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Abstract

Review of Morgane Cadieu. *Marcher au hasard : Clinamen et création dans la prose du XX^e siècle*. Classiques Garnier, 2019. 214 pp.

Keywords

Perec, chance, clinamen, randomness, Oulipo

Morgane Cadieu. *Marcher au hasard : Clinamen et création dans la prose du XX^e siècle*. Classiques Garnier, 2019. 214 pp.

Attempts to theorize chance and randomness span disciplines, historical eras, and geographies. This scholarship's lineage is both the starting point and the challenge of Morgane Cadieu's *Marcher au hasard : Clinamen et création dans la prose du XX^e siècle* ('Walking at Random: Clinamen and Creation in 20th Century Prose'). Cadieu considers chance, randomness, and coincidence—that is, *hasard*—at the transition from French Surrealism to the Oulipo group, arguing that this transition reveals and complicates a relationship between chance, space, and prose. *Marcher au hasard* shows how clinamen, the strong randomness that breaks away from the (self-)imposed constraints central to Surrealism and Oulipo, is essential to the process of creation and to the experience of (urban) life. The book's version of the Lucretian clinamen is atomist, spatialized, and tied to the literary creation that represents it; the constraints that interest Cadieu are the playful constraints of these movements' writing as well as the quotidian constraints that challenge conceptions of free will. Scholars of Surrealism and the Oulipo, especially of Georges Perec, will find in Cadieu's book a provocative historical analysis and a strongly argued theoretical reading. Literary urbanists and other scholars of the spatial turn will read between the literary-historical analysis of Oulipo and find a novel synthesis of atomist and materialist theories of movement and encounters in cities.

The book's introduction sets up a thorough theoretical genealogy of clinamen, highlighting how *hasard* influences the rise of the Oulipo group. The canon in this introduction gestures at the breadth of her inquiry: from Aristotle to Lucretius to Denis Diderot; Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, and Charles Baudelaire represent the 19th century; Marcel Proust, André Breton, and Jean-Paul Sartre represent the 20th; Italo Calvino comes in from Italy. *Marcher au hasard* deftly handles the breadth of the question of randomness by focusing primarily on Perec's writing, establishing a framing with which to understand these various references. The introduction presents constraints that similarly establish the specificity of her analysis; Cadieu argues that *hasard* cannot be studied without its concrete manifestation, a claim that grounds the analysis. A binary that surrounds Cadieu's conception of clinamen: Surrealism, involuntary chance, determinism on one side; Oulipo, constraints, free-will on the other. She breaks from that binary to develop a theory of chance and randomness that acknowledges its much messier lived experience. The introduction serves not only as a foundation for the book but also as a fruitful text for graduate and upper-level undergraduate courses.

The first chapter situates *hasard* in the Oulipo debates around questions of chance and constraint in writing and in urban life. However, it is the long second and third chapters, a close reading of Perec's 1967 *Un Homme qui dort* (*A Man who Sleeps*) that form the core of this book. Where the introduction celebrates the breadth of the theoretical genealogy of *hasard*, this section narrows the lens by

which *hasard* and *clinamen* are considered. Cadieu shows how the protagonist of Perec's novel, in imposing constraints on his daily experience to avoid life's randomness, discovers the impossibility of absolute control over chance. The inevitable deviations from these constraints, Cadieu argues, reveal Perec's evolution in thinking about chance in literature: the author seeking to impose unpredictability on writing is left only with repetition, memory, and machinations.

Throughout the book, and especially in the two chapters dedicated to Perec, Cadieu mirrors the techniques she highlights in his writing and the theoretical genealogy at the heart of her analysis, demonstrating how constraints influence her own scholarly writing. She argues, for example, that the intertextuality of Perec's novel reorganizes preexisting texts rather than swerving away from his influences. As she develops this close reading, the reader follows her along a spider's web of her own intertextual references—Proust, a direct reference from Perec's novel, but also Lucretius, Nathalie Sarraute, Sartre, Herman Melville, even other Perec novels. Elsewhere, she flows from precise line readings to cultural and historical analyses. Throughout, she adopts Perec and Samuel Beckett's tendency for listing. This practice of stylistic mimesis productively shows how texts and thinkers encounter each other almost randomly in scholarship, just as the characters in the novels about which she writes randomly encounter others while walking in the city.

After briefly discussing Anne Garréta and Calvino, the fourth chapter turns to a close reading of Sophie Calle's *Suite vénitienne* (1983). Here, Cadieu considers seduction and sexuality, showing that chance and deviations from constraints are revelatory of the desire for encounters with others. The addition of desire is most convincing not in the fourth chapter but in the conclusion, in which Cadieu reads Emile Zola, Marguerite Duras, and Patrick Modiano. These writers enlarge the scope of Cadieu's theorization of *clinamen*, showing variations of urban experiences. The analytical productivity of Cadieu's book is evident throughout this conclusion. She ends with the book's most provocative, open-ended question: is it possible to walk randomly? As her analysis has shown, it is not; her rejection of randomness distinguishes her conception of walking from that of a Baudelairian *flâneur*. *Clinamen* intervenes, just as it does in writing.

The book's specific focus on Perec is a demonstration of Cadieu's ability to read deeply the complexities of *Un Homme qui dort* while simultaneously understanding the literary history incumbent in her analysis of it. Nonetheless, readers who are unfamiliar with—even disinterested in—the projects of Perec and the Oulipo writers may find the specificity difficult to work with. The fourth chapter and conclusion demonstrate how effectively Cadieu's analysis broadens its application, but these chapters do not stand alone for readers wanting to bypass Perec. Similarly, readers looking specifically for spatial or urban analyses will be rewarded by letting themselves be taken in by the wide array and variety of Cadieu's analytic frame, because spatial revelations are developed throughout.

What should be unwieldy and inefficient in Cadieu's bibliography and stylistic mimesis is instead an expertly constructed argument that rewards a reader's generous openness.

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