedestrian" measure of the chaotic landscape of this novel.

What Roubaud is getting at here is this: There's parts of the main 'story' that he absolutely wants to tell you about, but are a digression or distraction. He numbers these sections and that number corresponds to a section in the back of the book where he elaborates on the point (sort of like *Infinite Jest*'s endnotes). He might briefly mention his morning routine involving a bakery stop, but leave his obsessive list of requirements for the perfect croissant for the corresponding segment at the end of the book. He labels these diversions the *interpolations* of the title.

The second innovation is the *bifurcation*. What's a bifurcation? At points where Roubaud absolutely could not decide which direction to take the novel, he went *both ways*. If a section of the main story has a number prefaced by a 'b', there is a bifurcation at the end of the book where he writes the chapter in the alternate flow he wanted to take.

I *really* like the idea of this book. Way more than actually reading it. The structure is fantastic; the actual content is a hodgepodge of all kinds of nonsense. Autobiographical episodes of his life, his family, his childhood. Long descriptions of rooms, photos. His love of England, love of reading, walking, swimming. Ruminations on poetry, math. Some of it is quite good — it's fascinating reading Roubaud describe the making of jelly from a fruit(?) I've never even heard of, wisdom from old Provencal France. But it's disordered and does not hold together. Some of the sections get abstract or theoretical and I appreciated them more than I actually enjoyed reading them. Worse, there is an interminable chapter where Roubaud pontificates on the mechanics of the how the novel, project, and dream all held together, how he would have written *The Great Fire of London* and the Project if he had actually written them. Large swathes of it are borderline incomprehensible:

The novel would contain mysteries, while also being told with mystery. These are not the same thing. In the appearances of mystery, there would be the mystery of its form. The mystery of its form would bear a substantial relationship to the Project's riddle, most particularly to that aspect of the riddle identified with reflexivity; the Project, in itself, a riddling presence. The mystery of the project-riddle's manifestation as a novel would assume a public form. It would be medieval monstration. The fiction would move through the necessary "variations" of narration and description. The mystery of the "with mystery" implied numerals and "numberings".

Imagine fifty dense pages of that!

Jacques also has this hilarious affectation w/r/t the english language. He's admits he's an anglophobe and is in love with England; but any reference to english or England must come with a follow-up clarification that he means english-english and not american-english, usually with an anecdote to show how inferior or soulless the american version is. I got so used to this that, late in the book, when he's describing how much he loves english parks, I already knew he was going to write something negative about how little he liked Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. And lo' and behold, the impugnment shortly followed. Blech, give me the dirt and chaos of GGP over highly manicured, sanitized english lawns that you cannot even step foot on any day.

Anyway, I really liked this quote so I'll end here (topic is reading):

My passion is as old as myself, that is, as the self that counts and walks and remembers. All

these things exist on a more or less contemporary plane (viewed from the distance of time where I am today). At every moment of the past I see books: books open and overturned in the grass, books piled near a bed; books on a table, shelves, in school bags, in plastic bags, in suitcases; books in buses, trains, subways, planes. Every picture of my surrounding world contains at least one book. The world teems with a plurality of books, books being read.

Greg says

Gosh. Wow.

This is good. I mean really good. Like, this could turn out to be a new favorite author of mine good.

I say this with all the normal caveats of any of my loved books, I think this is fucking awesome but I'm not recommending just anyone reading it. This isn't a novel for everyone. I can very easily imagine a lot of people hating it.

Reading it almost right after *The Pale King* was one of those wonderful unexpected synchronicity moments in reading. The two books worked so well together, even from small details like each used § to designate their chapters. But there is also the not-planned similarity of a tragic death hovering like a shadow over both books.

Once again, I'm stuck at the problem of how to review a book.

First off, it's an Oulipo novel. That means there are some constraints going on. What are the constraints? I have no fucking idea, I know the superficial ones, there are a pre-determined number of chapters to the book. The author only wrote the novel in the pre-dawn hours, there were rules he had about going back and editing what he had written. There are some others that he is explicit about in the novel, but there are also some that he doesn't mention but he does mention they are there and even gives a few clues about how to find them. Some day I may go back to read the novel again with these clues in mind to try to find them. But if I don't I'm sure Roubaud will forgive me for my carelessness, he and I share a similar habit of devouring books at fast rates, faster than is probably good for getting everything out of a book, but we also share the problem that if we slow down our comprehension falls off ever more.

Second, this is more of a book about writing a novel, than a novel with a story that unfolds and is contained in the medium we call a book.

It will be seen if I show it. I can't show by telling.

I'm sure there are lots of people out there who aren't really that interested in the overly reflexive form of a 'novel' about the creation of the novel they have sat down to read. But this is part of what Roubaud is trying to accomplish, or at least what I can make out what he is trying to accomplish. That is a little murky.

One thing I've been fascinated with for quite awhile is the idea that is what's most important in a novel, or story, or any kind of writing is what isn't said. I don't know where this idea first came to me, but it's tied up in my memory with Kafka, did he write something about this? Or maybe did Deleuze write about it while talking about Kafka? Or maybe someone else entirely and I've just gotten those two names attached to it?

There is definitely some Lacan to this idea, too. I imagine a perfect execution of this idea in a story or novel where there isn't even an explicit hint given to what is missing. Sort of like maybe *The Trial* without the last scene, which brings to mind God. When I try to picture this idealized story of absence my mind can't grasp exactly what it would even look like.*

A less idealized version of this idea of absence runs through out this entire novel. Roubaud points periodically to this absence throughout the novel.

The illumination, nevertheless, would still require an effort on the reader's part, a quest for meaning. Thus the elucidation might have been, in reading, invisible at first glance; hence omitted. But once discovered, it could just as well be forgotten.

My book has many little ripped up pieces of paper serving as bookmarks for pages that I wanted to quote. I'm afraid I'm going to not mention something important in this review. That I'll go through the book later and be saddened by the absence of something that I had really meant to write about and have since lost the chance to. Good thing I have no problem staying on topic with reviews, maybe I'll come across this while reading some MMA book and turn that review into a rambling review about OULIPO**

How would I live? Silence, gardens, reading, "suspended judgment," walks, pubs, the library; the kind of life I occasionally live in London... I would attain the absence of desire, the suspension of faculties, a state of non-suffering, of non-despair, non-hope.

Some might not call this a novel. But it's amazing how elastic a term novel can be. Much of this book reads more like a portrait of the author, he writes about his parents, their home, how to make jams, why he prefers walking and swimming to driving, how much he loves books and love of counting and math. His solitude, his work habits. His time spent in America as a visiting faculty member. One thing he doesn't talk much about is his young wife Alix, even though the whole book is in certain ways about her; which is paradoxical because he conceived the book and started working on it one time before he even met her. The version we have though is the one he is working on in a numerically significant amount of time since her death. Some might not think of it as a novel because there is no real story, there is no build up, no climax, no real action or even dialog. But since this is a novel can we believe that Roubaud is actually talking about himself, or just a character that he is creating loosely based on himself? Or is this just a novel of absence, the novel being absent from the work, with just some pointers letting the reader know that it is lurking invisibly somewhere, or maybe contained on the one page separating the 98 chapters that make up the main body of the work with the 99th chapter that begins the interpolations.

I sometimes think that the Oulipo authors have an unfair reputation as being cold and overly formalistic in their writing. Do people actually think this? Or is this just my feeling? Even though I have a great respect for them, and I've really liked or loved quite most of the books of theirs I've read I still feel intimidated by an author, even one I've read before, just because he (because I don't know of any female authors in this little circle) is a member of the group. I was a little intimidated by this book. I shouldn't have been though. Even though it isn't an easy novel, it is very welcoming. Maybe it's because I feel like Roubaud is a kindred spirit to me. His ambivalence about driving, his solitude, his love of books and of being a reader. The chapters about his love for reading were some of my favorites, they made me feel a little less regretful about all the time I spend reading when there are so many other things out there that could make me a better, happier or more successful person.

Every evening, back in my hotel room, I take the books out of their characteristic bags. I number them, total the sum of reading pages thus added to my reserves, read the notes once more, read the prefaces to expand

my knowledge of the titles, with an eye out for references to other books, opinions, literary affiliations. I go through the list of publishers, the catalogs, the announcements of forthcoming publications.

Then I stretch out on the bed, in the poor light. I read.

Roubaud takes vacations to London, just so that he can sit all day and read in the British Library. How wonderful of a vacation idea. It makes me wish I had the means to just fly off somewhere to read in a new setting.

Of course, our similarities run out, Roubaud identifies himself as *Homo Lisens* reading man, but he also makes his living as a professor, and he writes books of poetry and novels. I only read, unable to bring myself to make anything more of myself than a reader and one of the lowest cogs in a corporate book peddling machine.

He is also something of an anglophile, something I'm not. I don't have the love for British authors that he does. I don't even want to get into it here, but the way he categorizes British Women Authors and his love for them is quite interesting, especially when the term woman for him doesn't really hold any gender but is more about the authors who fall in the thread of literary history that follow Jane Austen, without regard to gender or in a couple of cases nationality (or in the case of Henry James neither gender nor nationality happen to be 'correct'). Even though the ladies over on Kelly's Jane Austen review didn't need the help at all, Roubaud offers some of his own opinions about Jane Austen that could have helped shut down the criticisms being leveled against her the other day.***

I started this book and it took me quite a while to finish it. I started the book and I read it for a couple of days exclusively, and then I started to cheat on it with *Clash of Kings*, and then I went away for a week and left this book at home, because at my parents' house I knew that this type of book would be too difficult to get into, with distractions from all those cable tv stations and people who I think think that when they see you reading is an invitation to just start talking to you, like you weren't doing anything at all at the time. So the fantasy novel went with me. And when I came back this book was my commuting and read on break book, while George RR Martin continued to be my at home read. It would seem like the fantasy novel would be a better fit for the non-optimum conditions of commuting, but that is the way things were decided by me.

While reading this book sometimes I'd run through ideas for what I would be writing in a review for the book while shelving other books at work. This was a slightly dangerous occupation, I would start to think too much about my own solitude, and what has gone into the decisions that have led me to where I am, my conflicted feelings about it. I'd start to think about the things that lurk behind quite a few of my reviews, the things I might make vague hints about in some reviews but which I never say explicitly. I'd think about how I could write a review worthy of this novel and not be able to come up with anything except excuses to turn yet another review into a rambling mess about myself. I'd sometimes even berate myself for not being able to write reviews so chock full o' win that everyone would just want to read a book because I said it was good. Of course, this is a problem for me, since I dread the idea of recommending a book to someone and they wind up not liking it and then I have to hear about it. Which might sound like I'm annoyed by the bother of having to listen to someone complain about a book I loved, but really it's just a pathetic attempt to save me the mental anguish of having my irrational guilt complex fire off.*v

I thought there would be a lot of quotes. Maybe I'd construct a review on the idealized writing imagined by Walter Benjamin in one of his essays, entirely constructed of quotes. In his case it would be from a variety of writers, in this case it would be from just one. What glorious absences would be found in a work created this way, the meanings left to the reader to decipher and maybe even create for themselves in the spaces where

the different voices from the different authors (or disjointed passages) were brought together. I realized quickly that this was an interesting idea that I lacked the energy or is just the rigor to carry through with.

Maybe for a review for another book.

If this weren't the umpteenth time I've pulled this stunt of writing a review about writing a review this would probably be a good way of reviewing a novel that is about writing the novel that it is purportedly supposed to be. Instead I've used this trick too many times. It's old. Although it this probably shows some of the attraction this book had for me.

As I said at the start of this review, I really liked this book. And maybe you will also.

How about I share another quote I really liked, and then say this review is done?

The most kindly disposed, who read me as a poet, go so far as to accept what I say out of trust, their belief based on my good looks, but would probably accept any specious argument along the same lines (as we saw during the days of Kristevian pataphysics).

Notes:

*This idea is taken up by the Deconstructionists and their off-shoot schools and Identity Theory ilks where things are read into a work with the advantageous historical perspective of the present to illuminate older works. This isn't what I'm interested in. I'm sure it's interesting seeing the lack of women characters in a particular novel and reading an ideology of patriarchy into a text, but that's pretty much just an academic exercise and seems similar to playing Monday morning quarterback.

**Apparently there are new version of OULIPO out there, for example there is a group of DJ's incorporating constraints in a similar manner that have an OULIPO-esque name. I was thinking that there should be fighting version of OULIPO and then I started this footnote and realized that David Mamet sort of made something like this in his movie *Red Belt* and that it was stupid. So shelve that idea.

***Unbeknownst to me the argument on that thread was going on while I read about Roubaud's love for British Women Authors (that aren't necessarily British or Women, but just with a certain sensibility). If I had known of the argument the day it started, and I had read these passages while I was on break I might have come back from break and added some of what I'd read to the discussion, but that time is already past, although I appreciate the unintentional synchronicity, this book seems to have quite a few moments of unintentional synchronicity attached to it for me.

*v My guilty feelings are on a hair-trigger. I can feel guilty about just about anything. I can feel like I'm in the wrong for arguing with someone on goodreads, even if he started off his attack with some strange rudeness about how he doesn't care for a review I'd written. Fortunately though this person then said something rude to my best-friend, which is one of the quick ways to switch off or at least minimize my guilty feelings.

Jonfaith says

I will forever cherish Roubaud's idea of drab insularity as to English literature, but other than his asides on Boston, the British Museum and what constitutes a proper croissant, I'm not sure what would weigh in my memory.

As a postscript, I do think about this work rather often. I bought Mathematics with optimistic leanings, albeit yet unrealized. The chief issue with both The Loop and Mathemmatics remains, of course, the threads which require enhanced concentration i.e. these aren't books to lug to work.

Eddie Watkins says

Yes, for some reason Roubaud always intimidated me. Or was I simply averse to what I (thought I) knew of him – the dryness, the mathematical restraints, the logic, hell even the pomposity (dunderhead that I was)? If I had known he was this charming, humble, funny, mischievous, and unpretentiously brilliant I would have read him years ago.

I will not say anything about Oulipo or Roubaud's involvement in it. If interested look it up for yourself. And if you're not curious about Oulipo or Roubaud's involvement in it why are you even alive and reading this?

I am hard-pressed to explain the extent of Roubaud's use of Oulipian restraints in this book. One, such as the restraint to write only in the pre-dawn hours without editing what he wrote and to cease writing at sunrise, is explicitly stated in the book itself (though he also admits to not strictly adhering to it). Others, such as those surely hidden within the text, on the shadow side of the text as it were, are necessarily unknown to me and so I cannot explain them. This ignorance of mine, in reference to the “shadow side” of the text, is an intentional strategy of Roubaud's, and constitutes an image of the main theme of the novel.

The novel, even as it proceeds with very detailed descriptions of present actions of the writer – drinking coffee, walking rituals, reading rituals, etc. – and very detailed descriptions of memories (which according to Roubaud are destroyed once they are described), is primarily “about” a back story that is barely elucidated (because to elucidate would be to destroy, I presume, and so to not elucidate is to preserve something much loved).

The back story? – well, what I'll call the front part of the back story is actually elucidated at some length; this being the author's abandonment of a vast writing project that appeared to him in a dream many years ago, but in title only, the actual substance of the project remaining unspoken, hidden inside the dreamscape from which only the title emerged. But the actual back story, the “reason” the project was abandoned, was the death of the author's wife only three years into the marriage, which precipitated a decade long silence. This death is rarely referenced, and not described; though it thoroughly haunts the novel in that the bulk of the writing that comprises the novel was written as a way of eating away time while grieving in an unorthodox fashion: grieving via avoidance. The entire novel, even with its stated interpolations and bifurcations, is one large aside or side path around an issue he does not want to explicate. In a strange way this novel via side paths is, by example, a definition of literature's relation to our lives – it does not replace our lives, but by diverting us from our lives it enriches them.

But this side path of avoidance is only a beginning of Roubaud's use of this novel to define what novels are in relation to our lives. He is in a way a cynical idealist, in that he can “feel” the existence of a vast and great work of literature within himself, via the dream that introduced it to him, and admit its Platonic reality; but at the same time, through this novel (whose secret title is *Destruction*) he describes at great length the

impossibility of achieving the project; while in the process creating a work that is possibly even more evocative of greatness than any realized dream of greatness could ever be. And he does this, not by being heavy and ponderous (though one chapter he does describe at the outset as "difficult", though even that is never heavy and ponderous), but by being mundane and charming.

This is a book infused with love of literature, of reading literature even more than writing it, and of the abiding love of his dead wife. These two loves can be described as the diurnal and nocturnal sides of literature; of the revealed and the hidden; and for Roubaud (at least in this book) the hidden is effectively infinite and thus dwarfs what can ever be revealed. This is the formula that creates the simultaneously heartening and despairing atmosphere of the book, a book that was a thorough joy to read.

* * * * *

Two things, two coincidences if you will, that greatly enhanced my reading of this book:

- 1) As Roubaud wrote it (for the most part) in the pre-dawn hours I read it (for the most part) in the pre-dawn hours (my typical time for reading).
- 2) As the writing was haunted by the death of Roubaud's wife, my reading was haunted (during the last two days) by the sudden premature death of a beloved cat of mine.

Kbrooke says

With its wisdom, finely wrought observations, intense self-reflection, wit, and formal complexity (digressions, multiple plotting, the need to jump back and forth just to follow its trains of thought) one must get to know this book very much as one gets to know a human: with patience, sustained attention, and an earnest investment of time. Then again, Roubaud had me at "Bonjour." One of my most rewarding reading experiences in a while, and my intro to the world of Oulipo, where I plan to be spending a lot more of my time.

Nate D says

The howling absences of the pre-dawn, traced in (skirted by?) gentle modest (yet sharp) self-reflections on memory, images, and the ideal croissant.

In the first section of this *potential novel*

(in triplicate:

1. a novel is what, at the outset, Roubaud hoped might result from his writing
2. this is what the book may yet become as I read it, though this is yet unclear, and finally
3. a potential novel in the Oulipan sense of potential literature, to which this belongs, Roubaud was a member, and a student of Queneau's)

-- in the first section I became aware of a certain stalling process, wherein the author discussed the yet unwritten (and in some ways unplanned, in many ways *never to be written*, except that I already held it,

complete, in my hands) work to come, a kind of stalling process that reminded me of *The Hour of the Star*. Yet, whereas in that story the stalling revealed the traits and guiding hand of an annoying false author, here this evasive writing actually revealed an all too real and earnest authorship. And as the reasons for the delay became evident, they became heartbreaking.

This work seems to be above all an *Act* of writing, rather than a true novel, or an essay, or a memoir (though it contains or may contain elements of all of these). The process itself is forefront here, the context, the underlying reasons and emotions -- but not ironic sense of the (Roubaud's self-defense:) "puerile variation, the "mirror stage" novel, the ineffably boring depiction of the novelist in the process of writing the novel". Instead, Roubaud seems to write in circles and avoidances because doing so is *vital to his survival*. This is not such a common condition.

An act of writing, an act of coping with insurmountable loss, and an act of contemplation:

For contemplation cannot aim to convince the reader, nor lead him off into the labyrinth of the tale. It offers nothing.

And so the success and, for me, partial failure of this Act. I respect it deeply, I am moved by it, but I also recognize it as an act that must be most significant to its author. And much as he attempts to explain it to us (and often succeeds in doing so), these meandering syncopations of theory and memory (only approaching any sort of "novel" in the sense that any recreation of memory is a mutation and destruction: all writing is fiction, a recurring theme here) can only come to me as second hand glimpses, tracing -- still -- an overwhelming absence that nothing can fill. What isn't here is by design more significant than what is, but that leaves what *is* here as a rather strange and elusive construction.

...

I wrote all of that after reading only two sections of the six that make up the "Story". Yet, these early reactions held entirely true throughout. A few more incidental comments:

-The dicey proposition of an act of writing contemplating itself, the full diceyness of which Roubaud seems fully aware of, comes to a head in the "Dream, Decision, Project" section, the longest, in which Roubaud attempts to explain the revelatory insight which compelled him to undertake not the book we are now reading, but its ghostly, long-abandoned predecessors, which foresee and influence the book we are reading. Roubaud labels it the most difficult, in a peremptory warning, but the other reviews on here tend to contradict that sentiment. I would actually agree with Roubaud. Not that this section was impossible to follow, exactly, but the commitment of following it through its theoretical constructions seems rather unrewarding since it is the theoretical explanation of a book which he only hypothetically might have written. This is the least interesting aspect of the book to me, well behind its more human and emotive aspects, and also, in its structure of digressions and asides, its incidental details.

-These details, whether on Navajo color-meanings or ornamental hermits of the fin-de-siecle, are actually really interesting.

-There's a long stretch in the middle about the preparation of azarole jelly, about the difficulty of cooking right up to the secret perfect point at which it will properly gel only if removed from the flame at exactly that moment and set aside to cool. This delicate operation serves as a poetic explanation of both his approach to

writing, it seems, and to Roubaud's extremely careful approach to his own ephemeral memories, moving just close enough to brush by the details he needs without endangering the the carefully maintained apparition of the memory. For when each detail is written, the memory of act of writing replaces the memory. In this way, Roubaud's book is a selective burning, one by one, of his memories, the originals of which will be lost forever. This sorrowful and perfect image is at the heart of the work.

Joseph says

The mathematical/structural elements of this book went way over my head. I did, however, thoroughly enjoy the parts in which Roubaud actually talks about his life, his habits, his role as homo lisens, Louise, and the whole prose as azarole jelly comparison. Being in the position where I have to "trust" Roubaud and his rationality -- with all his double-image, reverse-palindromic jargon -- made the text difficult at times, and I felt like I had to slog through it. Roubaud is not without his charm, however. The prose was intimate and evocative (even when articulating technicalities, and going on and on with his bifurcations (little digressions (branches))) -- kind of like that.

:-)

MJ Nicholls says

Intellectual colonoscoping of the most elegant stripe. Roubaud's muted conflagration opens up a Pandora's paradigm of manners in which the prose novel (this one) can and might and will be rendered. Split into six chapters with two sets of "insertions" (interpolations and bifurcations) requiring three bookmarks, Roubaud elaborates on the unrealised theories and axioms for the unrealised novel *The Great Fire of London*, and digresses on more pleasant topics such as his love for bookshops, reading, his fondness for London, and the perfect croissant. A slow-moving novel haunted by grief, solitude, and melancholy, *The Great Fire of London* showcases a gentle and restless intellect in full flight and ranks as one of the finest and most innovative texts from the Oulipo Centre for Prose Wizardry and Assorted Genius.

Geoff says

"The world stretches out before us, fraught with answers, and we cannot find our tongues. In the "barrens" or "bedroom" of devastated time, we wander, not in search of answers, but in quest of questions. But unlike Perceval the Breton, if ever we find them, it is too late to revitalize the "wasteland" of our lives. I don't even believe that the knot is cut at the last moment, at the hour of our death. The riddle remains a riddle, even after the corpse's eyes turn into hollow shells. Whosoever solves the riddles loses the light of day. Truth plucks clean the eye sockets of the living." (pg.139)

"When Perceval the Breton finally comes back to the Grail castle, his mouth full of words, one at a time he opens the doors kept shut for centuries. He cures the Kings of the Grail, the Fisher Kings, the Wounded Kings. He opens the doors of the last room. In the darkness he recognizes the Sphinx. And the Sphinx says: "What is the answer?" "No," responds Perceval, "what is the question?" (pg. 138)

"the great fire of London is...."

-a novel, the shadow of the Project.

(I think the real question Roubaud wants us to seek an answer for is “what is the Project?”, because “*the great fire of London is....*” is provided with multiple, though never specified, answers:

"the great fire of London is...."

-a novel, which is the shadow of the Project

-Wittgenstein’s language-city (the language-city erected at the foot of the ruins of the Project)

-an image; that is, something that never retreats into the past, but is always present, *always in its present-tense*.

-an event

-a dream that inspired a decision)

~

The book that we hold in our hands, The Great Fire of London, is not “*the great fire of London....*”. That much is certain. This bound paper and ink-pressed object is the result of the failure to write The Great Fire of London. What is the origin, what is at the heart of this failure? That’s the question. The answer to this is not easy- it’s six volumes long (the first three of which are published in these gorgeous translations (“*always translating, all the time*”) by Dalkey Archive Press).

~

The Great Fire of London is a Poetry project, a Mathematics project, a novel, a dream, an autobiography, a work of literary theory, a language analysis- a Wittgensteinian language game. It is something calling back to the deepest origins of storytelling- the Grail novels, 1,001 Arabian Nights, the love songs of the troubadours, medieval manuscripts- but it is just as much a work of late 20th century Paris. Its “strategic archaism” is centered in Oulipian experiments with form and content; it is not only postmodern, it’s post-novel; its ambitions are to be nothing less than an “infinite novel”, while at the same time it is a project of destruction. It is unafraid of contradictions.

In its attempts to become an “infinite novel” it allows for constant branching (the interpolations and bifurcations) which spread the narrative out rhizomatically (allowing memory to play as it pleases), while always looping back (Hofstadter’s “strange loops... the snarls that arise when systems turn back on themselves”) to different places along the ever-elongating, ever-expanding center root, the story-branch ,”Destruction”. The forest of memory’s paths are divergent; some run parallel for a time, some cross back in on themselves, some become lost in the undergrowth, some fade with daylight and are only encountered much farther on, past night...

~

The Great Fire of London is a memory project. The language of memory is Poetry; the rhythm of the world

is Mathematics. In the poetry of the Provencal troubadours Roubaud found the convergence of these two ideas. The intertwining of the poetic language of memory, constrained by the world-rhythm of mathematics (form-speech-language-song) became the foundation for his Project. However,

“...I don’t search out time’s traces in order to replay them before my own eyes and thus reenter into possession of a lost possession, at least for as long as my story lasts; my goal on attaining them is their destruction, their abolition”(pg. 318)

Thus the great fire of London is Anti-Proustian. When a recollection is set down with ink on paper, it is forever lost; what one recalls after the memory has been externalized is no longer the recollection, but the recollection of the recollection. The process of writing externalizes the internal, creates a space (more than a mental distance) between what was previously *of us*, and which subsequently exists in the world, for the world. In writing our thoughts, our recollections become objects- no longer ourselves.

~

“the great fire of London.....” is an autoportrait of Jacques Roubaud- walker, swimmer, counter, reader, “absent artist”. It is an autoportrait of a man of solitude and the wanderings in his worlds, the world of the World, and the worlds of memory (the processes of memory, how we remember what we remember, memory’s methods), the worlds of books and numbers, gardens, deserts, cities, buildings, streets- shadow and its eulogy, light. It is also a portrait (a double autoportrait), of the book he is composing in the present tense, as we read- we are privileged observers of the construction of the edifice (I kept thinking of the Pompidou Centre, whose functional structural elements are left exposed, and color-coded). The book speaks of the book, the book watches the book coming into creation, the book folds in on the book. The book is also everything it does not say, cannot say (that which is passed over in silence)- that at the heart of the question of the Project and its memory is a great pain, an absence- a portrait of Alix, Roubaud’s wife whose sudden death at a young age both destroyed and made possible the novel, which fell and failed, but that we somehow hold in our hands. *“the great fire of London.....”* was one of the great reading experiences of my life.*

*I make no claim that it will be this way for every reader. Some might find it confounding, or parts of it (esp. the chapter *Dream, Decision, Project*), exasperating. But every word of this was like a hammer hitting a bell in my brain. I often found myself coming across whole sections that I had thought before (in paraphrase, of course), sentences and assertions that my whole thinking life had anticipated. This was the right book at the right time for me. It may not be for you. The Great Fire of London sat on my shelf for maybe two years, waiting (books wait, and watch), and it seems to me in retrospect one of those books that Fate places in your lap at just the right moment- all throughout last year I've been delving more and more into Oulipo, my obsession with Proust from a few years ago still colors my thoughts, in March I read a biography of Wittgenstein and began investigating his writings (Wittgenstein, who is so essential to the understanding of the *Dream, Decision, Project* section of this book, which is modeled on the Tractatus)- all my previous reading has led me to Roubaud at this moment in my life- prepared me to appreciate this book fully. I hope that if you decide to give The Great Fire of London series a chance, it offers a similarly exciting experience.

Mark says

Still Roubaud's best book, and one of the great unheralded novels of the late 20th century.

Ronald Morton says

There are, to me, three things that are important to know going into this book.

1. Jacques Roubaud was a professor of mathematics
2. Jacques Roubaud was a professor of poetry
3. Jacques Roubaud is a member of the Oulipo group

Sub item of all three – Roubaud's first book was a “collection of mathematically structured sonnets” (published by Raymond Queneau).

As mentioned in many of the reviews I've written on the site, I have a tendency to approach books as blindly as possible; it's typically only after I finish a book that I seek out any supplemental information about either it or its author. So, as I'm reading The Great Fire of London I kept thinking to myself – this kind of feels like a Oulipo novel, but I'm not necessarily seeing what the specific constraint is (Wikipedia: *Roubaud's fiction often suppresses the rigorous constraints of the Oulipo (while mentioning their suppression, thereby indicating that such constraints are indeed present)*). And while Roubaud – multi-meta-level-Roubaud: as author, as active narratorial author describing the act of authorship, and as narrator-proper – references both mathematics and poetry in his work (and axiomatically references it as a work of mathematics and poetry), even without those references the book reads and is structured as mathematic axioms and proofs, presented with a poetic precision of language. Anyone unfamiliar with Oulipo would likely find that contradictory; any familiar with Oulipo likely was nodding along with that.

Like many Oulipo books (and like many Dalkey books) The Great Fire of London is deeply interested in the act of writing; not just any act of writing, but the *active* act of writing the text the reader is presently reading. At a deeper level, Roubaud is exploring the idea of the act of writing as a destruction of memory (the processing and dissection of memory *from* memory to words on the page). But, as this is a book suffused with the loss of his wife (and the absence of his wife), it feels as if the act of writing – the act of destruction – is willful and pursued, as if he is attempting to consign memory to the page: to feed it to the fire of writing. But the narrative is continuously suppressed (or, never begun; the act of beginning is frequently referenced, as if Roubaud is steeling himself to write, but finds he can only write about the act of writing), and as such the reader is presented with the promise of narrative, but instead is presented with the avoidance of narrative. But it is a very structurally precise avoidance.

I love books like this – probably why I read as much Dalkey stuff as I do – the meta-dissection of the process of writing and authorship; of the transition from dream to project to page. This is a melancholy but beautiful book; a book of loss filtered through both mathematics and poetry, producing something resonant and unique. Probably not for everyone (it is precise to the point of tedium; but the level of precision presented is what makes the book great), but for a small (infinitesimally small) subset of readers it will hit all the right notes.

Martin Ledstrup says

Roubaud is hyped, and for good reasons. He is a sort of inverted Proust, where the text winds - through memory - towards its own not creation, as in Proust, but destruction. Which, paradoxically, makes the novel exist. Some of the passages are pure genius. But I do find the whole Oulipo fetish with form quite tiresome and superficial. This review was for volume 1. Maybe the remaining volumes will change my opinion.

Jonathan says

I hope to write something more detailed soon but, till then, I can say that I found this both deeply moving and deeply dull, frustratingly beautiful, unfocused yet precise, a telling and a refusal to tell, a obsession with the minute to avoid the impossibly huge. It is a process undertaken by an author as a way of working through the death of his wife. It is therefore intensely personal. It is hard to begrudge him the some of his less engaging passages, as one can see that this digression is necessary for him. I am personally less interested in some of the structural/theoretical methodology, and for those of you with more love for the Oulipo style, this may float your boat more than it did mine. There is some wonderful writing here. Well worth taking a wander with him.

Jacob Wren says

Jacques Roubaud writes:

In fragment 252 of a book, *Autobiographie, chapitre dix*, I wrote the following:

Thus, approaching forty, the age when life becomes as delicate as dew, like a hunter building for himself a hut out of branches for the night, like the aging silkworm spinning its cocoon, I constructed a final shelter for my body. If I compare this dwelling with what was formerly mine, it's truly a very tiny shack. In my declining years, my dwelling shrinks.

My present “house” covers a thirty-one square foot surface and is six feet high. Since I no longer need a stable home, its foundation is simply set on the ground. Thus I could easily move elsewhere if some unpleasantness arose. Presently I have paused in the scrub, near Villerough-la-Crémade: at noon I built a canopy, added a small terrace of reeds and, inside, against the western wall, in a niche I placed the portrait of Kamo no Chōmei, which I shift slightly each day, so that his face is lit by the rays of the setting sun. Above the sliding door, I install a small shelf where I put three volumes of poetry, my notebooks, and a pot of basil.

In the book, the description of the hermit’s retreat is protected by two other fragments (notebook “pages,” numbers 253 and 254) which are pages of silence, respectively:

and

page of silence, poetry

As a hermit, I place myself under the authority and example of Kamo no Chōmei, the poet-hermit of thirteenth-century Japan. The hut contains his portrait and the description itself is transposed from Chōmei's own hut, site of his own seclusion after the great fire of Kyoto.

This fragment is written in a special style, invented by Chōmei, which he calls "old words in new times."

Like other medieval Japanese poets, Chōmei has left behind his list of styles, the very one I chose to guide my own footsteps through the novel's prose.

Chōmei's choice was not accidental. Before his great "stylistic" decision (to live in seclusion), he was closely connected to a strange poetry enterprise, as secretary of the "poetry office" of Emperor Toba II, he was one of the chief compilers of the Shinkokinshū, the eighth imperial anthology, great "poem of poems" from which I drew one of the most constraint-bound visions for my Project.

Since *The Great Fire of London* was to be a story of the Project, this explains why I decided that it would be composed as a story in ten styles, in his honor.

The ten styles

- (I) The choku tai, the style of "things as they are."
- (II) Rakki tai, the style for "mastering demons."
- (III) The Kamo no Chōmei style: the "old words in new times."
- (IV) The yugen, the "style of twilight."
- (V) The yoen, the "style of ethereal charm."
- (VI) The awareness of things, the mono no aware.
- (VII) Sabi: rust; solitude.
- (VIII) The ryōhō tai, "style of the double."
- (IX) Ushin: "deep feeling."
- (X) Koto shirarubeki yō, "this should be," muss es sein.

In the course of the preceding chapters (and in this very one here), I've already mentioned some of these styles, the yugen, the rakki tai, the "style of the double" (this indirectly by emphasizing the "double" nature of the photographs entitled *Fez*, and elsewhere; by double, I mean both an object (of thought, or of prose, or of poetry, or images), and its "style," in this particular sense: it's a double in the "style of the double"). This was to provide a perpetual resource for my novel, a trace of which remains in my present effort.

The interpretation given to these styles, transposed in haphazard fashion from medieval Japan to the nighttime bedroom of a mock hermit in the waning years of the twentieth century, was to be quite obviously an invention, I made a great effort to steep myself in my understanding of these styles (within the narrow limits of poetry, disregarding the religious dimension). I made a particular effort for style (VI), mono no aware, gathering under this title a French recreation of 143 poems selected from the imperial anthologies (this book also contains a selection entitled *sabi* (style VII)), but I know full well that I am a long way from clearly fathoming the original meaning (which moreover seems rather difficult to grasp nowadays even in

Japan, if I can judge by commentators' contradicting interpretations. In addition, each poet seems to have had his own interpretation of the styles, and even his own list: Chōmei's is not Teika's...) Therefore, I had rather blithely and obliviously appropriated this very suggestive division of the ways for approaching a prose-written reality (written in poetry as well, the poetry specific to the project.)

To each branch of The Great Fire of London there was to correspond, not a style, but rather a sort of characteristic "cocktail" of styles, composing a complex stylistic figure, governed by constraints. With this goal in mind I had forged myself a vision of each of the styles, based on the original examples I had been able to collect, but above all (rapidly abandoning this point of departure), based on a meditation focused chiefly on their names. Free to choose, I was able to test the invention of a thing by "deducting" it almost entirely from its name (and from a few elements of a "definite description," like in the already mentioned case of the *yugen*). The totality of a prose narrative world would thus be divided up into areas dominated by a single style or a combination of styles, like colors.
