EADEM MUTATA RESURGO:

AN AFTERWORD

BY

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Rodney Graham was introduced to Edgar Allen Poe's "Landor's Cottage" by Charles Baudelaire. The French symbolist and champion of Poe's work left for his researcher M. Laumonier—who then left it for posterity—a small, nondescript *carte de visite* with "Charles Baudelaire" written on one side and a series of words and phrases jotted on the other. No further instruction was necessary for M. Laumonier; the name and the list were sufficient to express a space of uncertainty, and the resulting desire. What exactly is, Baudelaire's handwriting wondered, a "ground glass astral (not solar) lamp," an object glanced over in a quick survey of Landor's living quarters? What is the French for "silver willow" or "red-bud," two of a litany of trees and shrubs comprising the botanical inventory of Poe's landscape? Graham, coming across a copy of the small card in the Vancouver Public Library in the early 1980s, found Baudelaire's curiosity and appetite

for accuracy still resonant.   Going far beyond the work of Baudelaire's assistant, he struck up an intense relationship with Poe's text that would occupy much of his time over the next few years, and would result in a masterwork of contemporary literature, reprinted in the present edition for the first time in wide release.

Poe's story, the full title of which is "Landor's Cottage: A Pendant to the Domain of Arnheim," is an odd tale, and one which is collected with less frequency than most of his other works.   It was the last story Poe wrote before his death in 1849, and is on the surface void of the type of terror readers might associate with him as an author.   If the reader feels discomfort or a sense of the uncanny in the text, it is as a result of a surfeit of calm and beauty: as if in some inversion of the sublime, nature had conspired to participate in a presentation of a perfectly ordered and balanced landscape to rival the greatest achievements of the tradition in painting.   Poe's narrator, who would become Graham's narrator, begins the story nervously, embarrassed to have become lost on his hike, but not perturbed.   At the point of his greatest uncertainty, where he is no longer confident that the path he follows is, in fact, a previously travelled path, he stumbles upon a road which exists in complete harmony with its surroundings: the "overgrown undergrowth" meets the shrubbery to create a canopy just large enough for the passage of a mountain wagon, and the road's surface is not of dirt and gravel, or tufted grass, but a "pleasantly moist surface of—what looked more like green Genoese velvet than anything else" (6).   Following this road, the narrator, who will remain unnamed throughout Graham's

novel, and who occupies the rhetorical position of an authoritative, earth- and body-bound perspective of the *witness*, emerges into a scene of natural *composition*, "in which the most fastidiously critical taste could scarcely have suggested emendation" (7).   This scene, Poe critics have argued, is an idealized representation of Poe's own cottage just outside the village of Fordham, NY, a fact which might explain why after spending the bulk of the story describing in meticulous detail the harmony of a cottage and a landscape, the reader is left standing inside the cottage with no elucidation of the manner in which the structure or its surroundings came into being.   The story remains a spatial autobiography, written at some distance from the self; any description of "how he made it what it was—and why" is deferred to some future moment of introspection (308).

Graham, in a kind of reader's revenge, short-circuits Poe's tantalization, interpolating a bizarre series of nested tales in between the narrator's introduction to Landor and his abrupt refusal to expand on his adventure.   Indeed, it is very much the "how he made it what it was" that Graham grafts onto Poe's tale, beginning with a shift in perspective that moves the narrator back to his position at the high ground where the cottage first comes into sight.   It is from this view that the annex Graham imagines as the source of the "system" of the cottage is first presented. This small structure, we find out, determines the size, shape, and position of the three wings so carefully described by Poe, who perhaps unknowingly devises a system of architectural expansion rooted in the sesqui-alteral right-angle triangle.   As the younger Landor,

significantly named "Allan," explains, the cottage's three wings grew in tribute to the annex's relationship to the sesquialteral, or equiangular, or logarithmic spiral, also known as *spira mirabilis*: the miraculous spiral.   The "system" is not something Graham interpolates; it is something he extrapolates.   As Poe describes the cottage:

The main building was about twenty-four feet long and sixteen broad—certainly not more.   Its total height, from the ground to the apex of the roof, could not have exceeded eighteen feet.   To the west end of this structure was attached one about a third smaller in all its proportions:—the line of its front standing back about two yards from that of the larger house, and the line of its roof, of course, being considerably depressed below that of the roof adjoining.   At right angles to these buildings, and from the rear of the main one—not exactly in the middle—extended a third compartment, very small—being, in general, one-third less than the western wing.

Graham determines that the annex, following the architectural pattern of the cottage, would itself be one third smaller than Poe's smallest wing, and would be "nestled between the west wall of the north wing and the north wall of the main house" (20).   The calculations as explained by the younger Landor near the end of Graham's text perform a dialogue between Graham and Poe, in which Graham congratulates Poe on the accuracy of his narrator's estimation of the height of the main house.   The narrator claims it "could not have exceeded eighteen feet."   In actual fact, the younger Landor informs him, it is 17.888 feet (302-3).

The way Graham ends the text inverts the frustration and dissatisfaction of Poe's ending; the reader is informed that the cottage is still only a work in progress, and that the architectural marvel of the proposed "system" will only be available to future visitors, making its presentation to the reader an impossibility, not a decision on behalf of a stubborn and exhausted narrator.   There is also a strong correspondence between the geometrical-architectural "system" of the cottage and that of the sesquialteral spiral that recurs throughout the lengthy aetiology of the machine built by the elder Landor, providing the equivalent of a "happy ever after" ending within the domain of scientifically ornate tales of invention and future discovery: the son continues where his father left off, the elder Landor having lived an extraordinary life of intellectual achievement and having died in the very spot that the son's monument begins. Thus the work's structure adheres to the order of the sesquialteral spiral as well as its motto: EADEM MUTATO RESURGO.   The Latin phrase, which translates as "Although changed, I shall arise the same," became affiliated with the spiral through the work of the 17th century Swiss mathematician Jacob Bernoulli, who was so enamoured with the shape and its appearance in natural phenomena—from sea-shells to flowers, and also galaxies and hurricanes—that he ordered the phrase etched onto his tombstone in what was likely a faith sprung from a life spent pursuing geometrical harmony in the universe.

The spiral, in its requisite expansion, is distinguished from the loop by its relationship to time. The loop has played a significant role in Graham's

work, appearing first in the bookwork Lenz, which precedes *The System of Landor's Cottage.* For *Lenz*, Graham resets the layout of George Buchner's short story "Lenz," an account of an episode in the life of *Sturm und Drang* poet Jakob Lenz, so that the preposition "through," the final word on the first page, is completed by the noun phrase "the forest" on the second. The final word on page five is again "through," which leads into a repetition of the passage beginning at the top of page two with "the forest," and creates a sealed narrative that neither returns to the beginning of the text nor terminates in any resolution. This condition is better displayed in the text-sculpture *Reading Machine for Lenz* (1993) than the book or prospectus Graham first produced, as it illustrates the trap a reader or writer might fall into, and the type of perseveration which characterizes the madness of Lenz.

The loop appears in Graham's film work, as well, most famously in *Vexation Island*, where the camera lingers on the unconscious body of a shipwrecked sailor with a head wound, watches him awake, and follows him in his attempt to shake loose a coconut from a tree, only to have it drop onto his head and knock him unconscious, over and over again. Jeff Wall has linked Hegel's concept of "bad infinity" to the loops in Graham's work, and while it might be too broad to condemn the loop as characterized automatically by anxiety, it is an interesting counter-example to the sesquialteral spiral, which does not so much repeat as it does stretch toward the "good infinity," the historical impulse to move beyond socio-cultural limitations (Wall 12-13). The spiral will repeatedly cross

a plane bisecting its expanding diameter, but it will do so in increasing intervals, offering the surprise of the irregular within the constant. In this way the ending of *The System of Landor's Cottage*, in its suggestion of the inevitable expansion of the cottage, provides the pleasure of a resolution within a promise for change.

The French writer and 'pataphysician Raymond Queneau, like Graham and Bernoulli, was also enamoured with the characteristics of the *spira mirabilis*, to the degree that he convinced the Collège de 'Pataphysique to adopt EADEM MUTATO RESURGO as its motto in 1965. The Collège, founded in 1948 in order to continue the project of Alfred Jarry, and of which Graham is currently a member, concerns itself with the investigation of imaginary solutions. Jarry developed the pseudo-science of 'pataphysics—the term means that which is above that which is beyond physics—in response to the progressivism of his period, the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Steven Harris notes that the Collège formed in similar circumstances, counterposing itself against the dominant trends of surrealist flight into the unconscious and the existentialist commitment to the real conditions of struggle (Harris 3). By emphasising imaginary solutions, 'pataphysicians adopt the position that all solutions are sprung from powers of imagination. Their project is playful, but their play is serious, and rigorous. It inserts doubt into systems of political or scientific dominance, substituting the spiral for the now suspiciously naïve metaphor of the march of progress. Graham's text offers a particularly apt metaphor for such a shift in historical imagining in the presentation of the behaviour of the South

American *Mitaires seriatim*, whose constant recalibration of its path towards a light source—motivated by its biological urge for a 'luminous centre'—is determined by its compound eye's physical orientation, and mimics the path of an sesquialteral spiral (253). The *Mitaires seriatim*, true to their name, march in a line, but that line takes the shape of a spiral.

Besides his role as a 'pataphysician, Queneau was a founding member (along with fellow 'pataphysician and amateur mathematician Francois Le Lionnais) of the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo), a literary coterie devoted to the investigation of links between literature and mathematics.   The emphasis on authorial constraints was, again, posed against the attempts of the surrealists to access the unconscious through methods of automatism or the rejection of all artistic legislation.   Queneau's position was that the rejection of rules was a fantasy that encouraged an ignorance of the wider constraints placed on human creativity.   By imagining and developing one's own labyrinth, however, one might develop the skills to escape those built for us by others.

While Graham's text itself might not be considered Oulipian, the texts he imagines within his narrative certainly could be.   The ode to the number nine—a number whose shape resembles a sesquialteral spiral—composed by the young Al Ma'araji, at the behest of his tutor, Mukhazniz Oum-er S'afd, who required that it take the form of "ninety-nine stanzas of nine verses each, with each verse further containing nine long, and nine short syllables," adheres to an essentially Oulipian constraint (68).   The poem's expansion

by the older Al Ma'araji into ninety-nine cantos of ninety-nine stanzas each, interpolated into each of the original stanzas, as well Sligo's translation, completion, and encryption of it, are similarly Oulipian in character.   And one could certainly argue that the system of Landor's cottage itself, though only in the early stages, is a design that would fit perfectly into the currently underdeveloped project of Ouarchipo, the Laboratory of Potential Architecture.

Graham's novel therefore occupies a middle-ground between 'pataphysics and the Oulipo, and as such shares a space with a figure whose work is often associated with Graham's, Raymond Roussel.   Roussel has been claimed as an influential figure by both the Collège de 'Pataphysique as well as Oulipo, who list him as an anticaptory plagiarist for his anomalous historical position in advance of the group's forming, and it is perhaps his work that looms largest over *The System of Landor's Cottage*.   Indeed, apart from the entirety of Poe's tale and a short passage from William Beckford's fantastical eighteenth century novel, *History of the Caliph Vathek*, a text Poe references in his story, Roussel is the only other author to be quoted directly by Graham, in the form of a passage from *Locus Solus* describing the grounds of the inventor and scientist Martial Canterel, which Graham adapts to the property of the elder Landor on the outskirts of Boston.   But there are factors beyond quotation that link Graham's text to Roussel, the first being a tendency towards resolution, and the second being an intricacy of description as a technique of defamiliarization, one that stretches the signifying capabilities of language.

As both Graham and Roussel function within a 'pataphysical tradition, it is not surprising that their work should bend towards resolution. 'Pataphysics is, after all, the science of imaginary solutions, not imaginary riddles or enigmas, and the pleasure felt by solving an elaborate algebraic problem is the same in spite of the use value of its variables. The Oulipo, in their emphasis on the constraint as equation, and the writing as *proof*—the ideal Oulipian text is not a literary text, but the constraint under which a literary text might be written—performs a similar rejection of the disjunction and indeterminancy that characterizes much of modernist literature. Roussel's long poem, *New Impressions of Africa*, is a strong example of a structural resolution, as it is comprised of sections that divide into parenthetical regressions, and beyond the parentheses into footnotes, all the while adhering to a rigorous rhyme and meter. Just like in an equation, the interior functions (the relationship between variables and numbers within parentheses) need to be completed before the exterior functions (the relationship between the interior functions and the numbers and variables that lie outside of them) can be resolved. If that sounds complicated, it should go some way towards evoking the disorienting experience of reading Roussel.

The pleasure of Roussel's texts—and there is a great deal of pleasure involved—often comes in the play between disorientation and scientific explanation. The structure of *Locus Solus* is perhaps the best example, as it presents a tour led by Martial Canterel—a character who in both his genius and wealth parallels Graham's Landor, Sr.—of his

sprawling property, which he has cultivated as a kind of garden of inventions. Canterel guides a group of curious visitors that includes the narrator around his grounds, stopping at various points to first present a seemingly incomprehensible scene, and then to offer an in-depth scientific explanation of its creation. A similar structure is at work in Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, except the scene is the coronation of an African emperor-king in some imagined equatorial, West African nation, where a procession of bizarre performances, including both scientific and bodily feats, are presented to a group of invited guests. The generation of Roussel's bizarre scenes comes from a method he describes in his essay "How I Wrote Certain of My Texts" that involves beginning from words or phrases that are identical but for a single letter, and trying to construct a narrative that can lead from one to the other. One example he offers is of the French words *billard* [billiard table] and *pillard* [plunderer], which he then inserts into the phrase *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard / pillard* [The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table... / The white man's letters on the hordes of the old plunderer...] (4). Both phrases then form scenes and characters from which part of the narrative of *Impressions of Africa* is built. Another example implements the technique of homophony to challenge the author's imaginative capabilities. Roussel provides the example of coming across a pencil drawing of a man sitting in a Ministerial antechamber and captioning it with the phrase "Patience à antichambre ministérielle." He then extracts from his caption the phrase "patience à entiche ambre mine hystérique": [button-stick attracts agitated amber

lead] or [lead which rushes towards … amber, which is attracted to…] (14).　Out of this slight but odd shift in meaning comes the scene in *Impressions of Africa* where the scientist (a favourite character type for Roussel and Graham alike) Bex displays the extraordinary powers of attraction of a new, "very complex" substance he has developed and christened "magnetine."　The properties of magnetine are presented to the gathered spectators in the form of a demonstration, one which begins with Bex bringing out a giant *button-stick*, then a set of ten large pencil-like cases which house *amber-colored leads*.　Upon removing the tops of the pencils, exposing the magnetine leads, Bex hides behind the giant button-stick while the leads shoot across the esplanade towards the particular metals to which they are attracted.　After the demonstration, which Roussel describes matter-of-factly, comes the act of resolution, triggered by a phrase that is but one version of many: "An explanation was necessary" (48).

While Graham's text does not spring from the polysemy of metagrams and homophones, it nevertheless parallels Roussel's method of alternating between stupefaction and remediation.　Instead of a series of vignettes presented in succession, though, Graham's text begins by presenting a total structure—the machine in the annex to Landor's cottage that speaks the mathematical definition of *locus* and mysteriously flashes the equation of the sesquialteral spiral so brightly that the afterimage is inscribed on the retina of the visitor—that Graham spends the rest of the text explaining in a series of narrative regressions, finally coming to the "system of Landor's cottage," itself

rooted in the strange machine in the annex.

There is no reader of Roussel or Graham who will fail to be disoriented by the scientific and mathematical language found in their texts, for the very basic reason that the science, though accurate, is not always true. An entomologist might have a deep understanding of insect behaviour, but that will not prepare him or her for the description of the unique properties of the chanter beetle, or the *Mitaires seriatim* in Graham's work; a mathematician might be aware of the formula for the sesquialteral spiral, but that will not prepare him or her for its relevance to the vocally-triggered hydraulic mechanism that raises the grand pavilion from its watery depths.　The geographer will not have an advantage when it comes to Ginnistan; the philosopher will be unaware of Leibniz's genealogical tribute to the House of Welf, or Voltaire's sympathies in the coffee wars.　Compounding this instability in the position of the reader is an emphasis on what appears to be exact, diagrammatic language.　This strategy is present in Poe's story, and in much of Roussel's work, as well.　The challenge is to the reader's imagination, particularly in her / his ability to keep in mind the various intricately described components within a larger scene or structure.　This technique is perhaps best displayed in Graham's text during the account of how Rocnaz transforms her pendant into two small heat engines in order to save the life of her condemned lover, Atalmuc, who has been sentenced to *The Period* by the cruel and jealous Caliph Fakreddin.　Over an extended passage, Graham describes Rocnaz's process in great detail, demanding that the reader imagine a complex and delicate operation within a literary space (113-19).　The text stretches the limits of language's

accuracy and of the reader's ability to store informa-tion, and results in a sort of stupefaction that is related to the description of the scene of Landor's cottage in Poe's text, or in Roussel's presentation of Canterel's inventions in *Locus Solus*.

The more information that is piled onto previous descriptions, themselves vague and reliant on assump-tions for size, texture, placement, and color, the less stable the idea becomes in the reader's mind. Graham often performs this conceptual agitation by describing shapes within shapes, frustrating a stable frame of reference.   In describing the machine in the annex from his exterior view, for example, the narrator describes the structure in depth, making note of the shape, angles, and orientation of various planes, and positioning them in relationship to the wings of the cottage.   Then, in describing the flash of light emanating from the structure, he describes it as having its source in "the center of the pink cloud's lower half" (23).   Even if the reader had been able to keep the shape, size, and position of the annex in her or his mind—not a simple task, by any means—s/he encounters a description of a flash coming from a quarter of the way up a *cloud*, a term which signifies an irregular mass resistant to measurement.   It is a synonym for vague, or obscure, and thus performs the impossibility of Graham's text that is so exhilarating. For it is in the resolution of the exhausting descrip-tion—the success of Rocnaz's machines to function as planned, thus saving Atalmuc and ruining Fakreddin, or the rational explanation of the functioning of the bizarre monument to Landor, Sr.'s accomplishments— that assures the reader that s/he had it right all along.

This constant play between doubt and confidence, instability and stability, enacts the drama of language: a communicative system that relies on misunderstand-ings to spawn the pleasure of understanding, the slip-ping away and coming into being of meaning and its constantly shifting historical conditions.

The System of Landor's Cottage is, ultimately, a hopeful text, one that celebrates the instability of language and authorship as an opportunity for the imagination to transcend itself, to follow the constantly expanding spiral path of history.   Its emphasis on the idea of the pendant performs that hope, as a reminder that things can always be *added*. The novel is described as a "Pendant to Poe's Last Story," which was itself a "Pendant to the Domain of Arnheim," a story in which Poe offers an account of Ellison, an accidentally extremely rich man who turns his wealth and genius to the creation of a perfectly poetic landscape, like Poe's Landor but on a much larger scale.   It can be argued that Rocnaz's manip-ulation of the pendant given to her by Fakreddin is the hinge on which the entire story turns; it is the love story between her and Atalmuc, after all, that prompts the poem of Al Ma'araji, which prompts Sligo's cipher, and which provides Landor, Sr. with his greatest intellectual moment.   Graham's text also refers to various other pendants throughout: the annex "appended to the main house" (we find out later it is actually the other way around) (20); the laboratories "appended" to Landor, Sr.'s house (55); the "sprawling garden appended to the palace" in Ambreadad (68); and Al Ma'araji's appending of his youthful pane-gyric, written to the number nine, in a manner that

references Graham's own relationship with Poe's story (147-8).   These pendants have central roles in the text, to the point that they are almost more important than the bodies and forms they attach to.

The etymological relationship between the physical space of an appendage and its temporal character—the word source is in the French *pendant*, which refers to the condition of hanging from as well as meaning "during"—offers a further understanding of Graham's project.   The text fuses writing from disparate times into one narrative body: William Beckford from the eighteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe from the nine-teenth, Raymond Roussel from the first half of the twentieth century, and Rodney Graham from the second.   The appendages have subsumed the core, and the impulse is to continue the agglomeration, perhaps with surgical and architectural incisions and exci-sions as they become necessary, on the next turn of the spiral.

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