

EXISTENTIAL TEXTUALITY:  
ENGAGEMENT IN THE FORM OF A LETTERPRESS BOOK  
JOHN CROMBIE'S *SO*

# *John Crombie's So*

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## *Abstract*

*"Existential Textuality: Engagement in the Form of a Letterpress Book" examines the work of English writer and book artist, John Crombie. In So, his combinatory narrative of cyclical romance, Crombie integrates typographical and literary composition, physical and narrative structure, letterpress and linguistic materiality to address the fundamental givens of existence: mortality and consciousness, freedom and contingency, subjectivity and temporality. The 'book' as both a finite and an interactive format gives rise, in the typographic schema of So, to a view of language, stories and life itself as sets of possibilities and events, the significance of which derives from choice and sequence. The implicated reader of So's multi-linear tale may flirt with notions of authorship, yet in her hands, the codex enacts, typography writes and design tells, as every movement and surface of Crombie's work becomes reflective of the meanings that inhere in the very form of a printed book.*

*From children's puzzle-stories to fragments of Samuel Beckett <sup>1</sup>, the handmade books of Kickshaws press share their imprint's two-faced presentation: "I'm something/I'm nothing." The word "kickshaws," a corruption of the French *quelque chose*, owes its existence to use by the English to describe French culinary frivolities of the seventeenth century, as in, "a 'something' French, not one of the known 'substantial English' dishes." From this first use, the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the sense in which we take it here: "Something dainty or elegant, but unsubstantial or comparatively valueless; a toy, a trifle..." A denial of substance, despite elaborate appearances, unites the two meanings. Yet the very choice of a word that originates in the untranslatability of another should give us pause. For is not the trace of *quelque chose*—*kék(é) chose*—that lingers in "kickshaws" itself a sort of substance? And are not the matters to which an insistence on this trace leads us—the role of linguistic materiality in the production of meaning, for example—quite substantial, indeed?*

1. Crombie, John. 1987. MAC. Paris: Kickshaws. "Passages from Samuel Beckett's Mercier et Camier that were excluded by the author from his English version, gleaned, translated and printed by John Crombie." (Crombie, John. 2002. *Kickshaws Catalogue 2001-2002*. Paris: Kickshaws, 4.)

One might even draw an analogy between the French emphasis on a dish's outward elaboration—mistrusted and dismissed as inconsequential, or worse, by the English—and the English attachment to the eloquence of a word's form. In this case, the form is phonetic: *quelque chose* preserves its foreign tone and airy elegance in becoming “kickshaws” rather than “something.” And its retention involves us with the shape and shaping of language rather than with its “content:” the ideally disembodied meaning which it is any inscription's traditional duty to deliver. As in the original ambivalence of the English attitude that produced it, within the word “kickshaws” itself, and surely in its selection to identify the productions of John Crombie and Sheila Bourne, an intriguing contradiction exists, a demonstration of substance and complexity in the guise of self-dismissal. *Thus, it is with care that we approach Kickshaws books, each one trying to pass itself off as a trifle while at the same time displaying at its surface the elements of a clever construction.* If this display might be explained as an attempt to amuse, its diversions cannot prevent a quite opposite effect, which is to call our attention to the inner workings of books, of tales, and of language itself. In fact, the self-consciousness of Kickshaws books leads straight to the structures that make them—and any other book, any other narrative, any other meaning—possible. We should not be surprised, then, to find our suspicions of the seriousness<sup>2</sup> of the Kickshaws enterprise confirmed by John Crombie's evident formal and conceptual ambition. The design and production of his books embrace the question of the Book and the nature of textuality. His visually and verbally explicit schemas reveal the very mechanisms of writing. As for his stories, more often than not, they plot the bounds and pull of existence itself. Indeed, this theme enjoys such frequency in Crombie's work that to ignore its role would be to miss a central point.

2. An entirely different discussion could be fruitfully pursued concerning the nature, means and antecedents of Crombie's humor. My focus on gravity in his and Bourne's work is in no way meant to discount the significance of this humor. Indeed, gravity and humor are intimately linked in nearly all Kickshaws books, often in the form of a distinctly absurd(ist) sensibility that might interestingly be linked to a host of post-war writers, from Beckett to Ionesco, Frisch and even Nabokov.

### **Untitled Life**

*In Curtains*,<sup>3</sup> a text describing the fall of night gradually loses its contrast to a dark background and disappears. In *Overcoated*,<sup>4</sup> the silhouette of a coat works its way up from the bottom of the page to obliterate more and more of the text body. These and many other stark sequences trace an allegorical progression toward death in Crombie and Bourne's books. And while theirs remain symbolic passages, the number of Kickshaws works that quite *literally*, if elementally, tell a life story is no less considerable.<sup>5</sup> Often, the draw toward an end is set in motion by the repetitive and progressive action of these books; whether by accumulation or elimination, the entirety of a life's list—of women loved, books read, milestones reached—is exhausted, complete or contained in the sum of their pages. Many titles establish the scope of their subjects immediately: *The Loves of My Life*, *Biobibliographie*, *Womb to Tomb*, *Such Is Life*.... In others, a sense of *range* gains the reader as she realizes that a story begun with some rendition of a birth (a photo of a newborn described, for example) is moving at a narrative pace and on a typo-evolutionary scale that will surely lead to a death before the book is done. Or rather, exactly when the book is done. For what quickly becomes clear to the reader of these stories is the extent to which an analogy has been pushed: between a book (the Book) and an individual existence (Existence).

*The privilege enjoyed historically by books as favored embodiments of lives can be detected in any number of literary and cultural tropes.* Whether a life's quality is displayed by an array of works read (the image of a full bookshelf), its worth attested by the weight of a tome written, or its truth contained in a diary kept, there is, it would seem, always more than a clean symbolic exchange at work. An investment—or displacement—deposits the essence of a life in the (permanent) form of the book, as if, paradoxically, the written—or better, the printed—volume offered the “meaning of life” refuge from the ravages of time, the accidents of fate, etc. And yet in many ways, the analogy between life and a book goes much further than the notion of an ideal surrogate would suggest. Indeed, in the hands of John Crombie, books become an accurate model of mortal consciousness, a means of placing the implications of our *condition* and their impact on experience within the reader's grasp. Crombie may say that his predilection for life stories merely reflects some functional convenience,<sup>6</sup> but its effect is to bring to the fore again and again what a page and a moment have in common in the context of finitude, linearity and an incapacity to be anywhere but the present—the context, that is, that defines our lives. Existential temporality inheres in the codex form. Crombie's books simply make the most of this given by configuring and enacting its principles at every level of narrative, typographical, visual and physical structure.

3. Crombie, John. 1985. *Curtains*. Paris: Kickshaws.

4. Bourne, Sheila and John Crombie. 1982. *Overcoated*. Paris: Kickshaws.

5. At least a dozen such books exist, including:

Bourne, Sheila and John Crombie. 1983. *Untitled Book*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Bourne, Sheila and John Crombie. 1985. *Stitches in Time*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1985. *The Loves of My Life*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1986. *Biobibliographie*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1986. *Womb to Tomb*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1989. *True to Type*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1990. *De Mère en Terre*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1991. *Such Is Life*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1994. *One Way or Another*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 1997. *Four-Letter Word Life*. Paris: Kickshaws.

Crombie, John. 2002. *Errata, or My Mistake*. Paris: Kickshaws.

*If life is the story, and bound, printed pages are the book, then Untitled Book does not merely compare, but equates and conflates the two entities.* No title or preliminary pages separate this book from its letterpress text. Indeed, the latter commences on the front of the former in the form of a mound of jumbled black letters on a blank background. This mound is repeated on the first (next) page and again, opposite a colophon, on the next. Either the mound serves as a cover illustration, title and first page of the narrative, or the narrative begins with the very appearance of the book and continues within as an expression of initial stasis. In any case, in its fourth iteration, the mound shares the page with a vocalic line whose shape (thin and straight) contrasts with that of the large round heap, even if its verbal content—"ooooobuuuuueeee," etc.—has yet to distinguish itself from the pile of gibberish below. *figure 1* As one turns the pages of *Untitled Book*, these two elements, the line and the mound, maintain the position established for them on the "cover" and "title page," always taking place on the recto opposite a blank. But changes in their composition begin to occur. As its content becomes legible, the straight, set type above acquires justified lines in a growing block, while the blob below gradually diminishes. At some point, it becomes clear that their relationship is not merely one of contrast or inversion, but causality: one borrows a sum from the other and spends it. The nonsense vowels aligned atop the first page are revealed (retrospectively) to have been the cries of a newborn by the text of an announcement that directly presents the otherwise unnarrated event of a birth: "Mr. and Mrs. Grimshaw are delighted to announce the birth of a son Miles." Another hint lies in the decorative typeface that sets this sentence apart from the rest of the justified text. Looking back to the previous page, one's suspicions are confirmed: those elaborate initials, those spindly small caps, used to be part of the mound; their appearance in the composed portion of the page has effectively subtracted them from the uncounted quantity below.

*The story continues, its landmarks shown as much as told by various narrative and typographical devices.* With stylistic evolutions appropriate to the stage they represent, firstperson, present-tense evocations of specific moments of the narrator's childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, marriage, parenthood, divorce and retreat plot the graph of a life. These stages are separated by what Crombie has called "typographical dissolves," <sup>7</sup> strings of random letters that cut short the depiction of a given moment and allow for otherwise unmediated transition to another biographical era. Each time of life is punctuated by

6. "...Ce qui explique sans doute l'importance du syndrome "womb to tomb" comme thématique privilégiée... Schématisant cette trajectoire exemplaire entre toutes qu'est la vie, du berceau...au tombeau, la présence constante de cette suite de rimes à forte résonance... n'est pas à attribuer à une quelconque morbidité de la part du typographe mais plutôt au fait qu'elle s'offre comme prétexte idéal à des exercices narratifs purement typographiques." ("...Which, no doubt, explains the importance of the 'womb to tomb' syndrome as a favorite theme... Tracing the most exemplary of trajectories, that of life from cradle... to grave, the constant presence of this resounding rhyme is not attributable to any morbidity on the part of the typographer, but rather to the fact that it offers an ideal pretext for purely typographical narrative exercises.")

Crombie, John. 1991. "Kickshaws: son parcours (et accidents de)." *Littérales* n° 9. "L'Écrivain et la Fabrication du Livre." Actes du Colloque Organisé par l'Institut d'Étude du Livre, Centre de Recherche Livre et Littérature, Paris X Nanterre, 31.

7. Crombie. "Kickshaws: son parcours (et accidents de)," 48.

ooooobuuueeeewooojiiiiii booooooogooofeee gooooooaaaaa gaaaadaaaa daaaaadeee

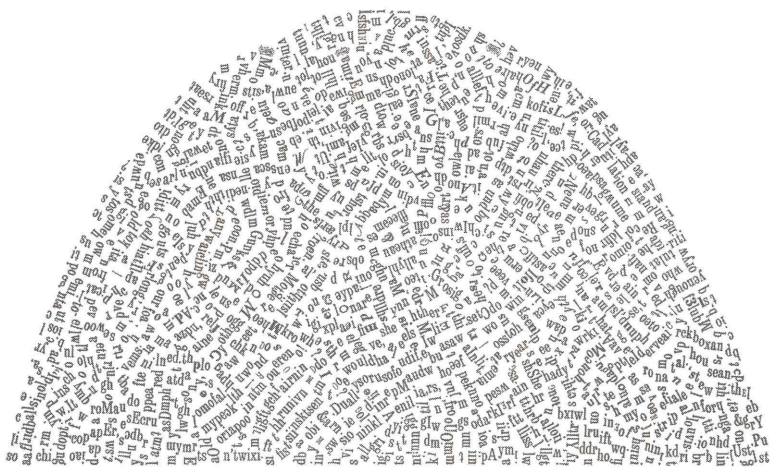


figure 1

Untitled Book

a typographical facsimile announcing some important development: a 21st birthday, a wedding, the birth of a child, a housewarming, a new job, a change of address (divorce), the death of a loved one, etc. Each announcement is made in its own distinctive typeface. But there is another punctuating element in the protagonist's life story that always shows up in the same bold italics: the titles of his various—aborted, rejected—manuscripts. Meanwhile, as the justified lines expand with the maturity and establishment of their subject, the mound of typographical matter diminishes, sacrificing its letters in standard and special styles to every event recounted. And "matter" is, indeed, the word for this mound, as its shapeless shape, primal graphemes and quasi-static repetition from one page to the next imply. But a life's passage, its formative experiences and, most mimetically, its literary productions are exhausting this matter. Just as the narrator spends his life on texts that attempt to make sense of this life, so *Untitled Book* consumes itself in the creation of meaning. This perfect coincidence of existence, writing and the book is marked again at the end of the story. Alone in old age, the protagonist struggles to continue writing despite an ever-decreasing arsenal of vowels (recklessly wasted by the newborn who opened the book with his cries). The name of the work in (sputtering) progress, *The Time of His Life or Capitulations and Recapitulations*, is the last to be offered for this ultimately untitled life. **figure 2** The manuscript comes to a stop; the text falls off; the protagonist dies. The needed "e" can no longer be supplied. "I," the last remaining vowel has reached the limits of its applicability. The book ends. Life, writing, the stuff of language and the book object form one and the same extent.

*To accomplish this equation in Untitled Book, Crombie and Bourne employ the most basic means of their medium (letterpress) and form (the book).* What distinguishes letterpress from other print media is the degree of its physicality. Handset type must limit its compositions for any given run of the press to the quantity of letters available in a case (a quantity conventionally measured—proportionately represented—by the number of e's cast in the lot). Thus, the authors' image of finitude derives from a real condition of their means of production—so, too, does the image of meaninglessness (the mound). It is the dreaded "pie." Pie results from the collapse of a set form, an event feared in any letterpress print shop and one that can all too easily happen, since foundry type does not come in words or lines but in individual characters that only lateral pressure can maintain in lines and blocks.<sup>8</sup> Crombie has said that his ideas for books are suggested by his experiences as a printer <sup>9</sup>, and *Untitled Book* would seem to exemplify this phenomenon. But letterpress is not the only

8. The difficulty of creating this pied mound as a printable surface, the minuteness of material involvement entailed, may only be appreciable by fellow letterpress printers. Far from an artifact of Adobe Illustrator, the mound was made of individual pieces of type crammed into the confines of shape cut from plywood and stuck down on doublestick tape for good measure. As each page was printed, type was removed and replaced with non-printing spacing material in order to maintain the pressure needed to hold the type upright.

9. Crombie. "Kickshaws: son parcoures (et accidents de)," 30, 32, 35, etc.

*The Time of His Life, or, Capitulations & Recapitulations*—never at a loss for a title!—with perhaps a glimmer of the old fire when I burned to be done. Pull out the old fireproof if not alas damp-proof trunk and sift through my papers, juvenilia, senilia, sit scribbling away till all hours, no sound save the crepitation of all these crumpled balls of paper, faint mocking chorus of crinkling onionskin, from now on I shall just rip all rubbish to bits. Dim light dying till so dark I'll ruin my optics as Dad was always warning I would, or just lost in visions, visions of my inward optic as I sift this drift this shallow drift of skimmings all grist to my mill—how quill will go dribbling on 'twixt inky digits—till my fist starts aching and bad pain in my brain And my slim pickings shrinking dwindling till by & by nix! Spirit willing—mind willing!—I'll try & finish it scribbling it bit by bit till it's writ i'll finish it still if it kills m

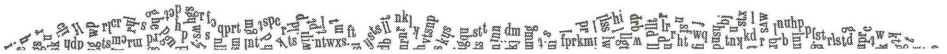


figure 2  
Untitled Book

physical support for the idea of finitude and meaning-making here. The codex is also a finite, physical form. What is more, with the codex come time and sequence, the source of narrative structure and, more fundamentally, of signification through repetition and variation. The design of *Untitled Book* visually reinforces these qualities by the consistency of its page layouts that allow for narrative movement to be apprehended without reading, through the inexorable shift in proportion from the resources to the expenditure of a life. Once established, this movement can be extrapolated, its end anticipated (by the reader if not by the ever-toiling protagonist). What better formula for a consciousness of mortality? And it is the experience of the book that offers this formula. The book, *Untitled Book*, is as textual as its text is physical. Indeed, the two are utterly inseparable. No meaning transcends intact the physical extent of the object in our hands. There is, it seems to say, no livable meaning of life beyond life.

### **So: Combinatorial Situations**

*Untitled Book begins abruptly and draws unrelentingly toward a single end. The comparison to death-defined life can easily be made.* But Kickshaws has produced many multi-linear, permutational and otherwise combinatorial books that do not replicate a simple start-to-finish trajectory. Perhaps more than any other aspect of Crombie's work, an enduring pursuit<sup>10</sup> of structures that generate textual (semantic, narrative, or poetic) variations through multi-directional reading distinguishes Kickshaws' output from that of other artists' presses. A book that can be read backwards and forwards, a set of pages that can be interwoven in any order, a reading that shuffles and reshuffles and tends toward endlessness, would hardly seem relevant to the themes thus far exposed. Yet in pulling back the flaps that encase the first of Crombie's original combinatorial texts,<sup>11</sup> the cloverleaf, reconfigurable *Only Connect!*,<sup>12</sup> we come upon this quotation of Raymond Queneau: "Upon this prospect, reader, do not brood./All things—all stories—must some day conclude." This on a book that, by its nearly infinite readability, defies exhaustion! Indeed. For this and subsequent combinatorial works, which date from Crombie's literary encounter with Queneau's theory and practice in the Oulipo, arise from and give rise to a set of conditions that, as we shall see, continue and deepen an analogy of book to existence as defined by mortality. The most appreciable effect of a book whose order—and thus, plot, and thus, meaning—is determined by an active reader is to confront that reader with the question of beginnings and endings.

10. This pursuit would, indeed, seem to be driven by Crombie, as distinct from Crombie/Bourne. In general, the "conception and text" of Kickshaws' books are attributed to Crombie, while Bourne is credited with "graphics" or "illustration." (Exceptionally, in the case of *Untitled Book*, no information is provided as to any division of labor in the book's text and design.) Insofar as the mathematical generation of text that distinguishes combinatorial books must be worked out in its "conception," Crombie is the originator of these works. He is also the one who has written extensively of Kickshaws' interest in combinatorial literature. In any case, many of Kickshaws' combinatorial experiments, like that which will be discussed here, are the work of Crombie alone: with or without graphics beyond typography, he is their sole designer. In all, more than thirty—or, roughly, one half—of Kickshaws' books to date are in some way combinatorial—combinational, permutational, variational, etc.—in their graphic or physical structure and reading possibilities, including many of the most recent titles.

11. Kickshaw's first combinatorial achievements were the design and illustration of Raymond Queneau's *Un Conte à Votre Façon* and Crombie's translation/adaptation and reprinting of Raymond Queneau's *One Hundred Million Million Poems*.

Queneau, Raymond. 1982. *Un Conte à Votre Façon*. Designed by John Crombie. Illustrated by Sheila Bourne. Paris: Kickshaws.

Queneau, Raymond. 1983. *One Hundred Million Million Poems*. Translated and adapted by John Crombie. Paris: Kickshaws.

12. Crombie, John. 1984. *Only Connect!* Paris: Kickshaws.

More insistently, such a book tends to simulate in its reader an experience of freedom as engagement in the face of contingency. This reader's choices link phrases, construct narrative relationships, in short, generate meanings the status of which, given their explicitly contextual and relative origin, eliminate any possibility of a simple belief in essence or transcendence. If we call these choices, the turns and connections made by a given reading, "decisions," we begin to distinguish another aspect of an underlying existential modality. For just as it may be said that there are two deaths in any life—the event that terminates it and the thought of this event which, survived, defines conscious being<sup>13</sup>—so there are two ends to any given narrative moment: the one toward which the whole story moves and the one through which each step in the narrative is taken: a definitive perception, a decisive turn of events, etc. This latter sort of end, in marking the culmination of a stretch of development, gives impetus to the next, it makes narrative advancement possible. A work that implicates the reader's agency in the effect of these decisive moments not only heightens consciousness of their role, but also, again, removes any trace of fate from the text thus created and lends lucidity to a more worldly, even embroiled, view of significance.

*Crombie's complex and engaging<sup>14</sup> romance cycle, So<sup>15</sup> (figure 3) embodies and enacts the implications of this view by all means available and inventible, from the principles and implements of its literary and material production, to its logic and function as a physical object, to the nature and insights of the readings it provokes.* In *So*, ends are beginnings, limits are generative, constraints are liberating, and meaning is both provisional and survivable. By exploiting typography's spatialization, exaggerating pagination's partial views, complicating the codex's continuity and highlighting the structural basis of narrative and signification, *So* dramatizes the interactivity inherent in any book. Somewhere between a book's wholeness and its parts, its fixity and mobility, its finitude and multiplicity, *So* produces, with every reading, a work that takes on and carries through the paradoxes of life and death, time and consciousness, history and agency.

### **The Workshop: Crombie and the Oulipo**

*To understand the processes by which *So* achieves such scope and effect, we might begin by considering it in the context of Crombie's explicit ties to the work of Queneau and his experimental writing group, the Oulipo.<sup>16</sup> "Oulipo" stands for Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle—literally, Workshop of Potential Literature.*

13. According to Hegel's definition, "the life of mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of its destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being." (Hegel, G.W.F. 1967. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Translated by J.B. Baillie. New York: Harper & Row, 93.) In Heidegger's formulation: "Death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. Being towards this possibility discloses to Dasein its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, in which its very Being is the issue." (Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Collins, 307.)

14. "Engaging" should be understood in every sense where *So* is concerned. And while, once again, the discussion here will veer toward the Sartrian end of the engagement spectrum, its other, more playful side should not be underestimated.

15. Crombie, John. 1985. *So*. Paris: Kickshaws.

16. Crombie. "Kickshaws: son parcours (et accidents de)," 38. For histories, founding texts and theories of the Oulipo, see Motte, Warren F. Jr. 1986. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*. London/Lincoln: Nebraska University Press.



Founded in 1960, the group sought “new forms and structures which may be used by writers in any way they see fit.”<sup>17</sup> These forms are often mathematically derived and/or the result of some material constraint(s). Some, like the lipogram, overcome a reduction in the linguistic means available to the writer (an elimination—not unlike that which strikes the final pages of Crombie’s *Untitled Book*—of the letter “e,” for example in Georges Perec’s lipogrammatic novel, *La Disparition*); others, in a sense, go further and, adopting certain formal dictates (in particular those that could render a text’s parts interchangeable), create combinatorial works that multiply the possibilities of reading.<sup>18</sup> All such endeavors rely and insist on an apprehension of language as a concrete set of combinable units, a theory of poetic effect and narrative style as the product of calculation, disposition and construction at the most elemental level of linguistic materiality. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find the word “artisanal” employed by Queneau,<sup>19</sup> to characterize the work of the Oulipo. Much remarked upon by the Oulipo’s members,<sup>20</sup> the root connotation of “work” in their workshop’s name indicates an awareness of the role of craftsmanship in their “research.” *Ouvroir* derives etymologically from the verb *ouvrer*, to work, “in the sense,” as Warren Motte Jr. points out, “of ‘working’ a given material: wood, copper, stone, and so forth.”<sup>21</sup> For the Oulipo, the position adopted by this choice represents a two-fold rejection in the realm of literary production: of chance and inspiration. An answer to the Surrealists’ attraction to the aleatory and unconscious as possible vehicles of transcendence,<sup>22</sup> this sense of *work* posits a conscious and voluntary praxis. More broadly, to the romantic “myth of literary inspiration,” it opposes a model of objectivity and exploration.<sup>23</sup>

### **Production: Literary and Literal**

*Invoked to make explicit a rejection of transcendence behind the valorization of craftsmanship, the terms “voluntary” and “conscious” would seem borrowed from an existentialist’s vocabulary.* Indeed, Sartre himself praised writers who saw themselves as “workmen in a room, like bookbinders or lacemakers,” called for a “literature of production,” and described language as “the matter and the tool of the writer.”<sup>24</sup> These images, in turn, bring us back to John Crombie, the typographer/writer. While Queneau’s interest in (personal computational) craftsmanship may have been temporary,<sup>25</sup> and while for all his fervor, Sartre’s use for the term remains figurative, Crombie’s involvement in craft is literal and pervades every aspect of Kickshaws’ productions. So demonstrates the inversions of content, form and

17. Raymond Queneau, quoted by Noël Arnaud in Motte. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, XI. Another of Queneau’s explanations reads, “*Quel est le but de nos travaux? Proposer aux écrivains de nouvelles ‘structures,’ de nature mathématique ou bien encore inventer de nouveaux procédés artificiels ou mécaniques, contribuant à l’activité littéraire.*” (“What is the goal or our work? To offer writers new, mathematical structures and to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures which contribute to literary activity.”) Queneau, Raymond. 1965. *Bâtons, Chiffres, et Lettres*. Paris: Gallimard, 321.

18. Giving concrete form to the idea of multiple readings suggests one sense in which the Oulipo explored “potential”: the potential meaning of any literary text. Another sense for the word might be attributable to the invented forms, themselves, ready for use, as Queneau suggests, by would-be writers.

19. Queneau. *Bâtons, Chiffres, et Lettres*, 322.

20. See manifestoes and memoirs collected in Motte. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*.

21. Motte. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, 9.

22. Motte. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, 18.

23. Motte. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, 10.

24. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1988. *What Is Literature and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 164-165, 195, 225.

25. The full citation of Queneau’s characterization of the Oulipo’s “recherches” reads, “*Artisanales—mais ceci n’est pas essentiel. Nous regrettons de ne pouvoir disposer de machines: lamento continué de nos réunions.*” (“*Artisanal—but this is not essential. We regret not having machines at our disposition: the continual lament of our meetings.*”) Queneau. *Bâtons, Chiffres, et Lettres*, 322.

An interesting, one might say historical, split occurs here between the Oulipo and Crombie. For while the Oulipo, which continues its work today, embraced the computers they so presciently awaited, Crombie has almost no use for them. His working relationship to lead type—not to mention other, less conventional, printable supports—and the book form remains an integral part, if not the source, of his work. The mention of his work, here and there, in the category of “precursor” to hypertext points up the apparent anachronism of his sticking to a concrete path. But, as I will argue later, this attachment to the book as a printed object is not without its reasons and consequences—consequences that distinguish his inventions in significant respects from the theory and experiments of hypertext’s early champions.

medium that such a pervasion entails. To begin with, *So* embraces the material principles and limitations of letterpress composition at its basis: the grid of measured units that makes type fit into lines and lines fit into blocks. From this embrace comes the typographical schema of *So*: the long, solid, tightly lettered horizontal lines and vertical stacks that form its paths and shortcuts. Unlike *Untitled Book*, nothing of *So*'s overall composition, its course or even its total quantity can be grasped by perusal of its pages. What is gained by such skimming is rather reinforcement—through repetition—of the image presented by each spread: that of a seemingly skeletal, certainly structural articulation, of perpendicular parts and the unfilled spaces their intersections create. It is only by reading the text word to (dis)connected word that one comes to appreciate how this visual structure supplies timing—duration, pauses and simultaneities—and direction(s) to one's reading. What is perhaps more readily intuited behind this visual structure is a logical extension of letterpress physics and the lexical forms in which it participates. In *So*, the conventional left to right and top to bottom directives of linear reading are polarized, given separate functions and this separation is visualized by contrasting alignments made possible by the underlying matrix of commonly measured letters and the solid, unseen spacing material that comes between them.<sup>26</sup>

26. *So*'s columns and lines also may be seen to schematize the so-called "vertical" and "horizontal" axes of language itself: structural linguistics' paradigmatic and syntagmatic sources of meaning.

27. See Crombie. "Kickshaws: son parcours (et accidents de)," 25-28, 47-53. Here he refers to himself as a "writer-for-hire" (by the typographer—himself—who has come up with a scheme), etc.

28. Crombie. *Kickshaws Catalogue 2001-2002*, 1.

29. Crombie. "Kickshaws: son parcours (et accidents de)," 52.

*Crombie has written eloquently of the conceptual resources he has discovered in the course of his letterpress apprenticeship, through the accidental effects and incidental revelations of setting, inking and impressing type.* His description of a workman's self-image and his own alternating action between two facets of his authorial role as typographer and writer reveals the depth of the interdependence of literary and print production in his work.<sup>27</sup> Thus, he states, in his introduction to a *Kickshaws* catalogue, that his texts are "produced 'to order,' for the purpose of working out a concept or exploiting a new format, graphic device, process or technique."<sup>28</sup> Before discussing the stylistic constraints to which *So* adheres, we might look at the more strictly physical restraints imposed upon the text by its "format." These relate to line lengths and the exact positioning of key words within them. They are purely spatial, and, if we are to believe Crombie's account of the book's design,<sup>29</sup> their successful calculation was the result of a compromise (involving wording adjustments, for example) between the character count of a typewriter's maximal line and the length and positions produced by that line when set in type. Writing as a response to, and in dialogue with, material factors goes hand-in-hand for Crombie with writing in the service of a conceptual model. Literary invention bends, in his hands, to whatever stylistic accommodations or jerry riggings are required by the design of the narrative machine. Here, the conceptual

model is that of a cyclical, combinatorial novel, a maze of interlocking romances. The physical system that constructs this model is that of the points and picas, the heights and lengths, of letterpress composition. Writing is engaged in/by factors stemming from both concept and construction. It does not begin or end without them. Indeed, as we shall see, writing continues, utterly implicated, in the visual and mechanical features of the codex itself.

### ***The Articulate Object and the Physical Text***

*One could say that So is a book about romance(s). One might also say it is a book about subjective temporality or narrative conventions.* In any case, the phrase “a book about” would ring true. For, indeed, the stories of *So* are inseparable from the book that tells them. As with *Untitled Book*, the text is the book; the book is the text. Here again, there is no cover; there are no preliminaries. *So* begins on its face. <sup>figure 4</sup> If anything, book and text are even further conflated in *So*. The “colophon” is reduced to eighteen words and a copyright notice printed in tiny light-grey type at the bottom left-hand corner of the first spread. The “outside” paper is the same Arches rag—albeit doubled for strength—as that of the inside pages. And there is no repetition of its content within: one is immediately plunged into *So*’s overlapping strains of timely encounters, ecstatic consummations, domestic (d)evolutions and desperate ruptures. Nor is the back cover left out of these strains’ circling. How should the circle be completed if it were? From words to type to page layout and sequence, all aspects of the book participate in the telling of this spiraling history. Yet the structural levels these participants occupy are different, and this difference, this multiplicity allows for extension, extrapolation, reflection and restatement—in sum, a degree of self-reflexivity that invites the apparent tautology: *So* is a book about *So*.

*So* is a soft, simply bound book of thirty-six pages and pleasing proportion. Small and light enough to be comfortably held (9 1/8” x 7 3/8”), it is yet thick enough to suggest volume and wide enough to accommodate the exaggerated length of the vertically isolated lines that stretch, virtually without margin (the inset is about an eighth of an inch) from one edge of its pages to the other. Like *Untitled Book*, it is strictly black and white, purely typographical. No pictorial intervention disturbs the repeated page-image composed by its parallel horizontals and ragged columns. And, to complete this visual austerity, only one type face is used throughout. One

shiver. It swirled up into the air then drifted lazily back to settle on her tingling skin just as a moment before. 'Don't worry  
 She was already almost gone by the time I got there. Just before breathing her last breath her eyes opened and she smiled to  
 So I was on my own once more! I breathed sighs of such sheer relief, I'd actually feel quite faint! Otherwise  
 buds, etc. (Weeks later, I happened upon what must have been a preliminary, botched draft of it in the pocket of her gown, in  
 hurtling down on me, bowling me into the gutter...  
 massively in my pockets. Thereafter I lived in a daze, somehow keeping a stiff upper lip until the day of her departure. All the  
 here on its own, I knew. It was a wrench, though, moving back north. My one deep regret was to say goodbye to all that sun-  
 deeper debt  
 local rag  
 hidden snag  
 So I survived, of course. My lifeline was a young night nurse I got to know, Fifi by name. Thanks  
 off with this lover of hers each afternoon! Oddly enough, now that I had this ocular proof I felt quite calm, almost serene! All  
 even before the train began pulling out. I think I felt it before she did, the drunken lurch as it chugged off at last, carrying her  
 all bedraggled, one might well have doubted it...  
 she called it. I'd give her a buzz on arriving, leaving her time to take her bubble bath before I'd be drawing up, ideally with  
 least desire

figure 4 So: cover

smallish size of the narrow, slightly scripty Françaises Légères produces solid lines with none of the internal spacing that, built-in to another type face or interspersed by another compositor, would highlight individual letters at the expense of linear clarity. This clarity is needed, for in the complex field created by the vast and irregular vertical spacing of these lines and the interference of two-word stacks that occasionally intersect them, *So's* reader clings to the progress of any given line across a page and around its edge to the next spread. As Crombie describes *So* inside its protective mauve wrapper, it is "designed in the form of a maze: a maze composed of ten romances. These run round and round the book, interlinking in a given order to form a complete, closed cycle. Being circular, the maze may be entered at any point...entry points are provided throughout the book by... breaks in the narrative line, signaling the end of one romance, or one section of a romance—beginning, middle—and the start of the next. Rather more abrupt entry may be effected via the vertical streams of rhyming couplets that trickle down each page and interlock with the horizontal storylines..."

### ***Linear Movement, Polar Pivots, Cyclical Survival***

*One begins to conceive of the convolutions that run, twist, stop, start and align themselves behind So's diminutive title.* As for the ten tripartite romances and their "given order," we should not be deceived by the promise of beginnings, middles and ends. For if, as the author suggests in the above-cited instructions, we choose to begin on the front "cover," the segment that opens with the words "So I survived, of course" could alternately, equivocally, represent the first or last stage of our reading. Either way, survival of an end (in that particular strain, quite literal survival of a near-fatal accident, in others, emotional and spiritual survival of the death of love) constitutes the condition of possible beginnings, marking the first day of the rest of our protagonist's life at every amorous juncture. Again and again, Tim (for so he is called, as we learn somewhere in the middle of the maze) is relayed by the demise of one relationship into the origins of the next. Along the way, symbol and symbolized trade places, as death and its survival (life) represent and, in turn, are represented by, the familiar stages of solitude, infatuation, sexual fulfillment, alienation, rupture and the return of/to solitude. As on the cover, this cyclical movement is often inscribed in miniature by the first words of a new phase, in phrases like, "So ultimately I decided I would have to make a fresh start."

Originating either in the deathlike untenability of solitude—"So thereafter I slowly sank deeper and deeper into an abject state of gloom, never going out"—or, adulterously, as a way out of the living death of a marriage gone bad—"In the end, to escape her innuendos..."—, the tale of each, always subsequent, encounter quickly flips its hero to reveal an ever-ready capacity for shining novelty in the form of romantic attraction. And this novelty is never presented simply as refreshment, but always assumes the conviction of an absolute break with history—"I felt something I'd never felt before," he says of his love for Fifi, and "Sonia was like no girl I'd ever met before," just as "Fay was like no girl I'd ever met before." Similarly, new loves seem never to strike without the revelation of a truth: "It was love at first sight," he claims of an anonymous encounter, "I knew that this was it at last;" of Jaqi, he says, "Somehow I just knew she was the one for me;" and of life with Maeve, "our love must last forever." Meanwhile, death and rebirth, falls and redemptions, succeed one another at a quick clip. Again and again, the narrator tells us, "I succumbed to moods of black despair," "I became plagued by fierce twinges of angst, a sense of spinning round and round in a void..." Yet again and again, his survival of these deadly states is experienced as a beginning: "I soon began to revive," he says of his time in Fifi's care; to Kate he declares that she can "redeem this mortal sinner;" and his path to Jaqi is cleared by his readiness to "turn over a new leaf." In most of these accounts, a period of sexual compatibility or domestic comfort elicits another impression of transcendence, a sense of timelessness introduced by a total embrace of the present moment: Tim and Maeve are "able to enjoy one another to the full;" with Sonia, he is "content to indulge this sensual streak she'd brought out in me to the full, to live, for once in my life, from day to day and week to blissful week." Bliss of a calmer sort is brought by settling in to a shared household or daily routine: with Kate, "I began at last to enjoy that quiet domestic bliss I'd all but despaired of ever finding," and with Jaqi, "I felt an inner peace." The incidents and developments that cause these states to lapse into strife and distance provide the stuff of the penultimate stages of the narrator's many involvements. Jealousy, morbidity and absorption elsewhere are the principle causes of disintegration. When rupture comes, it either marks or precipitates a death of the killing kind: "it was all over" with Jaqi, and with Clare, "it was a lost cause." Yet a death of the heart is no more fatal than that death which is a knowledge of death's inevitability, and so, Tim "survives" (the verb occurs more than once), though how long he will be able to maintain the purity of this state now that he is back to the lucid—and thus, depressing—condition of solitude ("on my own again") is the guess that propels the reader onto his next affair. The deaths died and lives revived figuratively in these stories are those of

love, trust, spirit, body, desire for another and desire for life; the slippery part is that at any given moment, one sort of death or rebirth might be standing in for another.

*Whatever the distribution of metaphoric roles, the movement of these stories remains unchanged.* Each of the ten romances forms a circle, despite the breaks that separate its beginning, middle and end, and despite the protagonist's delusion—and the narrator's rhetoric—of advancement (each stage being reached “at last”). These circles in turn form links in the meta-cycle, each end, as we've seen, lending a starting point to the next ring. The book emphasizes this tension between circular movement (not to mention backslides and gaps), on the one hand, and linear progression, on the other. Within each story, the pull from one pole to another—from beginning to end, bliss to despair, couplehood to solitude—and the ability of prose to trace this pull are demonstrated by the strength of the horizontal lines. Taken out of their conventional vertical proximity to other such lines in a text block,<sup>30</sup> these typographic streaks carry forward the ever-passing diegetic moment of the narrative. Yet these lines are crossed by stacks of key words—rhyming couplets—that are drawn from within them, repeated above and below them and aligned with their counterparts from other storylines. Always composed of an adjective and a noun (“upper lip/parting quip”), these couplets are placed above the storyline if they have already occurred within it and below if they have yet to appear. These echoes and foreshadows become associated with the reiterated phrases similarly selected in other romances by horizontal alignment. Thus, just as the circle within each tale adds a link to the cycle of their sum, so the tension in each story between forward motion and its complication is carried through from one story to another by the page layout's mesh of prose and poetry, of pursuit and pattern. Its weave is loose enough to let us see just how complex is the crossing of temporal threads in a life (not to mention the challenge of loose ends, here caused by the storylines' breaks...).

30. Of the forty-six horizontal positions available, only ten are occupied on any given spread, always leaving space above and below for the stacks of couplets.

### ***Typographical and Narrative Time: Stretches, Stops, Gaps and Overlaps***

*If the typographical page presents an image of cross-reference and implication—of past and future in present, of one love in another—the typography of the book as a whole provides a complementary circularity.* Not only do beginning and end meet around the narrow space of the book's spine, but the lack of visual margins renders the turn of the page a mere blink in the line that wraps around it. “Round and round the book,”

says Crombie, and so it goes. It is an achievement to have over-ridden the frames that present and divide a conventional book's contents, to have replaced page breaks with an intra-textual rhythm of disjunctions and, between these, to have maintained such continuity of focus over and across wide and multiple spreads. (The average line, or segment, of a romance crosses about twelve pages.) But what is remarkable is that this continuity, these stretches do not make for calm but rather flurry, as the page-turn-per-minute rate is greatly increased by only having to take in one line at a time. This rushing sense is reinforced by the breathlessness both of the prose, which often omits commas, and of the narrow type face that maximizes character counts per inch. Solid and quick-paced, stretched and hurried, these lines tell at once *the long and short* of romance. The temporal paradoxes suggested by this combination of extension and compression are further expressed in So's narrative language. The stories' succession of verb tenses, temporal scale and the meaning of singular versus gradual movements find form. And, in various devices of summary and abbreviation, repetition<sup>31</sup> sets its weight against breezy ellipses lest we be gained for a moment by the narrator's illusions of progress.

31. Depending on the proximity of the next storyline, a couplet may be repeated up to ten times.

*The polar pretense of So's romances, their apparent advancement from one emotional extreme to another, for example, has roots at a more basic level of discourse, in the sequencing of verb tenses that suggest decisive moments on the one hand—absolute beginnings, definitive ends, critical actions—and development on the other.* Following the conventions of literary narrative, moments of truth are reached "finally" and are marked by a shift in verb tense. Settled patterns or gradual developments (most commonly occurring, as one might expect, in middle segments) are drawn out by past progressives and "past habit" constructions, often introduced by adverbs of duration: "For weeks after, she would just snap at me... I would retreat... ever earlier each evening." With the appearance of the simple past and the single instance it describes, the habitual or progressive stretch is punctuated. Usually preceded by a specific indication of moment, these punctuations take the form of events: "Then one night, she didn't come home at all. I went berserk..." In their most explicitly decisive form, these verbs recount critical actions: "I decided," "I proposed," etc. But whatever the action, the simple past tense puts a full stop to the indeterminacy of what came before, signals the end of a period or state, and in so doing, defines a new one. There is an implicit conflation of these shifts with the revelation of meaning: insofar as the events they describe are decisive, they mean something about the future. In at least one case, this conflation is explicit: "the money ran out, which meant giving up the cottage." Most emblematically, these shifts to the

simple past reveal the existence of love (“I proposed... she accepted”) and the fact of its end: “Penny smelled the fatal rat... I confessed... the sad truth was that all trust between us was utterly dead.” But does anything so definitive as death ever happen in life? Love affairs, with all their attributable origins and degrees of demise, their prescience and anticipation, regression and denial, turn out to be exemplary of a complex temporal layering of experience, knowledge and change. Indeed, between Penny’s smelling the rat (her husband’s affair with Fay) and his confession, between his confession and their divorce, verbs of duration—“continued,” “kept on,” “grew calmer”—undo the simple past tense’s definitiveness and, interrupted by multiple adverbs of finality—“finally,” “in the end”—expose the alternating nature of consciousness, from conclusion to suspension and back again. Significance and intention may, it seems, be produced or revealed by events only to be unraveled by a subsequent, less punctuated passage.

*Points of decision and their subjective displacement or accumulation along stretches of duration are configured by So’s typographical systems as well.* The very lengths of the storylines embody duration, while their periodic breaks, which necessitate a jump to another starting point on the page, perfectly enact decision. But the constant shifting and recycling of the couplets that run between them offer a different view of time’s passage and events’ impact. Like the shuffling information on a railway bulletin, these stacks announce episodes that have yet to come and briefly retain the notations, once predictive, “now” lapsed, of recent arrivals. Actually, So’s arrival board has a track running right through it: each story’s present, the progress of which dynamically places those vertically sliding features first below, in the future zone, and then above, in the past.<sup>32</sup> These features often make multiple appearances before and after their occurrence in the storyline. There is nothing particularly regular about the placement of the columns up which these flashing highlights climb. Indeed, their number and positions change with every turn of the page, ranging from two to three per spread, occurring at any horizontal point, sometimes lining up against the far side of a page, sometimes straddling its edge with one of each couplet’s words on a recto and the other, just behind, on the verso.

*The couplets’ visual movement, by repetition at intervals, across pages and spreads joins the effect of their approximate alignment in columns—not generally flush,<sup>33</sup> not quite centered—to produce a sense of uncertainty that undercuts their seemingly consistent, even inevitable, shuffling.* This uncertainty

32. *Toward the end of a segment, there are less and less couplets to fill the future zone below a line. Thus, one literally watches as the future of the phase runs out. But there is always a past, at least one reiterative couplet, weighing on the segment’s end.*

33. *The only time they are set flush right or left is when they fall at the very edge of a page.*

makes itself felt in the physical storylines as well: in the changeable distance between them and, more acutely, in the inconsistent relationship between the end point of one segment and the starting point of its successor. For not only might a new strain begin at any distance below or above the position held by the last, but there may be a gap—or overlap—along the implicit (horizontal) line of the story's progress. Taken together, these variously staggered forms lend a visual unpredictability to repetitions that might otherwise suggest necessity or the existence of a larger pattern. Whether the inability to predict—to link the present to a knowable future—and, for that matter, to “postdict”—to draw a straight line from the present to its origins in the past—is to be attributed to the blind and headlong attitude of *So*'s protagonist or experienced by the reader of his exploits, it is at the level of typographical spatialization that we must seek its realization.

### ***Across and Down: Condensation and Modularity***

*In stark contrast to this visual effect of randomness, the verbal and narrative meaning produced by the couplets' stacking comes of accelerated perceptions and highlighted connections.* Indeed, the promise of knowledge to be gained along each string of beaded episodes-in-miniature would seem to cancel the mystery of their typographical configuration. The couplet columns present multivalent linking zones on various scales that further dissolve any distinction between definitive points and lines of development. For if the selection of a two-word feature to represent a stretch of story would seem to imply that it sums up this stretch, the alignment of this feature with others recasts it as just another point along a (vertical) path. This path, this linking—of content within stories and from one story to another—further complicates *So*'s construct of progress and subjective temporality and, in so doing, calls attention to two major operating principles of the book as a whole: condensation and modularity. In his introduction, printed on *So*'s wrapper, Crombie characterizes his “microcouplets” as “poetic insofar as rhyming couplets reduced to a single adjective and noun are perhaps a concentrate... of most poetry.” To take their poetic characterization one step further, we might note that these concentrates constitute metonymies of the tale they tell, bits standing in for whole scenes. Sometimes these metonymies describe concrete, even minute, details: “empty flat/famished cat,” “damp soles/little moles.” But they may also be pulled from general designations: “fresh start/broken heart,” “sore distress/squalid mess.” Either way, their narrative effect is to sum up, and in this capacity they participate in a broad range of abbreviating strategies employed in *So*. Read

consecutively, the first and last rhymes of each segment of a given romance would give us an ultra-concise version of its arcs from solitude to coupling, settlement to dysfunction, rupture to solitude. Culled, for example, from the story of Jaqi, they read, “sheer relief/new leaf... radiant glow/status quo,” “long lease/inner peace... smaller shreds/single beds,” “clean break/big mistake... backward glance/last chance.” Thus, alongside more conventional narrative formulae (“one thing led to another”), and punctuative ellipses (...), the couplets carry out a tactic of omission founded in *So*'s basic system of breaks and resumptions between beginnings, middles, ends (... and beginnings). As the work's title and the first word of its every segment, “so” deserves note here. It functions as “introductory particle” in what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls an “elliptic” usage. A horizontal reading of the couplets, then, demonstrates the book's primary mode, itself the exaggeration of a fundamental principle of narrative locomotion: suppression of the vast majority of material in favor of encapsulations that will allow for crystallization of meaning and advancement of plot. For clearly, advancement is the goal, since though we might think of the couplets as miniatures, they do not so much offer a distant view as the sort of acceleration toward conclusions that characterizes depressed (or simply philosophical) lucidity.<sup>34</sup>

*Such, then, is the effect of reading So's couplets 'across' a story. The more obvious direction to be taken, however, given their arrangement in columns, would be 'down'.* This is the reading that gives us a simultaneity of past, present and future at any given moment of the narrative, thus, as noted above, complicating *So*'s model of temporal consciousness—if not the protagonist's, then at least that of his observer, the reader. (And this complication goes further, into the temporally ambiguous areas where the past of one story merges with the future of another...) Yet the couplets' rhyming and stacking do more, for by their very nature as poetic units and connectors between narrative strains, they make us aware of a modular principle at work in *So*, and this modularity in turn implies—and in some cases makes explicit—another critical element of *So*'s construction: interchangeability. Operative on every plane of the book, its narratives and their language (not to mention the system of common measures which rules typographic composition), modularity makes possible not only the variable order of *So*'s ten romances, but also the interchangeability of their constituent parts (beginnings, middles and ends). Here, as in more detailed and concrete instances, the first consequence of interchangeability is the light in which it casts the narrative claims of uniqueness, novelty and originality so necessary to the existence of passion. The irony of this discrepancy—

34. *This principle of condensation and acceleration works at every level of So and may even be seen to be a force that affects the ten stories taken as a whole and in their "given order." While the "first" romances are only slightly clipped at the start by the space they share with the aftermath of their predecessor and otherwise enjoy full-length beginnings, middles and ends, some toward the center of the maze are, in a sense, cut short from within, precipitated into demise by the overlapping appearance of illicit affairs. This abbreviation of independent evolution culminates in the "last" of the ten loves—the only one whose object is not given a name—the whole history of which occurs in one section (the middle) and in one night's coupling, the section before having been wholly taken up with the conclusion of a previous involvement and the last section being merely the discovery that the relationship is already over, the*

between the narrator's conviction and the contrary evidence of its presentation—and the absurdity that results from its accumulation are underlined by the system of couplets, but these, it turns out, are merely guides to a much larger set of recombinable narrative modules.

*Through ample repetition, the couplets imprint their phrasing on the reader's memory.* It is thus thanks to them that, despite the pace both of page-turns and fast-motion narrative style, we first become aware of an echoing effect from one story to another in *So*. Examples of echoing couplets abound and the attentive reader may find resurgence at any point. These discoveries are aided by the stacking mechanism itself that is capable of placing a key phrase from one story just above its echo in another. Thus, "last breath" comes before "last goodbye" in the vertical chain, linking an actual death in one tale to the death of love in another. Slightly, if at all, modified, these phrases form such (virtual) pairs as "violent yern/violent gush," "jaunty stride/jaunty pace," "eerie hush/eerie quiet," etc. No matter how unusual the word choice contributing to a couplet's distinction, ("jaunty" in the above example or "vamping" which occurs twice to describe piano playing), there is no guarantee that it will not reveal its true generic nature by appearing in another. And the couplets are merely indicative, for this generic quality extends beyond them to the stretches of storyline that separate them. From the most minute details and seemingly specific incidents to the largest chunk of narrative trajectory, parts of *So's* romances are reused. Electric storms and the static they produce appear in four different stories, for example, thrice literally and once metaphorically. Crumpled notes, gritted teeth, fluttering eyelashes, a radiant glow in the eyes of a lover after sex... these and a multitude of other details find their way into *So's* stories more than once. Between their scale of modularity and that, much larger, of the beginnings, middles and ends, a whole range of reusable tropes and major events could be listed: travel as a way to revive (oneself or desire), marriage (six proposals recorded), settling down (into a villa at the end of a mews, a house by the park, a cottage on the moors, a bungalow by a lake, a cottage by the canal, a house by the river), etc. One effect of these echoes might be to posit association, displacement and repetition as the laws by which desire operates. Yet their implications go deeper. Just as the couplets' rhymes are only perceptible in their stacks and are otherwise buried in the line of the narrative's present—thus lending a hidden resonance to the prose stretches between them—so the repetition of words, phrases, images, actions and stages from one story to another forms other layers of refrain. And the more the reader "progresses," the more these layers surface. It may be difficult, given *So's*

convoluted sequence, to retrace one's steps and check on a suspected echo, and the protagonist's apparently faulty memory<sup>35</sup> may not help, yet the conviction mounts that one has read this or that phrase/passage/story before. Initially, this conviction serves to further disorient the reader—like the shape of a hedge one swears one has already passed in a maze—but ultimately, it leads to a grasp at a higher level: the perhaps melancholy perception that in love and life, events are never singular or unprecedented, that the range of their possibility is not infinite, but rather that all experiences derive from a fixed human repertoire.

### **The Type Case of Language**

*This notion of a repertoire describes the combinatorial view of linguistic possibility set forth by So, as well.* The reapplication of words and phrases both within and beyond the couplets suggests an understanding of language as a kit of parts, a concrete system ultimately relying on a material basis, the signifying potential of which lies in the disposition of its units. What qualifies words for inclusion in the columns of couplets is, firstly, their functional status as nouns and adjectives and, secondly, the phonic endings that make for their rhymes. A forcing of word choice (the hallmark of "bad" verse) is willfully pursued in such pairs as "ocular proof/same roof" or "straitened circs/grimy works," drawing our attention to the material nature of the constraints that make poetry possible.<sup>36</sup> In studying the slippages of meaning that occur between the first and next use of a key word, one perceives another aspect of linguistic materiality. If the word "static" means, literally, the passage of electric current between two bodies in one instance and, metaphorically, emotional shocks caused by tense contact when repeated in another, we learn that a word's only consistency lies in its material form, its potential to mean arising not from within but rather from contextual stimulation/determination. Through its inclusion in a representative couplet, "static" passes from narrative event (that of touching) to narrative metonymy (standing in for the sexual encounter to which this touch will lead). Through its subsequent use elsewhere to evoke the ready-to-explode atmosphere of a marriage, "static" leaps into a metaphoric role. And this passage, this leap, is visible in So thanks to its elliptical brevity and repetitive tendencies. All narrative clutter having been cleared, a selection of events and words remain to be used and, through use, invested with symbolic value. The fact that these events, these words, are recycled seems almost inevitable, since the whole exercise points to the concrete, and thus finite, basis upon which signification slips and slides.<sup>37</sup> The view of language we are thus

35. So faulty is this memory—of incidents and loves "past"—that traces of it are all but absent from the narration. And this absence, in its most troubling instances, is enough to make the reader doubt the very identity—continuity—of the first-person from one story to another.

36. That narrative direction may have been forced by the need to make a rhyme is a conclusion one might just as easily reach, given some of the absurd turns taken by So's storylines, the pivot being a neatly fitted couplet such as, "exotic plants/maiden aunts..."

37. In his "Brief History of the *Oulipo*," Jean Lescuré notes that the group's intention was to "fix the attention of the observer on the singular object that is literary language" by demonstrating that "(literary language) doesn't manipulate notions... it handles verbal objects... sonorous objects." (Matte, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, 36.) Crombie's affinity with the *Oulipo* proves, in this regard, to be profound.

afforded is one of a limited number of elemental units in a potentially unlimited number of combinations, with meanings—and means of meaning (concrete, figurative, etc.)—that change accordingly.

*Like the significance of events, the consequences of actions and the force of circumstances in So's ten romances, the units of language—letters, words, phrases—assume meaning by configuration.* The link between *sequence*—by which narrative is constructed—and *syntax*—on which semantics depend—finds expression early on in So's "given order" when, under the maternal care of Nurse Fifi, the protagonist recuperates from his near fatal run-in with a tram. Falling at the far righthand edge of a page, the word "slowly" is followed, on the verso, by "painfully, painfully slowly." Suspecting a copy error (no intentional prose could be so repetitive), one flips back to the fore-edge of the previous page, carefully (slowly!) reading around the page break to take in the full phrase: "slowly, painfully, painfully slowly, I continued under the spell of her dusky charms to recover some zest for life." The repetition of words, we find, not being exact in its order or punctuation, does not create a repetition of meaning. A mere reversal of order, along with the subtraction of a comma, produces quite a different denotation in the second adverbial phrase, slowness itself having become the source of the pain. The placement of these phrases at the very edge of a page, forcing a re-reading of their wrapping sequence, is what produces our awareness of this sequence itself as the bearer of meaning. This sort of meaning one might qualify as *contingent* (upon order, punctuation, etc.) rather than essential. This is the contingency that Crombie evokes when he says that typographical determination makes text lose its "necessary character."<sup>38</sup> And his is the anti-transcendent stance that the Oulipo's members declared in their rejection of "inspiration."<sup>39</sup>

38. Crombie, "Kickshaws: son parcours (et accidents de)," 27.

39. Lescurie, "Brief History of the Oulipo" in Motte, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, 34.

### ***Self-reflexivity vs. Subjectivity: the Author and Reader of So***

*These terms, contingency and transcendence, return us to the existential givens that dictate—and are expressed by—every aspect of So's composition.* Not only the language, not only the narrative possibilities but the design of the book itself proposes a version of creation, meaning and action as (re)configuration. What must be emphasized in this regard is the extent to which *So* constrains its visual repertoire. An appreciation of *So* in relation to the standards that have come to be associated with artists' books in general may be illuminating here. One

expects uniformity of design in a standard book, but where artists' books are concerned, transformations—of color, typeface or size, etc.—and the introduction of new elements of composition (including images) from one page to the next can be a structural means of creating meaning. Not here. Use of the same face, in the same categorical alignments (vertical and horizontal), points to the highly restricted palette from which the book as a whole derives its impact. This restriction results in a wholeness that meets our conception of the integrity of a life—that Life which, it seems, is the ultimate subject of every Kickshaws book. Integration of all elements in the effectiveness of the whole also constitutes a defining quality of artists' books, one that *So* fully realizes. A third distinctive feature, self-reflexivity, is achieved in *So*, as in so many other artists' books, by a conscious play of these elements, a sort of compositional dialogue that occurs from one structural level to another.

*Mirrors of effect, winks of recognition, reveal themselves throughout the book.* "I decided I would have to make a fresh start" states the first sentence of the section chosen by the reader after a break in the storyline demanding a *fresh start* in the narrative. Elsewhere, Jaqi's suggestion that she and Tim "make a clean break" occurs exactly at the page break, the edge falling between "make a" and "clean break." "Short cut" first appears as a means devised by the protagonist to get home earlier and enjoy domestic pleasures with Fay. In fact, this "short cut" becomes his access to a very different story (the affair Fay is having behind his back). And so it does for the reader. Drafted into couplet duty, rising, repeated, through the typographical ranks, "short cut" provides the reader just that: a quick by-way to the story of Sonia. Jealous Peggy accuses her husband of having (had) "a string of loving wives;" "loving wives" falls in line with the couplets above and below which, linking Peggy to Maeve, Kate, Jaqi et al (not to mention, Fay with whom Tim is soon to have an affair), effectively string these "wives" together. Her suspicions confirmed, Peggy drifts in "a dizzy maze" not unlike the one through which the reader seeks her way across and around the book. The list of such puns goes on, lengthened by various combinations of word choice and typography, cliché and pagination, literary trope and overall book structure. And these knowing nudges from one compositional rung to another, this meta-combination, has the effect of periodically calling the reader's attention to a single intelligence at work (or play) on every level of the book in hand.

*Thus, text and book, type and page, scheme and plot to create a tension in the reader's experience of them.* On the one hand, they allow access to ironic meta-readings of the sort just described. On the other, they seek to replicate in the reader's apprehension of the text the subjective limitations and absurd movements of this text's narrator/protagonist. Indications of a subjective

point of view are not restricted to the implicit moment of narration—the present-tense statements of thought, knowledge and enunciation that mark the stories' telling: "I think," "I shall never know," "I must say," etc. These markers and the limited, present tense vision they construct, invade the stories themselves, implicating the reader in the moment recounted. Incursions of subjectivity collapse the distance between telling and told, erase the closure that separates past from present, displace the time/place of enunciation from the present of narration to the "present" of the actions described by such tell-tale deictics as "now" ("the slight friction always between us now distressed me"), "soon" ("I soon found"), "here" ("My bruised heart could never heal here") and "this" ("This girl was"). Temporal slides of point of view also effect the narration's framing of information by insertions of (past) uncertainty—"What was she staring at?" "How long could it last? How would it end?"—and conviction—"Clearly." Even more concise conflation of the narrator and the protagonist's subjectivity occur in occasional exclamation points that directly represent the character's reaction to events at the time of their occurrence.

*The book's structure extends this immersive effect by mimesis.* At each break between segments and tales, the reader must make a decision about which strain to pick up, which thread to follow. <sup>figure 5</sup> The protagonist's bewilderment before the vagaries of his involvements, his fatigue in the face of "fresh starts" and "new leaves" is reproduced in the reader by this system of breaks and calls to action (choice)—so, too, is the limited knowledge of where these choices will lead. For though Crombie warns on the book's wrapper that "fine judgment will need to be exercised in order to make the right connection," he concedes that this judgment must be made "on the basis solely of the first few words visible on the same page." In any book, page breaks divide the present (the page one is "on") from the past (the spread that has been buried by the current page's turn), and the future (the page that lies, invisible, on the other side of the present). But in *So*, these divisions play a critical role, since they restrict the reader's field of perception (to whatever length a line extends before the page edge is reached) at a time when a decision must be made, the repercussions of which will effect not only the direction of the immediate narrative, but the order of every choice that succeeds it. One could, it may be argued, attempt to cheat by looking to the information contained on the next page before coming back to confirm a selection, but such forward and backward movement actually proves quite difficult to maintain in the force-field of lines and columns that animates each of *So's* pages. Thus, it is with certain angst that the reader contemplates the gap and

grimy works  
 empty space  
 mental case  
 morbid moods  
 into a series of quite bitter feuds that inevitably ended in tears or worse. Clearly we were making ourselves ill with all these  
 constant tiffs  
 fearsome cliffs  
 mellow fall  
 urban sprawl  
 sensual ease  
 shopping sprees  
 least wishes  
 rustle up all sorts of lousy dishes out of next to nothing. The fact is, I still hoped to marry the girl, still cherished the same old  
 smaller shreds  
 our double by two single beds, banishing mine and me with it to the loft. That only made things worse...  
 balmy days  
 mellow haze  
 purple prose  
 languid pose  
 throaty moans  
 I explored her, pleasure zones and all, learned to love her more, and better... There was something so easy, so gracious in the  
 electric shock  
 my swelling, swollen cock... Afterwards I lay awake most of the night, holding her, far too elated at the thought I'd found the  
 slight friction  
 polite fiction  
 fitful gicams  
 choke off the silent screams for ever welling up within me. I soon became quite a connoisseur of partings, of hair I mean, two  
 quiet mewls  
 all lanked up on office booze, I could scarcely wait to be back in bed with her. I spent hours poring over maps, working out a  
 loving wives  
 of the night on wild drives into the country, or up to town...  
 balmy spring  
 be nice to have a final fling on the Riviera before settling down. Alas, funds being low, we had to be content with occasional  
 precious pet  
 she'd get into a frantic fret if Tom went off his food. No doubt it was inevitable she would end up talking to God, mumbling  
 endless prayers  
 blank glares  
 baser needs  
 prayer beads  
 tuneless psalms  
 sweaty palms

So in the end she suggested we make a

So it was with a mixture of delight and

figure 5

"Fine judgment will need to be exercised in order to make the right connection," Crombie warns, "on the basis of the first few words visible on the same page."

commits to a given *restart*, conscious as she is of the ignorance of position and gravity of action to which she is subject.

*The tall hedges and blind corners of the maze laid out for the reader by So's physical disposition (occultation) of tales and indices of continuity—down and across pages, around to the unseeable other side of edges—provokes both the pleasure and the anxiety of engagement.* Yet the reader thus activated is reminded, as we have said, of another level of construction, one not lying in her hands in the form of freely made, ever-present choices, but already complete in the grand scheme of things: the plan of the maze itself. What we have called the single intelligence behind this plan makes itself felt in the disparity between the narrator/protagonist's blindness and the reader's induced ignorance on the one hand, and on the other, the acknowledgements of clever craftsmanship that distinguish So's apparent joints and nifty contours and teasingly imply a working diagram of the whole apparatus. A desire to acquire this intelligence germinates in the reader, in seeds of self-consciousness planted at every turn by the book's revelations of its multi-level machinations. This desire goes beyond that of being certain of the correct way forward and aspires to an overview, to a sight of what the entire itinerary "looks like." Needless to say, this desire is eluded by the very mastery of So's complexly riddled assemblage which, by interrupting and wrapping itself "round and round" a book that can only ever be seen one frame at a time, renders itself effectively invisible.

*Yet does this cobbled mastery not bear the stamp of a similar desire?* For all the interactivity on which *So* contrives to rely, its ultimate artifice may well lie in the infrastructure it builds for authorship, that knowing structure which is the generator of *So's* meta-textuality. Proclaimed dead as a pretense of textual *presence* by Barthes and others, the ghost of authorship haunts the pages of hypertext's champions,<sup>40</sup> who claimed for the new medium the victory of having effectively finished off the very notion of a designated source of textuality. And *So's* attention to itself as a composition forever-in-the-making, as a momentary realization of just one possible arrangement, would seem to lend shape to the idea of an open-ended text made up of linkable fragments. But to align *So* with the work of hypertext writers would be ironic at best. For Crombie's work takes the book to be a repressed rather than a repressive medium and replaces the traditional—socially constructed—model of authorship with that, internalized, of the author as maker: not creator but producer. From the workshop of this maker, come the *quelque chose* of an imprint and all the devised qualities of *So's* inscription: its edges and gaps, its stretches, chutes and turns, the typographically scored surface of its pages and the score of its overall orchestration as a mechanical object. The meanings of

40. See Landow, George P. 1997. "Reconfiguring the Author" in *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

So, in which the reader participates most evidently to be sure, arise from the coordination of its parts which produces a polyphony of material voices, a complex structure of textual refrains and visual motifs—and all from the fixed quantity, the basic components, of the bound and printed book. In the last decade, some critics saw through the flashing hyperbole of new media futurologists and the blinding familiarity of the standard book-object and perceived the possibility of such a materially embedded wealth of information and textual multivalence,<sup>41</sup> but perhaps it takes an artist of Crombie's mathematical and artisanal dedication to tease out and make manifest so many facets of the medium's potential.

41. See, for example, Duguid, Paul. 1996. "Material Matters" in *The Future of the Book*. Edited by Geoffrey Nunberg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

### **Author Notes**

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