

# Long Paddock

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Lost in Diversion: Repetition and Ennui in  
Antoni Jach's *The Weekly Card Game*

Rien n'est si insupportable à l'homme que d'être dans un plein repos, sans passions, sans affaire, sans divertissement, sans application. Il sent alors son néant, son abandon, son insuffisance, sa dépendance, son impuissance, son vide. Incontinent il sortira du fond de son âme l'ennui, la noirceur, la tristesse, le chagrin, le dépit, le désespoir.

Pascal, *Pensées* 131.

If anything, *The Weekly Card Game* (1994) reads like a hazardous experiment with the conventions of the novel. You have to be something of a gambler when you put *tedium vitae* at the core of a narrative. Naturally, very few sensible writers would dare take up this risky challenge in an increasingly market-oriented publishing industry, as action-packed and tension-building novels dominated by an outstanding central character are more likely to turn into bestsellers than contemplative narratives. And yet, Antoni Jach, who is all too conscious that he is playing for high stakes when pushing the exploration of boredom to endurable limits, has a card up his sleeve – a terse and measured prose sprinkled with deadpan humour with which he skilfully manages to entertain his readership.

This essay will focus on the multifaceted expressions of boredom in *The Weekly Card Game* and relate them to the principle of repetition that pervades the narrative in order to examine the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of ennui.

## “The Typologies of Boredom”

Published at the time of the re-emergence of the Republican debate in Australia, Jach's stunning debut novel with its prominent themes of change and changelessness captured the *Zeitgeist*, as his metaphor in the concluding chapter makes it clear: Australia has become some grand-scale chess game with “no republican spirit” (295) and “an exaggerated respect for royalty” (295). But *The Weekly Card Game* also reads like a satirical sociological study of Australian suburbia wherein the themes of change and changelessness relate to the antonymic philosophical concepts of agitation and ennui. It all started fifteen years ago when Bernard Poe scheduled on a Friday night his first weekly poker game with his three old university buddies – Harry, Tim and Roger. In order not to be left out in the cold, Bernard's wife Dolores organised years later a get-together on Monday nights with three

randomly chosen female acquaintances to indulge in “intelligent conversations of a structured kind” (15). Using a minimalist style and a neutral tone, Jach shows – with a sardonic sense of humour and a keen eye for details that is peculiar to the *nouveau roman* – how an Australian couple have gradually fallen into a weekly suburban routine which acts as an ennui-proof cocoon.

As Lars Svendsen has it in *The Philosophy of Boredom*, “It is perfectly possible to be bored without being aware of the fact. And it is possible to be bored without being able to offer any reason or cause for this boredom” (Svendsen 14). And so it is not unreasonable that Antoni Jach provides no open explanation for the causes for the pervasive sense of boredom in *The Weekly Card Game*. Removed though the cause may be, the blatant symptoms of boredom are still there, liberally sprinkled throughout the narrative.

Wide-ranging in its symptoms, boredom – as French essayist Pascal Bruckner has it – is “the disease of the modern soul” (“la maladie de l’âme moderne”, translation mine) (Bruckner 108). The Poes are plagued with a futile life whereby they keep themselves busy with pointless and unexciting leisure occupations for want of anything better to do in contemporary Australian suburbia:

Life was short, [Bernard] added, and there was much to be done between go and woe but he had always had difficulty in working out what was worth doing and what wasn’t, what was essential and what was trivial – so, as a consequence, he ended up filling his days with *all sorts of things* – none of which he enjoyed. (252)

What could be held responsible for the situational ennui which strikes most characters is the carefully structured life they lead – a daily monotonous rhythm of habits, set rituals, unspoken rules and pecking orders. All these elements contribute to making their life predictable and, by way of consequence, futile: “[...] the usefulness of the card game lay in its predictability. And the uselessness of the rest of the week lay in its predictability.” (108). The trouble is that the suburban environment makes the unbearable weightiness of *tedium vitae* even worse. When Bernard reinvents himself as a painter and is about to complete his first painting, readers realize that the canvas is his visual mouthpiece:

He had conceived the work as an abstract expressionist statement about the lack of passion in contemporary middle-class life: it was about Australians and their tendency to turn everything into blandness; every edge had to be knocked off, every weirdness had to be shorn off so the ordinary and the everyday could shine through with clarity. The suburban dream of the average Australian: to be ordinary. (253)

Jach, here, comes within a long line of Australian novelists like Gavin Casey, George Johnston, Christopher Koch, Randolph Stow and Patrick White who – from the early 1960s – have chronicled “the spiritual malaise of suburbanism” (Kiernan 279) and exposed the dreariness, ugliness, mediocrity and banality of suburbia<sup>[1]</sup>.

Boredom, however, is not the expression of a lack of action. As Anne Wallemacq cogently argues, “the fact of getting bored does not result from the fact that we have nothing to do [...] but rather from the fact that what we do ‘means nothing’” (Wallemacq 17, translation mine):

The weekly discussion group for intelligent conversation was a welcome escape from the mind numbing tedium of weekly life with its constant repetitions and its fruitless exchanges. It rolled along week after week, year after year, providing a

comforting drum and burr. (25)

When sharing his depressing outlook on life, Bernard reveals that he has issues with pointlessness and triviality with which he does not seem to cope:

Life, he says, is about getting up each morning and going through the day like it was made up of so many sheets of lace curtain until you get to nightfall and you come home in the dark and reach the lighted porch and turn the key and mumble away endlessly, pointlessly to yourself until you fall asleep in a mixture of guilt and despair and apprehension: realising how banal that sounded, at the very moment of saying it, but not knowing how else to say it. Life is *impenetrable*, really... (96)

There is a glaring contradiction in the aforementioned quote pitting absurdist philosophy which informs *The Weekly Card Game* – encapsulated in the adverb “pointlessly” and elsewhere in the direct allusion to “the myth of Sisyphus” (257)<sup>[2]</sup> – against those who, like Bernard, feel that “Life is *impenetrable*”. As an absurdist writer, Jach knows all too well that if life has no meaning for absurdist philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, it is not because meaning cannot be found due to life’s impenetrability, but rather because there is no meaning to be found in the world. And therein, perhaps, lies the roots of Bernard’s predicament who is condemned Sisyphus-like to a pointless and hopeless task: that of finding meaning in what he perceives to be an impenetrable life when crystal-clear life would have nothing to conceal! This expression of metaphysical boredom echoes an earlier passage, in which Dolores also felt pierced by existential *angst*:

There was a lot of tedium in life, [...] and on reflection it did seem to her to be harder to be happy as you got older. It was almost as if you had accumulated a great metaphysical weight over the years (too much perhaps to ever shake off?). But as long as you kept a goal in mind then you could leaven the tedium with the possibility of future attainment; though what the importance of that attainment might be would certainly be different at forty than if you have had attained your goal at twenty. (43-4).

If definitions of boredom are unlikely to spring naturally to mind when asked to delimit the subject, it is because there is a fine line between a natural feeling of weariness and a pathological state – that is, between boredom and depression. And there is a subtle crescendo shift of shades of ennui in the *The Weekly Card Game*, which first develop from situational ennui (in the first 3 chapters) and then morphs into metaphysical ennui (the next 12 chapters) to eventually give way to pathological ennui, namely neurasthenia. The Weekly Free Night chapter discloses Bernard’s neurotic state when he confesses that “every now and then he became so bored with life that he passed into another state: a state of anaesthesia or neurasthenia where everything seemed to be unreal” (182).

Among the many scholars who have struggled to come up with an all-encompassing definition of boredom, British psychotherapist Adam Phillips identifies it as “that state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.” (Phillips 71) Lars Svendsen would readily subscribe to this view given that for him “Boredom is not connected with actual needs but with desire. And this desire is a desire for sensory stimuli. Stimuli are the only “interesting’ thing.” (Svendsen 27). But there is more

than mere stimuli to it. If there is a “wish for a desire” as Adam Phillips puts it, it is because desire cannot express itself. Desire is frustrated, repressed and stalemated through repetition, hence the connection between boredom and repetition. Life, for the characters, resembles a chess game gone stalemate or, as Jach writes, a game of patience: “a way of passing time – waiting for something more interesting to happen. [...] sometimes the card game worked out and sometimes it didn’t; sometimes you were just stuck, at an impasse – impossible to proceed further; and then you really needed patience.” (42)

### Ennui and Repetition<sup>[3]</sup>

One ritual leading to another, Bernard and Dolores Poe have crammed their weekly social schedule with a range of activities which are repeated *ad nauseam* week in week out (save in January when they take their annual break) until they are faced with “the possibility of a change” some years later. For them, “Domestic life was a constant schedule of non-changing duties, habits and reflexes. There was little escape from everything that had to be done. Everything had to be endured. *To get through* became a recurring motif.” (150). Readers can listen to Jach’s bittersweet symphony with a keenness of hearing sharpened all the more by the distress of their own humdrum lives.

When interviewed in September 2007, Jach stated his vested interest in ennui and repetition:

I see myself as belonging in the school of Anton Chekhov and Samuel Beckett. I’m interested in ennui and I’m interested in repetition, greatly, and all my work is about repetition to a lesser or greater degree. The first play in the *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene* cycle grows out of Gertrude Stein’s writing. Both plays are full of repetitions and a luscious sound poetry of tonal waves. The first play pushes repetition – and the audience – to endurable limits. The first play is 2 hours and 20 minutes in its running time and some people just had to leave at half time; it was too much! I am fascinated by Søren Kierkegaard on repetition, and Peter Handke who has written a novel called *Repetition*. Gilles Deleuze has also written on repetition. When you are bored you open up a meditative and reflective space; your time is not taken up with action; there’s room to reflect on one’s life. Kierkegaard has said: “We live life forward but we understand it backwards”, and that’s a very important axiom for me and for all of my writing. (Vernay, 57-8)

So *The Weekly Card Game* (1994) is not an action-packed novel precisely because Jach has opened up “a meditative and reflective space” in which he represents boredom for the sake of having readers reflect on his story and, ultimately, on their lives. With his comment on repetition, Jach endorses Pascal’s wise observation in fragment 139 to the letter: “[...] j’ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre.” (Pascal, 64)

To say the least, Jach – like Gertrude Stein before him – revels in incantatory lexical and grammatical repetitions that challenge the rules of classical rhetoric. Like Ernest Hemingway who was “mentored” by Stein, his regular use of *ands* throughout the narrative, more than would be allowed in a school assignment, “is a symptom of its very repetitive syntax, stringing together declarative statements with subordinating one to another.” (Lodge 90) Stylistically, repetition is indicated with the inclusion of various adverbs of frequency like “often” and “always”, along with adjectives also expressing frequency like “frequent”, “another”, “more”, “regular”, “constant”, “familiar”, and phrases such as “keep

doing something”, not to forget the extensive use of the modal expressing habit “would”. What Jach seems to be getting at is that repetition, as in Stein’s writing, is a stylistic technique that can be used to defamiliarise the familiar and, additionally, can be used, ultimately, to highlight the absurdity and instability of (written) language itself. [4]

On a thematic level, life – as epitomized by the poker game – is impenetrable precisely because its core meaning is coated (if not sugar-coated) with soothing layers of repetitions: “The card game was like life itself: occasionally piquant but fundamentally wrapped up in extravagant layers of repetition where if you unpeeled the onion-like structure to get to the core all you would get would be layer after layer of wrapping.” (5) As the omniscient narrator points out, there is certainly “something comforting in the repetition” (11); and repetition of regular activities translates into the development of automatic reflexes: as many reassuring bearings in the eyes of babies (as illustrated by Georgia, Bernard and Dolores’s infant daughter, who “liked to have everything done following a preordained pattern – or else she felt insecure”, 157), the elderly and anxious people like Dolores and Bernard – a couple in the throes of existential *angst*. Hence “the usefulness of the card game” (108), the repetitive nature of which gives the four 30-year-olds a goal “with the possibility of future attainment” (43) because “in life you needed things to look forward to” (129). As its Latin etymology (*proiactare*) indicates, *projects* help people to cast (*jactere*) themselves forward (*pro*) in time in order to give themselves both stimuli and some sense of purpose in life:

The fear was that the others would think badly of you; would think that you lived a boring life, a mundane life, a repetitious life; a life devoid of excitement, stimulation, variety; that you were to be pitied; and that by comparison the private life of the others would seem to be more colourful and rich – thus giving the others the right to feel superior, and thus the right to be subtly patronising towards you. (61).

But the repetition at stake may well also be a “repetition compulsion” – and we know how much Antoni Jach has been influenced by psychoanalysis (Jach in Vernay 57). In psychoanalytic terms, the Poes seem to be under the sway of *Todestrieb* (the death drive<sup>[5]</sup>), as the godfather of psychoanalysis theorised it in his quite controversial piece (Laplanche 103-124) – “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (Freud 3-66). Freud’s analysis of his grandson’s *fort-da* (gone/there) game explicates the workings of repetition compulsion as a phenomenon apparent as early as infancy and stemming from some form of neurosis. “By compulsively re-enacting the drama of his mother’s departure and return, the child overcomes his feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and (presumably) loss.” (Sprenghether 158) *Mutatis mutandis*, by compulsively re-enacting the ritual of weekly pastimes, the Poes overcome their feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and loss.

#### Lost in Diversion and the Diversion from Loss

But what helplessness, anxiety and loss are we talking about in *The Weekly Card Game*? Well, possibly the helplessness of Man over the elapse of time which gives rhythm to a process of gradual decay, the anxiety in the face of death and the loss of meaning. In the novel, characters have different ways to cope with their helplessness as regards the fleeting years. Bernard’s disavowal transpires in his intolerance of any measurement of time<sup>[6]</sup>, while Jan, Dolores’s friend, laughs her helplessness off by proposing cathartic *tempus fugit* parties: “And [Jan] kept pestering Dolores to hold a party where both groups of friends

could get together to savour the peculiar *bittersweet* flavour of remembrance of time past. It could be a *tempus fugit* party, she said.” (150). This naturally adumbrates the gender distinctions made in the novel and only goes to prove that: “Women were always conscious of time. Men, they would say, were spendthrift with time: wasting their time telling endless, pointless stories in pubs while getting drunk and ruining their health at the same time.” (195). Bernard’s anxiety in the face of death is the most explicitly illustrated in the pages of *The Weekly Card Game*, particularly through the weird “boring dreams” which the narrator repeatedly mentions on a same page:

[Bernard’s] dreams were of the mundane, the pedestrian kind. Dreams about opening doors and walking down corridors or else dreams about roads, looking into ditches, or else even more boring dreams, the particular nature of which escaped him for the moment. He suspected that insomnia was caused by a fear of going to sleep and being bored to death. He had read somewhere that boredom causes cancer. (256)

There seems to be a purpose in the characters’ lives, a purpose deviated as distraction, but no meaning. If the purpose of life is to meet death and if the characters’ purpose in life is to elude death through diversion, then – by a most pernicious effect – they have withdrawn life’s meaning only to find loss in its place. The loss of meaning does not only result from diversion. More generally, it is an existential loss, the kind which has been put forward by the advocates of absurdist philosophy. For Albert Camus, the absurd originates in the confrontation between the human beings craving for answers and an indifferent universe. In his own words, “L’absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l’appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde” (Camus 46)

To make matters worse, death hovers over the novel like an ominous anxiety-provoking shadow. To some extent, *The Weekly Card Game* – published as Jach was verging on 40 but written in his mid 30s – can also be perceived as an anticipated midlife-crisis novel. Classically, the onset of middle age causes one to realize that the innocence of childhood is past recall, that one is no longer in the prime of life and that inescapable death is looming large on the horizon. Although we know for a fact that the cardplayers are “in their mid-to-late thirties” (49), all of them “were obsessed with their forthcoming deaths.” (54). And of course, sardonically enough, one of them,

Timboy – whose freedom the others envied – was convinced he would die of boredom. It would be a slow and morose death. Probably while reading a magazine written in a language he didn’t understand, he told the others. He would be in a *foreign* country, surrounded by people he didn’t know; he had a feeling he would be in transit, waiting for a plane, maybe looking up at the destination board flickering ...(54)

Later in the narrative, Jach reinforces this idea by repeating that Timboy’s death will have to be ascribed to ennui: “When asked what he had seen, all he could think of to say was that he hadn’t seen much but being constantly on the move had made him feel young and when he no longer felt young then he would probably die – most likely of boredom.” (99). Clinically, there is no such thing as “dying of boredom”: suicide being a *consequence* of boredom. But there is no denying that an individual can literally be bored *to death*, i.e. to the point of being driven to pass away. As Michèle Hugué points out in *L’ennui ou la douleur du temps*, boredom leads to “annihilation of the subject, suicide and organic death” in impossible and irreversible situations (Hugué 77, translation mine).



The Poes's daily routine carefully scheduled with almost clockwork precision in *The Weekly Card Game* is somewhat reminiscent of monastic life and the monks trying to avoid the pitfalls of acedia. Even if they are on the right side of forty, their awareness of being over the hill forces them to fill their spare time in an attempt to dodge an idle old age. However, they are not killing time to gain eternity as monks would do, but they are killing time precisely to avoid eternity – in other words, to perish the thought of their finiteness. In this respect, we can rightly assume that most of the activities taken up by the characters in the novel are as much a form of entertainment as they are some kind of *divertissement pascalien*. The Pascalian notion of diversion from death is clearly spelt out in the last pages of *Napoleon's Double*<sup>[7]</sup>, but readers do get a sense from reading *The Weekly Card Game* that deep down the purpose of the characters' lives is to elude death.

Syllogistically, if the characters' purpose in life is to elude death and if death – in keeping with Schopenhauer's philosophy – is the purpose of life, then the character's purpose is to elude the purpose of life! And therein lies the crux of the problem in *The Weekly Card Game*: the Poes no longer connect with life, its purpose and even with people. The Poes's friends remain objects of "frenetic enjoyment"<sup>[8]</sup>, or "*distractions*; one might even say *diversions*..."(103) and their ritualised life leaves no chance to interact and engage properly with others – interconnectedness being elsewhere described as "frightening" (221). In fact, they are seeking to "divert" themselves in the original sense of the word – that is, they are turning aside from humaneness, time, death, meaning and – if ever they succeed – their weekly rituals.

And yet, there is room for a glimmer of hope: "Life wasn't all neatly tied down: there were still possibilities for change." (71). When the novel draws to a close, "the possibility of change" seems to be enough in itself to fulfil the characters' desperate need to pull themselves out of their deep-seated and mind-numbing routine. The final chapters have the answer to whether the characters have endorsed or not the possibility of change they have toyed with so far:

It was possible for the cardplayers to change but it was neither *desirable* nor *likely* nor *realistic* to expect them to change. Dolores could change all she wanted to: they would stay the same, thank you very much. They were, after all, still enjoying the weekly card game, which came around so regularly – like clockwork – and when they were no longer enjoying the weekly card game, well ... Then they would probably keep on playing anyway; probably, because they could not think of anything better to do on a Friday night. Nothing else came to mind. They would have to be convinced to give up the weekly card game. (269)

To say the least, the move Bernard and Dolores have made at the end of the novel is by no means drastic. Dolores has substituted her weekly "intelligent conversations of a structured kind" for "nights of tale-telling" (282), which are obviously reminiscent of psychoanalytical sessions:

Eventually, when we have left the confines and rigidities of the public space of the well-known pizza restaurant (I've just thought of this) if it helps, we may each lie on a couch in a semi-darkened room to tell our stories with the other three out of sight – though that would be later down the track, when the concept is established. Maybe each year we could change: after tale-tellers we'll become dream-relaters and perhaps eventually each other's confessors. (283)

As for Bernard resisting change, he is "happy to keep playing cards because the card game

was so familiar and comforting and relaxing” (292). The proposition of a chess game to replace the poker game will therefore come from Timboy. But how big a change is that? Two games sharing a sense of royalty with kings and queens and knaves/ bishops! And there is already talk of going back to their original poker game: “Harry proclaimed that it had been an interesting experiment to play chess and he proposed they continue with chess, at least for a year or so, before eventually going back to cards.” (301)

In the light of these pointers, Bernard and Dolores seem to have embarked on a “talking cure” and both have failed their working-through (*Durcharbeitung*). Dolores has verbalised her talking cure through high-flown discussions compulsively repeated in her unoriginal concept of story-telling; while Bernard has internalised his through writing. In an unexpected twist, which puts the story in perspective with a *mise en abîme*, it is hinted that Bernard becomes the metafictional author of *The Weekly Card Game*:

You should write something too, Bernard. You’ve got the writer’s melancholic temperament. You could write the story of our lives – or better still, you could write the story of the weekly card game, so we can read it and see where we have been, and from that, see what lies in store for us. (303)

## Conclusion

With *The Weekly Card Game*, Antoni Jach has staked out a position as one of Australia’s bravest and most cerebral novelists. From cover to cover, Jach wryly peels off the onion-like structure of boredom by exposing its multifaceted typologies, which reveal the close associations boredom has with repetition. There is no mistaking that the Poes as well as some of the peripheral characters have reached an impasse, which is exactly what boredom is driving at. As Michèle Huguet reminds us in her conclusion to *L’ennui et ses discours*, boredom “evokes the idea of an irresolvable conflict marked by repetition and ambivalence towards an object which causes fixation when detachment is desired”<sup>[9]</sup> (Huguet 215, translation mine).

Pascal Bruckner argues in *L’euphorie perpétuelle* that “There are finally two ways of forcing oneself out of banality – either by shunning it or by espousing it so closely that it gets eroded from the inside.”<sup>[10]</sup> (Bruckner 112, translation mine) When all is said and done, it seems that Bernard and Dolores have attempted to force themselves out of banality by choosing the second way. But have they ever succeeded?

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[1] Read Gavin Casey's *Amid the Plenty* (1962), George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964), Chris Koch's *Across the Sea Wall* (1965), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), along with Patrick White's Sarsaparilla in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and *The Night the Prowler* (1974).

[2] Interestingly, the adverb pointlessly is used in the explanation for the myth of Sisyphus in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. "Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to the endless, futile task of rolling a rock up a mountain (whence it would roll back down of its own weight), thus becomes an exemplar of the human condition, struggling hopelessly and pointlessly to achieve something." (Audi 116). Indeed, the gods had thought – and these are virtually the words of Albert Camus in his book-length essay – that there was no worse punishment than a pointless and hopeless task. (Camus 163)

[3] For the sake of the clarity of our demonstration, we shall discuss repetition in this section bearing in mind that there is no identity principle (whereby A equals A) inherent to repetition. As French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has it in *Difference and Repetition*: "Repetition can always be 'represented' as extreme resemblance or perfect equivalence, but the fact that one can pass by degrees from one thing to another does not prevent their being different in kind." (Deleuze 2). Similarly, "habit never gives rise to true repetition: sometimes the action changes and is perfected while the intention remains constant; sometimes the action remains the same in different contexts and with different intentions." (Deleuze 5)

[4] See *The Yale Gertrude Stein* for a very good one-volume overview of Stein's writing.

[5] We prefer to translate *Trieb* as "drive" and not "instinct", following Jean Laplanche's argument. (Laplanche 9-10)

[6] "Because time disappeared at such a rapid rate, Bernard could not stand the sight of clocks or of watches. The passing of time was a cause for melancholy, and melancholy was to be avoided at all costs. The only way to survive was to be *resolute*; melancholy led to all sorts of strange paths and byways – ways he couldn't afford the time to take." (150)

- [7] "We have to push away all thoughts of death in order to keep on living. The thought of death is what eats away the spirit of life like the leech the surgeon uses to bleed the patient dry." (*ND*, 277)
- [8] A phrase proposed by Jeffrey Mehlman to translate the meaning of "*jouissance*" in French (Laplanche 113, 124).
- [9] "[...] l'ennui [...] évoque l'image d'un conflit indépassable marqué par la répétition et l'ambivalence vis-à-vis d'un objet auquel on reste fixé alors qu'on souhaiterait s'en détacher".
- [10] "Il est deux manières finalement de s'arracher à la banalité : soit en la fuyant, soit en l'épousant si étroitement qu'on la saborde de l'intérieur."