

An Interview with Harry Mathews

by Barbara Henning

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Harry Mathews and I have corresponded for a number of years, and in the back of my mind I always keep a list of writers who I'd like to interview and Harry is up there at the top. I admire his writing and his ideas and inventions for writing. When I sent him my book of interviews, *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* (Belladonna), he wanted to talk about some of Juliana Spahr's comments about women and the Oulipo, and since he was going to be in New York very shortly, it occurred to me that this would be the perfect time to interview him. Juliana had written a beautiful introduction to *Looking Up*, talking about Harryette's generosity and how the interviews were instances of poetic community. What Harry wanted to talk about was Juliana's comment, "It is also a group that is not only mainly French but also mainly male. I believe they admitted a woman once. She seems to have quit at some point." So on Friday, May 27, 2011, I met with him at the Bryant Park Hotel. First we went to lunch across the street but it was too noisy and the tape recorder couldn't pick up our voices, so we came back to the hotel and talked there. Then we continued filling out and editing the interview through email correspondence.

Barbara: Before we go on to talk about the Oulipo and women, I want to read to you something that Lynn Crawford wrote in a recent email to me.

The idea of Mullen willing to "tread even where, perhaps, she is less than welcomed" is interesting, even if maybe not true; the Oulipo has a terrific sense of humor and probably would wonder why anyone would want to join aging men drinking too much at lunch and talking about chess...you know? And the individual Oulipo writers (Queneau, Perec, Roubaud, certainly Harry) are incredibly open to things feminine, moreso, arguably, than many American writers.... Remember, Queneau wrote an ironic masterpiece titled, *We Always Treat Women too Well* so I guess it depends on how you read the word welcome. My guess is every one of them would be blown away by Mullen's work, and consider the support Harry has given you, me, Lynne Tillman.

Harry: I have no idea how the Oulipo would respond to Harryette Mullen's work, but certainly the fact of her being a woman would play no role in its members reaction. One element in Juliana's remarks that distressed me was that the record at this late date still needed to be set straight. In any case I wrote Juliana and told her that her comments about women and the Oulipo were well out of date. Our first woman member was elected to the group in the '70s and remained a significantly active collaborator until, a few years ago, she decided that her own ambitions were leading her in a direction that fitted uncomfortably with the concerns of the rest of us. She did not "quit" the Oulipo, since once one becomes a member one can neither resign nor be expelled; but she stopped

participating in the group's activities. (Several males have done the same thing over the years.) In the meantime four other women who have been elected play very important roles in the business of the life of the group and furthermore represent one-third of the active living members. There must be eighteen or nineteen members now, but only eleven or twelve are active, and I count myself as an active member, even if I'm not as available as I'd like. Of the 12 most active members, these four women are always present and always contributing, which is not enough but it's already a step in the right direction. We also have several gay members, both men and women.

Barbara: Could you talk about the Oulipo and women in the early years?

Harry: In the beginning the Oulipo was entirely male and they weren't making a point about that. It was just that Raymond Queneau invited a lot of friends to be the first members. There were two founders, Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. Queneau was the more literary of the two and he asked poets and novelists that he knew to join the group and I don't remember how many there were, maybe 8 or 9 in the beginning. That's easy enough to find out. There were no women and that may have been due to a somewhat misogynistic streak in Queneau. Sexually he was enthusiastic about women, but I think he had a sort of Swiftian skepticism about them as pure beings, not that males are pure beings. I don't know if you know this kind of misogyny in men which includes a lot of physical involvement and in his case an intense devotion to his wife whose death really precipitated his own death. He depended upon her entirely. Any one who is interested can read about how they met and how he courted her in one of his earliest novels, called *Odile*.

Barbara: I read that novel quite a while back, and I loved it, an intimate autobiographical novel that gives some sideways glimpses into the Surrealist movement.

Harry: Yes, it's extraordinary. It shows a whole side of Raymond Queneau which is not so evident in his other more impersonal novels. Anyway, in the beginning there were no women. Oulipo was founded in 1960. Perec became a member I think in 1966, maybe 65. And I became a member in 73, the same time that Calvino did. The first woman was elected to the group in 1975, an extraordinary performance artist.

Barbara: Michèle Métail?

Harry: Yes, Michèle Métail. She is the one that Juliana refers to, saying that she quit the group, and as I told her you cannot quit the Oulipo. She doesn't participate anymore.

Barbara: Why not?

Harry: Because she felt that we were not going her way or maybe she disapproved of the way she thought we were going. It's hard to explain. She was always independently minded and did what she wanted to do. And I think that, it is just an opinion, that her work took on a more personal vent in recent years and she found that there was no room

for her anymore in present day Oulipo activities. I'm not sure. I regret her absence because she was a knowledgeable confident participant in the group's activities.

Barbara: Why would writing that is personal be a bad fit?

Harry: It needn't be. I don't know the answer to your question, to tell you the truth. The last time I saw her was in Berlin, fifteen or more years ago, and she wasn't participating then, but she was there, and we spoke afterwards and that's the last time I've seen her, so I don't know what has been going on with her. But she was a very lively presence as long as she stayed with us.

Barbara: She could come back and participate at any time she'd like?

Harry: Of course.

Barbara: Could you explain why once you are elected you can't quit the Oulipo? I was thinking there was some political reason as a result of the surrealists . . .

Harry: Yes, absolutely, and if you want a detailed explanation you can read Jacques Roubaud's lecture that is reprinted at the beginning of *The Oulipo Compendium*. I'm really just referring to him. Queneau was kicked out of the surrealist group by Breton because Breton had left his first wife for a new love and Queneau was married to his first wife's sister. Breton said you may never mention the name of this woman. I don't want to ever hear this name and Queneau said, Fuck you. And there was also a doctrinal difference between them, too, but that was the immediate personal cause. I think Breton was insanely dominating in the surrealist group. So when Queneau and Le Lionnais founded the Oulipo, they took care that that couldn't happen and that people could not be kicked out. The corollary of that was that they couldn't resign. It was later thought that this was too restrictive and that they should be allowed to resign. The following provision was then made: if they really felt strongly about it they could summon a legal officer to their residence and there commit suicide in front of the legal officer, making it absolutely clear that the only reason they were committing suicide was to be able to leave the Oulipo. So far this is not an option that has been taken up. (laughter)

The dead members of the Oulipo are still members, and when we list our members we list Queneau, Le Lionnais, Perec, Latis, Luc Étienne, Noël Arnaud, Jean Queval, Jean Lescure, Jacques Bens, François Caradec, Marcel Duchamp, Italo Calvino, Oskar Pastior, Albert Marie-Schmidt, and André Blavier as well as those of us who are still alive.

Barbara: So if you had contributed to the creation of Oulipian ideas and processes, what you created would always be present?

Harry: I don't know if it was justified that way. The fact is that people died. You are expected to respond to the announcement of the monthly meeting and those who can't come have to request to be excused. I have not been able to come all winter because I'm here, so I'm excused. The people who are dead are permanently excused.

Barbara: So the reason someone can't quit—it's not an authoritarian rule per se, but rather a reaction to an authoritarian actions by Breton?

Harry: Almost no one went back to the surrealist movement after being kicked out by Breton. The whole idea of exclusion was in the air of the time, the time of fascism and Stalinism, and exclusionism was a tremendous weapon in the hands of people who were running political movements. The Oulipo is the opposite of that.

Barbara: Coming back to Michèle—was she ever published in English, besides in the *Compendium*?

Harry: I don't know. I know about the translations I myself did for the *Compendium*.

Barbara: And she's a writer of poetry rather than fiction?

Harry: Her great work is neither poetry or prose. It's a singular beast. She was inspired by a famous Austro-Hungarian song that contains one long compound word, *O Du schöner Donaudampschiffahrtgesellschaftskapit:an!* –oh, you handsome Danubetravel-companylinesteamshipcaptain; in English, you'd have to replace those words by genitives, you know, a noun proceeded by "of", and she started writing this work that is still going on, as far as I know. Each line drops its last unit as a new one is introduced at its head.

Barbara: Is that "20,000 Possessive Phrases"?

Harry: Ages ago it was 20,000 lines and she has gone on in several languages, including Chinese and German. It's quite extraordinary...

Barbara: It's difficult to translate?

Harry: No, but it's better to imitate than translate, which I did, but the results are close to unreadable. I obviously don't have her particular talent for that procedure.

Barbara: Who are the other women?

Harry: They were elected much later, in the last fifteen years or so. First, Michelle Grangaud, a master anagrammatist. She and Oskar Pastior were the two Oulipians who specialized in anagrams. She has invented many other procedures. She's also devoted herself to a systematic poetic study of the appearance of words by year in the French language, starting in the 15th century; she writes poems based on the words that appeared in a particular year. Excellent work.

Barbara: She was born in Algiers? Slenderizing is that something she did?

Harry: No, that was invented by Luc Etienne, a virtuoso of language.

Barbara: That's right. She did some variation called "the lipossible." What is a "lipossible?"

Harry: Before I answer that, I feel I should point out that Luc Etienne exemplified another kind of misogyny. He was someone who was attracted to scabrous, obscene solutions to the problems he set for himself and so brilliantly solved. This is a man, I thought, who really loathes women. But when a woman was invited as a guest of honor to one of our lunches, he was all syrupy courtesy. His behavior infuriated me. To talk about women in an almost pornographic way and then when one shows up to assume a mask of old-fashioned gentlemanliness! I guess that's better than nothing.

Anyway Michele Grangaud was I believe the first woman to be elected after Michèle Métail, in 1995. Her concept of the lipossible was generalization of Luc Étienne's slenderizing, which effected the removal of the letter *r* from a text without destroying its grammar or coherence; Michelle Grangaud showed how it was possible to do the same thing with any letter of the alphabet.

Barbara: No other women were proposed in between?

Harry: Probably, yes; I don't want to name the one person I remember being proposed because she wasn't elected and that caused a great deal of bitterness on her part. Electing people has always been difficult to handle and get right. A number of us — younger members and myself — have always pushed for getting new, especially young people into the group. Ian Monk wasn't quite 40 when he became a member, but recently we elected Daniel Levin Becker, who is in his early 20's. We were thrilled by that.

Barbara: How does an election take place? This whole process is striking me a little like academia—you can't be kicked out, well, you can quit your academic post but you can't be fired.

Harry: You can't quit the Oulipo, but you can withdraw. It's like choosing new members of a department in academia, like a club. The Oulipo is a friendly club, but there is nevertheless a division between people who don't want to change things much and others of us—Ian Monk, Fréd Forte, me and probably a couple of the women who want to keep moving along. Anyhow, someone proposes a name and describes what the candidate does and why he or she would make a good member of the Oulipo. The first thing we then usually do is to invite the candidate as guest of honor at one of our monthly meetings, and after that decide on whether or not to proceed with an election. That's how I was elected. As a guest of honor you present yourself and your work, your sponsor does the same thing, and later it is discussed. Usually nothing comes of it. A hard sell on the candidate's part is not recommended; and it helps a lot to have somebody pushing for you. I can't name names, but one person came as a guest of honor and was absolutely brilliant. I mean his work was technically masterful and completely Oulipian. When he had to leave after a certain point, before the end of the meeting, we all looked at each

other with half-averted eyes because it was clear to all of us that he was not going to fit in socially.

Barbara: You have to fit in the group? That's also a consideration with academic hirings although often not talked about.

Harry: You have to be someone that we'd all like to see. And this person was someone none of us wanted to see. In a way it was unfair to him. Of course, he was very upset by this and went off and started his own group. But it's all right now, I think.

Barbara: But in that period between 95 and back in the 60's some women were probably proposed.

Harry: Yes, but none elected. I can't remember the details, it's already a long time ago. I just remember one particular caseIf I go into the details it will be too obvious. After Michele Grangaud, next came Anne Garréta, a brilliant woman who has written some interesting works of fiction. She's been an admirably provocative member. For me, she is somewhat too respectful of academia. Even though she is a creative person herself, she's all too happy organizing professorial discussions of the Oulipo.

Barbara: Is she still at Duke University?

Harry: Yes, she teaches half the year there, and the other semester at the University of Rennes.

Barbara: I notice that her novels have not been translated into English. After a quick search on the internet, it looks like none of these women have books that have been translated into English.

Harry: I don't know why not. The next woman to join was Valérie Baudouin, a soft-spoken, extremely bright and knowledgeable person who has distinguished herself in many domains, but who is mainly known to us by her work as a computer expert, an IT expert. She set up our site and she keeps revising it expertly. Recently she's written fascinating collaborations with Anne Garréta.

Barbara: Poetic collaborations?

Harry: It's not poetry, but it is sort of an immediate memoir *à deux*. Recently Michèle Audin joined the group. A brilliant mathematician and a lively presence, she's also very active not so much in the general activities of Oulipo but in her own research. She is continually coming up with new forms and new ideas, mainly drawn from mathematics (a return to Oulipian basics).

Barbara: So Michèle Audin is a mathematician who contributes to the list of possible constraints: does she also work with language and write literary texts?

Harry: She does; but her chief interest is how mathematical structures are potentially productive in literature. Last weekend there was a conclave, a gathering of Oulipians in Normandy, to review the general situation of the group. Michèle presented a paper there that she put on-line, but unfortunately the math was too difficult for me so I don't dare report on it.

Barbara: Were you interested in mathematics before you joined the Oulipo?

Harry: Perec and I were mathematically ignorant.

Barbara: But you must have become more interested in mathematics as you went along.

Harry: I was good at math until I got to calculus, but integral and differential calculus were beyond my powers. And that's where modern math begins. After all if Pascal could understand it, why couldn't I? But I couldn't. I'm still interested in arithmetic, and my use of mathematics as far as there is any is arithmetical (I did explore one geometric form once): mostly very simplistic stuff. For instance, I wrote a sestina in French in which the end words have four letters in the first stanza, five letters in the second stanza, and so forth. That kind of thing I can do. But it hardly deserves the term mathematical structure. Anybody can do that.

Barbara: Talking about geometry reminds me that the poet Lee Ann Brown wanted me to ask you a question. If you were to write a Geodesic Dome, what form would it take?

Harry: If I could write it? It would probably be a series of poems. I'd have to figure out how to compose an antagonal poem containing pairs of pentagons that would share an edge, perhaps first and last lines. It's an interesting idea actually.

Barbara: In the *Compendium*, Le Lionnais is described as a hero of the French resistance against the Nazi occupation. I was wondering, Harry, how politics generally played into the Oulipo? Were the members mostly left-leaning?

Harry: Everyone in the group is politically oriented and up to date with what is going on. Most of us are left-leaning but there have been a couple of . . . Luc Etienne was very right-wing and Jacques Bens . . . I don't remember (a lovely man). We avoid talking about politics in our meetings because our focus is on the use of language, which of course involves politics immediately, but then we sort of take it as it comes. I've always felt that Oulipian procedures are perfect defusers of political rigidity because you can take a speech from anyone and subject it to $N + 7$, for example, and you can see what it really means, if anything. In fact when I first told Stephen Sandy about this technique (he's a poet and former college teacher), he said, this is a terrific way of discovering what is happening in faculty meetings. (laughter)

When we did the first colloquium about the Oulipo, it was organized at CUNY by Lanie Goodman (a distinguished translator from the French and Raymond Roussel scholar) who was teaching there at the time. One woman she invited from the faculty said, "You know,

this is very dangerous using politically blank forms. They could be used to say anything." To her surprise I responded that Oulipian procedures were effective tools for the subversion of political authority and so were inherently leftist. Right-wing people don't ever show such disrespect for their language. The point isn't often made, but Oulipian constraints are powerful critically.

What the Oulipian procedures reveal is the bearer of meaning in writing: the form of the sentence, the form of the paragraph, the form of the chapter. That is what is bringing what you are thinking or saying into existence. I don't know if you have seen my essay "For Prizewinners." In it I quote Kafka's extraordinary little story, "The Truth about Sancho Panza," consisting of two sentences. The first sentence is long and uncertain; it accumulates clauses and phrases and ends up very wobbly. The second sentence is crisp and neat and immediately satisfactory. If you subject as I do in this essay, the text to N + 7, you can see how that works: whatever the nouns are, you are miles away from the declared meaning, yards away anyhow, and nevertheless the sense remains.

Barbara: Yes, the rhetoric is revealed. And the sense will always stay there syntactically, and there is some kind of power structure that happens in the syntax and that is then revealed .

Harry: Absolutely. Other procedures do the same thing.

Barbara: One last question about politics and class. I was talking to a poet last week about Oulipo and she said, she thought you had to live in Paris and be rich enough to throw all those dinners. I said, well, I don't think George Perec was wealthy.

Harry: The poorer members have modest dinners, but they are fine. You go to the charcuterie and buy some sausage and ham and you make an inexpensive salad.

Barbara: So people in the group are varied in terms of their finances?

Harry: They are. Almost all of them make their living writing, teaching or translating. Ian Monk earns his living as a translator — a hard job.

Barbara: Did George Perec throw dinners for the meetings?

Harry: It's an interesting question because I can't remember a single dinner at his place. He must have, but maybe not. It depends. You know Roubaud was a distinguished professor and earned a satisfactory living as a professor of math as well as literature. Bénabou is both a bourgeois and a professor. Fournel had a difficult career and worked all his life. I'm sort of an exception, in that I have money of my own, and I think I'm probably the only one.

As for the dinners: Anna Garréta gives fabulous dinners, Jouet does too — he may have money of his own, but he writes a great deal and undoubtedly earns quite a bit from his writing, as a dramatic writer as well as a fiction writer. He makes his living as a writer as

Georges Perec did in his final years. Perec had a job for most of his life as research assistant in the library of a medical laboratory. He analyzed and classified file documents for the staff. He was good at that and was decently paid for it.

Barbara: He also wrote crossword puzzles?

Harry: Yes, crossword puzzles for a weekly magazine, called *Le Point*. Some people think he was the greatest cruciverbalist, constructor of crossword puzzles, in France.

Barbara: I love the piece you wrote after he died. It was so moving. After reading that, I started to love Georges Perec.

Harry: It was very hard to write

Barbara: His life was very difficult. The book he wrote *W, or the Memory of Childhood* is beautiful and wrenching.

Harry: Yes, wonderful.

Barbara: Would that book be considered Oulipian?

Harry: It's not.

Barbara: Well, he had that parallel society going on.

Harry: I know — so terrifying, blood-chilling, the Olympian society supposedly based on the rules of the Olympic games. At the end they are racing in shackles. It's not really Oulipian, but it is formalist — not Oulipian the way *Life A User's Manual* is. He was a very devoted Oulipian. He sort of liberated himself through the Oulipo.

Barbara: How so?

Harry: In a general way, by discovering as many of us have — but in his case to a much fuller extent — that the use of abstract, arbitrary methods frees a writer from self-centered obsessions and so releases inherent imaginative potential. More specifically, his experience of one such method enabled him to explore the greatest trauma of his life. Georges saw his mother for the last time at the age of six, in 1942, standing on a station platform in the Gare de Lyon, where she had sent him off to stay with cousins in the Vercors, a region where hiding Jews was possible. She herself made the mistake of returning to her former domicile, where she was arrested and shipped off to an unidentified extermination camp. Her death was not confirmed officially until Georges was (as I recall) eighteen, so that for twelve years he was suspended in uncertainty: his mother had not necessarily died, she had disappeared. *La Disparition*, the French title of *A Void*, means “The Disappearance,” and the book is entirely concerned with the mysterious vanishing of all its characters, in a text where the letter *e*, the most common in the language, has also gone missing. So the use of this unusual constraint brought

Georges to an inevitable consideration of the most dramatic aspect of his experience, one that he had not been able to face before.

Barbara: Freeing the writer from self-centered obsessions, and his choice of the constraint itself was personal, disappearance. Was there any pressure in the group to stay purist with Oulipo?

Harry: No, for example, Paul Fournel has written Oulipian texts for our interior publications, but most of his other writing is not Oulipian at all. No, there is no pressure to do anything.

Barbara: Didn't you say earlier at lunch that you are not a purist, but you have tried out every Oulipian constraint? You wrote "Autobiography" in *On The Way Home*, I was thinking, well that's not Oulipian, is it? Any procedures used with this?

Harry: I tried out every Oulipian method in order to produce examples for the entries in the *Oulipo Compendium*. As for the autobiography, the moment that I received the invitation from Gale, the archival publisher in Detroit, to contribute to their series, I realized that I could write it by talking about the people in my life, not about me. That's not Oulipian, just clever.

Barbara: Clever, but..

Harry: Well, if it were more systematic, it could be called Oulipian, but once you have worked in an Oulipian matter, practically everything you do has some . . . I remember when I finished writing *20 Lines a Day* and was thinking of publishing it, I said to Jacques Roubaud, this is such spontaneous writing, not at all what Oulipians are supposed to be doing, and he said, when you've worked in constrictive forms all your life, anything you do is going to be formally ok. (laughter)

Barbara: Well it is 20 lines, right? That's mathematical.

Harry: It was Stendhal's idea, and not at all strictly applied.

Barbara: Harryette Mullen would say she uses Oulipian techniques, but she's not an Oulipian. She's not a purist. She just uses them as starting points and interventions. That's what I usually do, also.

Harry: It's true, she's not at all strict in her application of the procedures. My favorite line of hers is "a smart blonde has been dropped on the Chinese Embassy." That was brilliant.

Barbara: Very funny, isn't it? (laughter)

Harry: As you point out, it's not only a smart bomb but a dumb blonde. That just took my breath away.

Barbara: She has a knack for witty language. N + 7 + the clinamen—I also take many opportunities to use the clinamen.

Harry: Technically you can only use one in a piece. The most interesting rule is that you have to be able to solve the problem without resorting to the clinamen. I always observe that.

Barbara: A clinamen is a swerving away from the method. I think they use that term in Lacanian Psychoanalysis, too.

Harry: Well, it comes from Lucretius, who took the idea from Empedocles. It's a philosophical term that refers to atomic activity before the universe took form. A rain of atoms was falling in very straight lines until one atom moved out of line and touched another and that started.

Barbara: I love the way you describe that. I'm interested in these mistakes. They start something new, rather than just sticking with the rules.

Harry: Sticking with the rules is interesting because when you start allowing yourself deviations, it ends up the way it would have been if you'd never adopted the constraint in the first place; but if you follow the rules – even if they aren't working well – in the end, you'll say things you wouldn't have said otherwise.

Barbara: But if you take the constraints and work with them and you start generating this great material and then you can work with everything, whether it's improvisation or intentionality and shape it as you want. The end result would be very different if you had never used the constraint as part of the process.

Harry: But no one says you can't do that! However, the value of the Oulipo is structure.

Barbara: Yes, I like working with the strict methods also. In the 90's when Lynn Crawford passed on a sheet of your Oulipian constraints, I wrote my first Oulipo-inspired poem and after that my writing changed significantly. No more waiting for inspiration. Noël Arnaud mentions in the *Compendium* that with the Oulipo, there is an "emphatic rejection of chance", and I was thinking of the *I Ching* for example, when you throw the coin or the sticks and there is a sense that there is no chance involved with it, no matter how you play out these things, they are scripted somehow, as if there is some knowing between your hand movement, your question and the text, some kinesthetic knowing.

Harry: You're telling me. I once started using the *I Ching*, and once I had collected my yarrow sticks I thought it would be a good idea to practice. I would ask questions, ruffle through pages of the text, and take whatever I got; and there was never not a good answer. There is nothing except good answers.

Barbara: It is usually the correct answer. For me, I throw the coins, look and it answers my questions, because the *I Ching* is only offering alternatives on how to keep your life peaceful.

Harry: Absolutely, but I found that there was no point in doing it. Wherever you look you are in the right place. Somebody involved with a site devoted to John Cage got in touch with me and asked if there was any relationship between Cage and the Oulipo. And I told my story. John Cage played a very important role in my development long before I knew him. I heard him speak in 1949 at a large cultural gathering at Vassar. When I met him, decades later, I got to know him quite well. I learned that he was interested in the Oulipo despite its being very anti-chance and his being devoted to chance. Not long ago I responded to an inquiry from a website specializing in Cage (Marjorie Perloff later got involved and was very encouraging). I said, Cage and the Oulipo are not that far apart. Chance in Cage's work involves the creative part of it, not the interpretive part, so that once he says he'll use the dots on a piece of music paper to determine his notes, he sticks with that. What chance creates in such a case is a kind of fixed form.

Barbara: Once he decides what approach he's going to take, that's the beginning of chance, if we believe in chance. It looks like chance.

Harry: But I don't think the use he made of it was very chancy. I had a funny time trying to draw him into arguments about chance, but he eluded me with great nimbleness, which was ultimately fine by me. He was a funny, witty, and intelligent man.

Barbara: Jabes' *Book of Questions*. Could that be considered an Oulipian text?

Harry: Yes and no. He was really very much a Buddhist. I think what interested him was taking things as they are, including the Oulipo.

Barbara: In *The Compendium*, you talk about how Perec's palindrome resulted in "a combination of length, ingenuity and literary elegance". Some of the Oulipian experiments are elegant, and emotionally and intellectually engaging, but some of them are tedious. Were there arguments and discussions about this topic?

Harry: The rule at the beginning when the group was created was that what the members of the group were doing was not just word play, that it had to have literary quality. That was less a rule than an ambition, but has always been what distinguishes us from logophiles — people who are (for instance) interested in finding words with the highest numbers of vowels. There is nothing wrong with that, but it doesn't necessarily lead to a satisfactory literary text. It depends on the writer, as in all writing.

Barbara: But one could use constraints like these and the results can be surprisingly elegant.

Harry: One example I like to read in public is my contribution to the "Homage to Perec" after he died, one of the fascicles of the Bibliothèque Oulipienne. At the outset I didn't know what to do. I was in a state of dismay, I finally decided to pay my homage to Georges by writing something without the letter *e*. The resulting text made me realize that I had a very strong neo-Platonic streak in me, not so surprising since I'm a great lover of Henry Vaughn's poetry but I didn't expect to have it just shoot up like that. You can have revelations of that kind. That was a small one, perhaps, but it was latent and unconscious in me and that is what is good about using these structures. They get you places where you wouldn't go without them.

Barbara: It seems like one has more latitude writing fiction, using categories and structures and in between you have all this room for invention and improvisation.

Harry: First it should be said that the Oulipo does not have a great repertory of narrative methods, but practically all its methods can be used to create a narrative. Some look as though they were dealing only with words, but those words can be extended into paragraphs or chapters. That more or less describes the genesis of *Cigarettes*.

Barbara: I reread *Cigarettes* a few weeks ago and the characters are still in my mind.

Harry: How was it?

Barbara: It was great. I especially liked the characters Phoebe and Lewis. They are the characters that are the most alive, the most suffering ...

Harry: Yes, and Lewis turns out to be the narrator in the end and that changes everything. It makes him a much more sympathetic and humane character than he seemed before.

Barbara: I was wondering how you invented this narrative. Somewhere you talk about how the structure enabled you to work with some autobiographical material.

Harry: Not so much autobiography, but my early milieu. New York, and the Hamptons, disguised in the book as Saratoga Springs. When I was writing *Cigarettes* I found myself confronted with this abstract list of events that had no meaning at all. But it finally gave me access to the circumstances of my early life. I didn't know that was going to happen. I had set up a series of five-item lines of events, moronically simple events like A meets B, B dislikes A, A falls in love with B, B flees. . . and you have no idea who A or B is and they are not the same always. Anyway, I've spent years concealing this.

Barbara: Tell us.

Harry: Well, let's say there are five lines and then you transpose the things. You take the first item from the first line and put it into the second line, and the third item into the third line, and so forth. You get a completely different story. I had this whole thing laid

out in front of me, but there was no indication of who anyone was or where it was happening....

Barbara: How did you come up with that?

Harry: I just kept looking and little by little and situations and characters started emerging. It was extraordinary. I had had no idea what I was going to do.

Barbara: It reads like a Victorian novel.

Harry: Well, that was deliberate.

Barbara: When I finished it, I thought that it almost invites a structural analysis, and maybe that's what you started with. Or maybe the critics would come out with something totally different.

Harry: (laughter) They would come out with the detective aspect of it. What seems to have happened didn't happen, it turns out he and she were not behaving the way you thought they were. That's what people think is Oulipian about it, but it has nothing to do with it. It was just something that grew out of the structure. It was arbitrary in the sense that I lined up the different events, but they were after all very basic. They didn't signify anything substantial.

Barbara: It wasn't really a mathematical structure—

Harry: It was because the situations were permuted, as in a sestina; their order changes in a precise way. The sestina, by the way, is a wonderful form. The Oulipo has done lots of work with not only the sestina but with what we call n-inas or queninas: that is, the principle of the sestina extended to poems whose stanzas have any number of lines (not merely six). This was the work of Roubaud, something not conceivable thirty years earlier.

Barbara: My students are writing sestinas this week, using sentences instead of lines. I've been doing this every semester in the flash fiction classes I teach.

Harry: Do you know my prose sestinas?

Barbara: Yes, you gave them to me long ago. They are in the course packet with your assignment. I've been using them for years. What was the relationship between the New York School and Oulipo? You were involved with both groups.

Harry: There is no connection, except for me. Incidentally, the original members of the New York School denied its aesthetic existence. I got involved because I had met John Ashbery, we became friends and soon started the magazine *Locus Solus*; Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler were the other two editors, also charter members of the New York School. Look at those three poets: they don't have much in common.

Barbara: Yes, they are very different from each other.

Harry: They had something basic in common, like “clean” writing. I don't know how to define it. There was some unspoken rule perhaps that warned against self-indulgence.

Barbara: But with O'Hara and Jimmy Schuyler, there's this intimate voice... I think that's what a lot of the poets in the second generation New York School picked up on.

Harry: You're so right. I particularly like what Ron Padgett has done with that. Have you seen his last book, *How Long?* In fact his last two books are packed with rare jewels.

Barbara: It's sitting on my to-read shelf. What you were doing with Oulipo was quite different from what they were doing. I'm thinking there is this experimental edge to the New York School, an interest in collage and . . .

Harry: I don't think there really was, certainly in the case of John Ashbery and we've discussed it often enough. You know he isn't really interested, I mean occasionally he'll use a formal procedure but it's exceptional.

Barbara: What about his pantoums?

Harry: True enough. The Oulipo was also interested in the pantoum. Jacques Jouet was the one who led the way; he eventually wrote an article on the pantoum, including its oriental traditions, that is as useful as such things can get.

Barbara: And you wrote a sequence of haiku in your latest book, *The New Tourism*.

Harry: Oulipians have been writing haiku for years. The haiku has become like the sonnet, something you can do in your sleep. I mean it is not a really demanding form. Some people find it difficult, but all you need is five plus two fingers. However, I discovered a mistake among my own haiku, one of them is missing two syllables in the second line. Let's call it a clinaman.

Barbara: I wrote a sequence of sonnets for a Leave Book pamphlet long ago and I was looking at them recently and noticed one was only 13 lines.

Harry: It is still a sonnet. By the way, Ron Padgett wrote a great self-definitional haiku: "First five syllables,/ Second seven syllables,/ Third five syllables."

Barbara: Richard Wright wrote a book of haikus at the end of his life, a terrific book.

Harry: I wrote them because they are so short. At the end of the day I'm usually sozzled and sleepy; it was interesting to see what emerged from the day. Was it you that said they were little glimpses into my life?

Barbara: Yes, I did say that in a letter to you.

Harry: I don't know why I stopped, but I'm glad I did since there are so many of them already. It's thanks to the guys who run this little press that I put them in; I'd found many of them defective as poems, but that doesn't matter: it's having the long sequence that matters.

Barbara: I like to collect haiku images either in my notebook or with my camera. It keeps me sane, in a yogic way of speaking.

Harry: It was at the moment of the day when I couldn't . . . well they probably did, kind of relief and abandonment of ego, which is half way there.

Barbara: Did you know Laura Riding when you were with Robert Graves in Majorca?

Harry: No I never met her. She was long gone by then. They broke up in 36. And I met Robert in the fall of 54. No, I wrote this long piece on her, it's in my collected essays, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*.

Barbara: I remember reading that essay some time ago.

Harry: At the time, they had just republished a wonderful book of hers, called *Progress of Stories*. I wrote this enthusiastic review, it must have been the most enthusiastic review she ever received.

Barbara: She was still alive then, wasn't she?

Harry: Yes, oh alas, and I really figured the whole thing out and not in an ah ha way I've caught you, but in a respectful way, but unfortunately this was the pretext for her grousing. I said, you know, her name has changed so much, the only thing that is consistent is Laura, so I'm going to refer to her as Laura.

Barbara: You must have known how she would respond to any critical writing about her. Did she write you letters?

Harry: She wrote a letter to *The New York Review of Books*, an absolutely loathsome letter which I answered with three lines. I wasn't going to argue with her. She was too insane. But I love her all the same. I love *The Telling*, too. Did you ever read that? It is a terrific book. I pay tribute to that in this review, too.

Barbara: Yes, years back Lewis Warsh gave me a copy of *The Telling*. That's the first time I read Riding. I also wrote a piece on her (after she died) that I presented at a panel for The Poetry Project. It's on-line. I'll send you a link. I spent quite a bit of time in the library reading all her letters to the editors and made a poem-essay in response.

Harry: I have a student who has become a very good art critic and historian, Rafael Rubenstein. When I was his tutor at Bennington, he wanted to write on Laura Riding. In the end he sent her his thesis; I said, if I were you I wouldn't. She just stomped on it.

Barbara: She created her own empty spot in literary history. Even now she doesn't show up in lots of anthologies where she should. I may be almost out of questions today, but let me ask one last thing about *Cigarettes*. When you were writing it, when you got involved in these two scenes, the one with Phoebe's terrible mental suffering and then the sadomasochistic sex scene with Lewis, how emotionally involved were you?

Harry: In the case of Phoebe I was very emotionally involved because among other things, even though she is unlike Niki de Saint Phalle, Niki suffered from hyperthyroidism and the description of Phoebe's disease was really a replica of Niki's. It was a ghastly, terrible experience to witness, and I was happy to be able to write about it in fiction, about someone who wasn't Niki, rather than writing about her. In the case of Lewis, Lewis appears on the first page of the book. He's the one who is saying I want to write a book about these people. They are showing him a letter from Owen and he can't believe that anyone wrote this and he's there speaking as "I" and . . .

Barbara: And then the reader completely forgets about it until in the end you realize you have been listening all along to Lewis. There's one tiny reference at the very end that made me realize that. What was it?

Harry: It was some reference to Morris. So my heart went out to him. He seems to be a creep but actually he is the person remembering everything so he can tell the story. I felt sympathy for Lewis. I suppose I was thinking about myself in my less sociable days.

Barbara: That's all the questions I have, Harry, except—how did you hurt your finger?

Harry: There was another French writer, Hélène Cixous, a feminist whom years ago I was ridiculously pursuing — she was obviously gay. One evening friends of mine started making fun of her and I got very mad and swept my hand across a table full of glassware and cut my finger open very nastily. I went to an emergency ward up the street. They put me in front of this woman doctor. She was relatively young, but she had a solid older nurse standing behind her. She looked at my finger and said, But you are bleeding terribly! Oh, no, I said, this is perfectly normal. I spent my whole time reassuring this woman who was scared shitless of sewing me up. She took a hooked needle — she was chain smoking through this — and got it into one flap of my gaping wound, then she got it through the other, then she pulled the thread right through both flaps of skin and out the other side. It was extremely painful. I learned how many nerves there are in the extremities. Of course she had to do it all over again. Are you suffering pain? she asked and I said, Oh, no, nothing at all.

Barbara: So now your finger is bent like this because you were defending Hélène Cixous.

Harry: Yes

Barbara: I have one more question. Why did you call the book, *Cigarettes*?

Harry: That's a very good question. Everyone asks it.

Barbara: You didn't lay out cigarettes as you were laying out the permutations, did you?

Harry: There's no explanation. The explanation is that it's a good question. After looking at that title every page after page after page, people wonder, why is it called, *Cigarettes*.

Barbara: I never thought about it until we were sitting here talking about Obama smoking. So you chose it because there would be no possibility of connecting it with the novel in a meaningful way.

Harry: Only in a clichéd way, life or love is like a cigarette, you finish one, you start another, all that kind of junk. And I don't see that. I think the title is getting better and better because no one smokes anymore, well, only two-fifths of the population.

Barbara: The sidewalks are now full of people who smoke.

Harry: It reminds me of *Tlooth*. Here you are in the middle of the Venetian episode and the guy goes out to the prophetic marsh and sinks his or her leg and pulls it out and the marsh says, Tlooth. What happens at that point is interesting because the reader looks at the top of the page and realizes this has been there all the time and for a moment the book becomes an object, calling the reader back to reality.

Barbara: It's already four o'clock and I have to head downtown. Thanks Harry for sharing your afternoon with me. And thanks for lunch, too.

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