

AN EXCERPT FROM
EXCHANGES
ON LIGHT

(ECHANGES DE LA LUMIÈRE)

By Jacques Roubaud
Translated by Eleni Sikelianos

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Preface

Here is the first “chapter,” more or less, of *Exchanges on Light (Echanges de la Lumière)*. The whole, which is 85 pages in the original French publication, takes place in six nights; you have here the “events” of the first night. On each of these six nights, six people come together to discuss, in the manner of an 18th century philosophical dialogue, the nature and essence of light. Their discussions are sometimes scientific, sometimes theological, sometimes rhetoric, sometimes lovely nonsense. Some of the characters’ speech breaks, at times, into poems. The piece is thus many things at once: philosophical meandering, poetry, dialogue; and so the genre proves difficult to pin down.

PROLOGUE

The Form of the Poem or The Play of Light

Houses along the edge of the road, empty; nothing on the road; no one.

I to 0 for her.

A lit window, just one; its rectangle.

I everywhere.

Night, and silence; and silence; silence.

2-I for her.

Rain stopped, no rain; wind died down, no wind.

3-I.

Stars go out, one after the other; no stars.

4-I.

A lit window, only one, rectangle; the same rectangle.

4-2.

Houses and nothing; behind, nothing; above, nothing; nothing.

5-2.

A lit window, the only one; in the window's rectangle, a shape begins.

5-3.

Window goes out

[souflée].

play.

Protocol

There are six voices:

- M. Goodman
- Basil of C.
- Dennis Ps
- Lewis de B.
- John Ph.
- William H.

FIRST NIGHT

M. GOODMAN

I have chosen that we assemble in this place a few evenings, at the moment when the lamps are being lit, when natural light is retiring, leaving the outside world in obscurity. Let us remember that these windows open to the west; that just beneath us is the grass, the knowing grass, of a park designed by Capability Brown, for example, or Humphrey Repton, with the orderly disorder of trees and, further out, the low hills in the soft English distance.

But each of you might imagine another landscape, beyond the windows facing us, where the lights of stars and those of the lamps penetrate, leave, meet, fight, or mingle, while we speak. It's of light that we speak, that you speak.

M. GOODMAN

I would begin with this:

Without light, no world; and not only the world is not, without light, but it, and all that is, is light. Objects are of worn out light. The total of light is the world.

WILLIAM H.

Light is the boiling point of things.

BASIL OF C.

Light is an emanation from God; as emanation, it is an eternal process; it is not creation at each instant; for creation is *ex nihilo* and takes place in time; and light is natural thus because creation is a deliberate act.

JOHN PH.

Everything you have just said trebly is nothing but this: the world is luciforme *a luce prima*: formed from light, derived from the First Light. Light is the first bodily form. It is not objects but forms that are light, the only substance of the physical world that is nearly pure form; since all form is a form of light that manifests itself in the object that it informs.

DENNIS PS.

Light is inaccessible; inaccessible even in lightning. The cause of everything, itself nothing, in that it is ultra-essentially cut off from everything.

LEWIS DE B.

Let us be serious, let's not get carried away: when the sun, after a long magisterial stay on the horizon, sinks and suddenly disappears from sight, we understand that there necessarily exists between this star and us a certain mode of communication that reminds us of its existence, without it being necessary to touch it. This mode of communication, that exercises itself thus over incommensurable distances, and transmits via the eye — this, and this only, is what light is.

LEWIS DE B.

Let's not be poor in light, without sun. We are debtors to the Sun.

M. GOODMAN

Nevertheless, that which is rising at this very moment in the park, the grass, the trees, far away, that which encircles each form with a dark thought, like a finger of smoke, a dark dust, a pollen blurred with red, that which all the outside objects have in common, is that not also light? And the rules of nocturnal vision, do they not permit us to substitute it, slowly, for the anterior, disappeared solar glimmer?

DENNIS PS.

If the shadows were without light, we would not see them. The darkness would be entire, eternal, and nothing.

WILLIAM H.

Night you come the light pushes
against the emptied slopes of day the
leaves will be dark.

JOHN PH.

Who can elucidate light?

BASIL DE C.

The sun was not made to elucidate. The genesis of light preceded that of the sun. Writing speaks not of spreading light but of illuminating, through the very essence of light, not through the sun which is unprepared to serve as a vehicle to something whose birth preceded its own.

BASIL DE C.

Light differs from shadow in that in light existence is not separate from essence; it is of the essence of light to exist purely; contrarily, if it were of the essence of shadow to enter into composition with its existence that would render it impossible to perfectly conceive of shadow's essence without shadow's existence twisting in. As the essence of the number 2 would be destroyed if one tried to extract from it its unity, so the essence of shadow might be destroyed, by simply extracting shadows from the universe, by extracting the existence of shadow from its essence. But that's not possible. It is possible to understand the essence of shadow without seeing it, even without supposing that there are real shadows. Furthermore, if there were no distance between essence and existence in shadows, one could say that they existed thanks to their essence. But only light has this property.

LEWIS DE B.

Let's be serious. Why not try to prove that light is God, while you're at it?

JOHN PH.

I wouldn't say that. But why reject a metaphysic of light? Several divine traits are applicable to it; thus: light begetting and the splendor begot come together and illuminate each other; something divinity also accomplishes by itself.

M. GOODMAN

But isn't that what light is? There is light and lights; lights are objects, light is an arrow. The first change; the second, not.

WILLIAM H.

In the air
 light
 pulls out
 from earth into dark
and spits
 in the air
 the night rough to the edges
 of trees
 in the ground

DENNIS PS.

Whatever you say. It's clear that each light tears itself out from night, but it is also clear that in each shining thing, light in its essence and substance is more shining still than its visible glimmer, which is only the black and shadow of all its shininess.

DENNIS PS.

These trees, this grass, these hills, like us, visible in the dying light, aren't they all as impenetrable as the inaccessible light, of which lights are but a shadow?

BASIL DE C.

Light, born from the first word of God, who fashioned it in his image, made the tenebrae vanish immediately. God separated light from shades. Light and shadows are of incompatible natures and are in perpetual opposition; between it and them is the largest interval, the longest distance.

WILLIAM H.

Night
you
came

the
lights
have grown
over

the grass, the slopes
emptied
of

light, the
lights have

become
dark

LEWIS DE B.

No light is dark; that doesn't make sense; there is more or less light, intensity, variable wave lengths, that's all. Get serious.

M. GOODMAN

I remember London in March, 1940, during the black-out. I was overcome, and still am, remembering; seeing the city quietly give itself over to darkness (this was before the bombardments), like a countryside might, like the one we're looking at now from these windows, pushing itself into night. London humbly preparing herself in the twilight, the shutters shutting up windows, the rare passer-by hurrying towards home, the small medieval lanterns lighting up subway entrances here and there. And darkness fell; and, with the dying sparks of light, noises rarefied, the sirens emerging from this dark mass one by one, as if night were painting it.

JOHN PH.

The configuration of objects produces the state of light.

JOHN PH.

But of light, or not light, from the ones it is not possible to deduce the others, light or not light.

DENNIS PS.

Not-light is also the being of beings-of-light. We mustn't call them simple doubles of perceptible light. If one reasons thus, one transforms them into their opposite, that is to say into what is, in itself, darkness; instead of being that-which-manifests, that-which-illumines, they become only something manifested, signaled by a light other than that light which informs them. Contrary to what Aristotle said, all realities are contingent, like the simple lights which appear on the hill, or those reborn in the memory of London in Mr. Goodman's thoughts, each accidental configuration must be preceded by a more noble being: it's the illuminative exigence resting on the unconditional hegemony of illumination in relation to the object which it reveals.

M. GOODMAN

I was a child then. My mother lit the candles, I parted the dark curtains, I leaned into the dark street, near Russell Square.

BASIL DE C.

The smallest light, the most humble, that of the candle, is all light, is Light.

LEWIS DE B.

You're confusing things again.

WILLIAM H.

The lamps evaporate in the bottom
left rectangle of the window fills
with lights from elsewhere black and white
from a light the rectangle of the
window of lights black and white
and the window fills with lamps
with lights slowly and from elsewhere

WILLIAM H.

The lamps evaporate in the bottom
left rectangle of the window fills
with lights from elsewhere black and white
from a light the rectangle of the
window of lights black and white
and the window fills with lamps
slowly with lights and from elsewhere.

JOHN PH.

Mental window, mental hands, mental lights, lights always already mentioned,
repeated, repeatable in their composition.

LEWIS DE B.

Light doesn't turn the street corner

DENNIS PS.

Light has already, while you were giving it boundaries, while you made light of
the impossible, turned the corner of the street.

BASIL DE C.

Light is not of time.

M. GOODMAN

Night is complete now, and the stars, nor time, are yet a part of the field of our conversation. It's time, according to our rules, to leave off. We will convene here again tomorrow at the same hour, if you will.

WILLIAM H.

Night
you
came

the
lights
have grown
over

the grass, the slopes
emptied
of

light, the
lights have

arrived in the absence
of light

dark
of light lost

of light that was
beautiful

JACQUES ROUBAUD was born in the town of Caluire, in the Provence region of southern France. He once called himself a ‘manufacturer of mathematics and poetry’. At twenty-two, Roubaud abandoned his literature studies to devote himself to mathematics.

In the early 1960s he was working simultaneously on a thesis on set theory and a book of poetry, having found that mathematic strategies work very well in poetic creation. The result was published in 1967, and has as its title \subset , a symbol from set theory, meaning ‘contained within’. By introducing new rules, Roubaud succeeds in breaking open the time-honoured form of the sonnet. By this procedure he attracted the attention of Raymond Queneau, who recruited Roubaud for his group OULIPO, or ‘Workshop for Potential Literature’.

Apart from poetry, Jacques Roubaud has published numerous translations, of modern American as well as traditional Japanese poetry. He has rewritten texts from France’s ancient heritage, notably the tales of the Holy Grail; he is the author of prose books, such as the Hortense trilogy, and an ongoing semi-autobiographic project, begun in 1989, which has produced four books so far. Finally, Jacques Roubaud is an untiring champion of poetry in, among other publications, *Poésie, etcetera: ménage* (1995), in which he makes a clean sweep of popular prejudices about contemporary poetry. Roubaud’s work has been widely translated.

ELENI SIKELIANOS was raised in California and received her MFA in Poetry from the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) in Boulder, Colorado, where she currently teaches. She has also been a guest poet at the University of Denver since 2001. She is the author of several books and chapbooks, including *The Monster Lives of Boys and Girls* (Green Integer 2003), *Earliest Worlds* (Coffee House 2001), *The Book of Tendons* (Post-Apollo Press 1997), and *To Speak While Dreaming* (Selva Editions 1993). Two more books, *The California Poem* (Coffee House Press) and *The Book of Jon* (City Lights) are due out in 2004.

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