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Ann Smock, *The Play of Light: Jacques Roubaud, Emmanuel Hocquard, and Friends*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2021. viii + 231 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1438481494; \$33.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1438481500.

Review by Alison James, University of Chicago.

In *The Play of Light*, Ann Smock traces a path of light and shadow through the terrain of contemporary French poetry. Two prolific poets, Jacques Roubaud and Emmanuel Hocquard, are the primary figures in this landscape, though they are also placed in intermittent dialogue with Danielle Collobert, Jacques Jouet, and Anne Portugal. *The Play of Light* presents itself less as a scholarly study than as a “mildly distracted mode” of exploration that juxtaposes voices to bring out patterns, contrasts, and philosophical hypotheses (p. 10). The book takes as its central focus the paradoxes of light: the enigma of “dark light” that runs through Roubaud’s work; or in Hocquard, the sudden exposure of the nonvisible in the blink between light and dark. Collobert, as the third protagonist in this drama, takes these paradoxes to an extreme point in a form of writing born of exhaustion and impossibility, while Jouet and Portugal offer brighter notes later in the book.

The philosophers who appear as the main tutelary figures for these poets are Ludwig Wittgenstein and Giorgio Agamben. Hocquard takes the propositions of the *Tractatus* as a model for his own poetic elucidations, while the “Wittgenstein topics” of “private language,” “language games,” and “forms of life” make up Roubaud’s own version of this philosopher’s thought, adapted to describe the poet’s negative theology of an impossible, private language (pp. 4-5). More discreetly present is Agamben’s *The Coming Community* from which Roubaud borrows reflections on “whatever being” and “potentiality” (p. 5). Jean-Luc Nancy and Werner Hamacher also help shape the book’s concern with indeterminate life and with community. Smock does not delve into philosophical arguments, however, but rather shows how they emerge in the form of poetic enigmas. This is a book not on philosophy in poetry but on poetry as thought: that is, the ways in which poetry’s contrasts and reversals, its way of saying or not saying, bear on questions of being and non-being, identity and difference, or communication and secrecy.

As I have already noted, the book deliberately follows a discontinuous, wandering path. It is organized not around particular poets or works but around themes or leitmotifs. For the first chapter, “Thy blackness is a spark,” the topic is the paradox of “black light”: light itself, which is invisible because it cannot be illuminated. As indicated by the chapter title, this enigma is placed under the sign of Edward Herbert, the seventeenth-century poet whose sonnets in praise of the dark are a key inspiration for Roubaud. In his poetry, as well as in the fictional colloquium

*Exchanges on Light*, Roubaud makes the self-identity of light—which illuminates other things without itself being illuminated—into a figure for poetry’s own mode of (self-)disclosure: it reveals itself, but there is no other way to reveal it. From Roubaud’s poetic blackout, Smock moves to the indifferentiation that is Hocquard’s constant preoccupation, as he attempts to make visible a colorlessness or neutrality that is not visible in our usual observations and propositions. Hocquard’s writing favors the sudden, surprising production of tautologies that dissolve the distinction between subject and attribute, in moments of perception made possible by an unforeseeable event, accident or “case” (p. 23). Roubaud’s meditations on darkness are linked to loss, mourning, and the “negative poetics” (p. 27) of some troubadours, and to the “path of the impossible” (p. 5) that defines his own poetry. The “intonations” of Hocquard’s poetry convey uniqueness without distinction, or without attribution (p. 35).

The second chapter, “Birth was the death of him,” takes its title from Beckett and centers on the enigmas of birth and death, along with related themes of origins, departures, and encounters. The fact of birth is for Hocquard an accident or a fall into being. For Roubaud, life is already a kind of afterlife or survival, embodied in his work by the character of Mr. Goodman who embarks on a second life after his wartime childhood. It is Hocquard’s poetics of the letter, or “literality,” that dominates this chapter, allegorized in an Edenic narrative: the sudden revelation of naked being, stripped of custom (p. 40). Rather than looking back (like Blanchot or Beckett) to a disaster that is always anterior to our origins, Hocquard’s poetry aims to look straight ahead at what is before our eyes. At the heart of the third chapter, figured poetically by the palindrome, is the doubleness that haunts Roubaud’s *œuvre*: the state of *biipsism* that he experienced with his wife Alix before her early death; the two languages spoken by the couple, French and English; Roubaud’s twofold plan for a poetry project accompanied by a novel. Danielle Collobert’s work stages this relation to the other in negative terms, evoking the absence of an addressee to whom one can say “I.” For Hocquard, who like Roubaud is a translator, translation opens up an impersonal territory between languages, via a necessary discrepancy between voices. Chapter four, “Beware of Enigmas,” offers the most Roubaud-centric reflection of the book (with a short detour via Collobert), and focuses on the realm of riddles, puzzles, traps, logical conundra, and contradictions. The ultimate riddle is the *auto-énigme* or self-riddle: this riddle that bears only on itself is enacted in the Arthurian romances that Roubaud explores in *Graal fiction* (Percival’s failed question to the Fisher King, the puzzle of Lancelot’s hidden name), and exemplified, once again, by poetry. For Roubaud, poetry is the form that inevitably encounters and expresses nothingness, contradiction, the impossible, or nonsense in the way it “says, but not anything” (p. 90 and *passim*).

Chapters five and six offer brief interludes, the first dealing with dreams, images, illusion, and photographs in Roubaud’s work, the second veering away from Roubaud’s “black sun” to the formal variety and multiplicity of Roubaud’s fellow Oulipian Jacques Jouet (p. 118). Jouet’s commitment to the daily production of poetry echoes, in its own prolix way, Hocquard’s insistence on the indistinct and the unexceptional. His “potentiality” is deliberately transitory, self-effacing and republican in its egalitarian diversity (p. 124). Chapter seven, under the aegis of the troubadours’ *fin’ amors*, brings Roubaud back into conversation with Hocquard but also with Anne Portugal. It picks up a number of threads from earlier in the book, including light and shadow, love and loss, memory, and photography. However, Roubaud’s light in this instance is no longer the black sun of melancholy but a white sun of memory, which Smock links to Agamben’s idea of potential as “a possibility of privation” (p. 135). Photography, that chemistry of light that reinvents our relationship to memory but also detaches forms from the world, has a

crucial place in Roubaud's thought as well as in Hocquard's writing. Hocquard associates photography with the principle of "nudity": the unadorned and undistinguished singularity of beings. The motif of nudity serves here as the hinge with Portugal, whose *Le plus simple appareil* refashions the Biblical story of Susannah and the elders.<sup>[1]</sup> Portugal's intricate syntactic acrobatics plot out a small-scale space or garden that simultaneously, through its play with borders and edges, gestures toward the abyss. As the chapter comes full circle, Portugal's denuding of the eye and Hocquard's reflection on thought as exposure bring us back to Roubaud's meditations on photography and loss, especially in *Éros mélancolique*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Chapter eight, "Diaphanous," brings together Roubaud and Agamben with a digression on Hocquard. It takes as its point of departure the translucent doubles that produce a margin or a blur between identity and non-identity in Roubaud's description of his wife Alix's photographs. Agamben's reflections on the necessary relation between potentiality and impotentiality serve as the keystone for understanding Hocquard's use of the term *nudité*, which may designate the "neutral terrain between power and impotence" (p. 166). For Roubaud, the equivalent notion is the blur that exposes the inseparability of form and the formless, or the variability of clouds as they mutate between specific shapes: the tiny, shifting movements which the "now" of poetry inhabits (pp. 171-172). Hocquard's nudity and Roubaud's clouds converge in the opening of the ninth and final chapter, via the Old French term "*nueté*" (which fellow-poet Claude Royet-Journoud suggested to Hocquard). Exploring the in-between setting, the space of indifference, or the neutral third term that is also found in Anne Portugal's poetic garden, the chapter then gives the final word to Roubaud's clouds.

The book's deliberately meandering approach makes summary a difficult task, but I have tried to give a sense here of some of the ground that Smock covers. The five poets studied have already inspired significant scholarship both in French and English (by Peter Consenstein, Jean-Jacques Poucel, Glenn Fetzer, Florence Marsal, and others), but the originality of Smock's approach lies in the philosophico-poetic dialogue she establishes between them. *The Play of Light* is a stimulating and enjoyable study, even if its wandering paths can sometimes be frustrating. I have already noted Smock's refusal to construct an argument according to usual academic norms. Instead, her overt ambition is to find a form of criticism akin to "playing a piece of music": that is, an interpretation that entails striving to "play the notes that are written" (p. 11). While the musical metaphor is certainly apt, the method of the book might be more accurately described as orchestration: each chapter establishes a particular kind of melodic dialogue and harmony between the poets, complete with echoes and counterpoints, and not without occasional dissonance between the poetic "friends" assembled here. On one level, the effect is one of great proximity and fidelity to the words on the page. On another level, the author adopts an exploratory and hesitant mode of analysis that expresses some uncertainty about how, exactly, we should "play the notes" written on the page (p. 11). "I imagine..." "I expect that..." and "I think that..." are the leitmotifs of this critical style, which puts forward interpretations in tentative, speculative, and subjective form. There is much that is appealing about this approach, although it also makes assessing the book's precise claims something of a challenge. This is not to say that the critical apparatus is absent: the critical bibliography is fairly comprehensive, and the endnotes are substantial, while they also point in new directions for reflection. The book's style is accessible overall, although—as is perhaps inevitable—its dive into philosophical paradoxes can be dizzying or opaque.

The attempt to imitate the poets' own style of thinking and writing carries a risk, of course, one that is compounded by the difficulty of theorizing about poets who insistently offer their own theorizations of poetry. The problem is particularly acute in the case of Roubaud, whose detailed and authoritative pronouncements about his own writing, or about poetry in general, can make critical distance feel next to impossible. This danger of presenting "Roubaud's writing and the thought in it as a sort of oracle" is one that Smock recognizes and attempts to ward off from the outset, by presenting (in schematic and humorous form), the basics of the poet's authorial "posture": Roubaud says "no" to Joyce and "yes" to Stein, for instance (p. 10). In addition to this opening gesture, Smock effectively plays poets and thinkers against each other, producing a contrast of light and shadow that mirrors the patterns found in Roubaud's work. She turns to Anne Portugal, for instance, "to brush into [her] book a bright stripe symmetrical to Danielle Collobert's dark one" (p. 142). If Portugal and Collobert occupy a smaller place in the book than Roubaud and Hocquard, they offer effective and contrasting counterpoints, in their respective brightness and darkness, to the prolific *œuvre* of their male counterparts. Jouet brings a playful note to the proceedings.

I will offer here a slight interpretative quibble followed by a point about potentiality. The quibble concerns Smock's rendering of Roubaud's mottos, "la poésie ne dit qu'en disant" and "la poésie dit ce qu'elle dit en disant," as "poetry says, but not anything" (e.g., p. 12, 33). The second of the French phrases in fact appears somewhat differently, in *Poésie, etcetera, ménage*, as "la poésie dit ce qu'elle dit en *le* disant."<sup>[3]</sup> The presence or absence of the pronoun "*le*" may seem a small matter, but it makes the difference between the transitivity or intransitivity of saying—between the tautology (or "nudity," in Hocquard's terms?) of words saying what they say and the enigma of a mode of speech without an object. Roubaud's various formulations might lead us to hesitate between, on the one hand, a rather familiar point about the impossibility of paraphrasing poetry (unity of form and content), and, on the other, a paradoxical claim about the essential negativity of poetic speech. Smock tends toward the second interpretation. Roubaud, of course, is not averse to making poetry into a mode of negative theology. However, Smock's insistence on the negativity and intransitivity of language makes me wonder to what extent she really fulfils her stated wish to "depart from Blanchot" (p. 7). Maurice Blanchot, the writer and literary theorist whose reflections on the enigmas of literature were a major influence on the French literary field of the 1970s and 1980s, is an understated yet persistent presence in Smock's book. In particular, Blanchot's reflections on indifference and "the neutral" find resonance in Hocquard's emphasis on "indeterminate, featureless life" (p. 7), although Hocquard's down-to-earth tone also de-dramatizes Blanchot's themes (p. 68). In any case, here I may be expressing my own preference for a criticism that leaves Blanchot behind, as well as registering some uncertainty about the full theoretical implications of Smock's readings.

Regarding the question of potentiality, Smock establishes a distinction between "*potential* as it is celebrated in the activities of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*" (the Oulipo group, to which Roubaud and Jouet belong), and Agamben's potentialities: that is, potential as in the first place a potential not to act—a capacity for impotentiality or a "potential for impotence" (p. 6). While I am not suggesting that Smock should necessarily give more space to the Oulipo—on the contrary, one of her book's merits is that it situates two Oulipian writers within a larger field of poetic preoccupations and conversations—I would argue that the negative face of potentiality emphasized by Agamben is not in fact far removed from the Oulipo's "wealth of potential" (p. 6). Indeed, Jouet is one of the writers who has long reflected on the negative side of formal potential, showing that Oulipian writing constantly experiments with the possibility of unreadability (as

the generative sonnets of Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*), or confronts us with non-being and absence (the suppression of the letter “e” that becomes a figure of existential lack in Georges Perec’s lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition*).<sup>[4]</sup> My point here is less to argue with Smock’s premises than to confirm her intuition about the connections between Roubaud, Jouet, and Agamben, and to suggest that it might be pursued even further.

*The Play of Light* effectively reveals many of the shared concerns as well as some of the different “intonations” (to borrow one of the book’s own terms) of contemporary French poetry. It is an important contribution to scholarship in this field, and it might also serve as a partial introduction to the five poets studied (although it does not claim to offer a comprehensive study). As a final note, I particularly appreciated the generous place the book gives to poems, not simply in fragments but often quoted in their entirety. Taking to heart Roubaud’s axiom that poetry says what it says by saying [it], Smock allows words to speak for themselves, and invites us to dwell in their light—or darkness—for a while.

## NOTES

[1] Anne Portugal, *Le plus simple appareil* (Paris: P.O.L., 1992).

[2] Jacques Roubaud and Anne F. Garréta, *Éros mélancolique: roman* (Paris: Grasset, 2009).

[3] Jacques Roubaud, *Poésie, etcetera: ménage* (Paris: Stock, 1995), p. 77. Emphasis mine.

[4] See for example Jacques Jouet, “L’impotentiel,” *Quai Voltaire*, 7 (1993): 45-51. Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961). Georges Perec, *La Disparition* (Paris: Denoël, 1969).

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