

EXERCISES

Raymond Q

Translated by

For a descrip

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Collected French

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The Man

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The Red

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JORGE

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Jacker

author

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Other books by the same author

The Bark Tree

The Flight of Icarus

The Sunday of Life

Exercices 5/

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par by

Raymond Queneau

translated by Barbara Wright



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PREFACE

*Ladies and Gentlemen:**

From time to time people politely ask me what I am translating now.

So I say: a book by Raymond Queneau.

They usually react to that in one of 3 different ways.

Either they say: that must be difficult.

Or they say: Who's he?

Or they say: Ah.

Of those three reactions, let's take the third—as the fortune-tellers say.

People say: Ah.

By: Ah—they don't mean quite the same as the people who say: Who's he? They mean that they don't know who Queneau is, but that don't much care whether they know or not. However, since, as I said, this sort of conversation is usually polite, they often go on to enquire: What book of his are you translating?

So I say: *Exercices de Style*,

And then, all over again, they say: Ah.

At this point I usually feel it would be a good idea

* Based on a talk given in the Gaberbocchus Common Room on April 1st 1958.

to say something about this book, *Exercices de Style*, but as it's rather difficult to know where to begin, if I'm not careful I find that my would-be explanation goes rather like this:

"Oh yes, you know, it's the story of a chap who gets into a bus and starts a row with another chap who he thinks keeps treading on his toes on purpose, and Queneau repeats the same story 99 times in a different way—it's terribly good . . ."

So I've come to the conclusion that it is thus my own fault when these people I have been talking about finally stop saying "Ah" and tell me that it's a pity I always do such odd things. It's not that my wooffly description is inaccurate—there are in fact 99 exercises, they all do tell the same story about a minor brawl in a bus, and they are all written in a different style. But to say that much doesn't explain anything, and the *Exercices* and the idea behind them probably do need some explanation.

In essaying an explanation, or rather, perhaps, a proper description, I have an ally in this gramophone record, which has recently been made in France, of 22 of the 99 *exercices*. It is declaimed and sung by *les Frères Jacques*—who have been likened to the English Goons. You will hear that the record is very funny. I said it was an ally, yet on the other hand it may be an enemy, because it may lead you to think that the *exercices* are just funny and nothing else. I should like to return to this point later, but first I want to say something about the author of the *Exercices*.

Raymond Queneau has written all the books you see here on the table—and others which I haven't been able to get hold of. He is a poet—not just a writer of poetry, but a poet in the wider sense. He is also a scholar and mathematician. He is a member of the

Académie Goncourt (and they have only 10 members, in comparison with the 40 of the Académie Française), and he is one of the top boys of the publishing house of Gallimard. But he is a kind of writer who tends to puzzle people in this country because of his breadth and range—you can't classify him. He is one of the most influential and esteemed people in French literature—but he can write a poem like this:

Ce soir
si j'écrivais un poème
pour la postérité?

fichtre
la belle idée

je me sens sûr de moi
j'y vas
et

à
la
postérité
j'y dis merde et remerde
et rereverde

drôlement feintée
la postérité
qui attendait son poème

ah mais

Queneau, you see, is not limited, and he doesn't take himself over-seriously. He's too wise. He doesn't limit himself to being either serious or frivolous—or

even, I might say, to being either a scientist or an artist. He's both. He uses everything that he finds in life for his poetry—and even things that he doesn't find in life, such as a mathematically disappearing dog, or a proud trojan horse who sits in a French bar and drinks gin fizzes with silly humans.* And all this is, I think, the reason why you find people in England who don't know who Queneau is. Two of his novels were published here, by John Lehmann, in English translations, about 10 years ago. They were, I think, not very successful here. Even though the critics thought they were writing favourably about them. I was looking through the reviews of one of them—*Pierrot*—the other day, and this brings me back to what I was saying about Queneau's wit and lightness of touch being possibly misleading—the book's very brilliance seemed to blind the critics to the fact that it was *about* anything. The *New Statesman* wrote: "*Pierrot* is simply a light-hearted little fantasy . . .", and *Time & Tide* came down to Parish Magazine style: "This novel is of the kind called 'so very french'. It is all very unassuming and amusing, and most of us enjoy this kind of fun." According to the current way of thinking (or not-thinking), it seems that if we are to enjoy anything then we must not have to think about it, and, conversely, if we are to think about anything, then we mustn't enjoy it. This is a calamitous and idiotic division of functions.

And this, I think, brings me to the *Exercices de Style*. Queneau is a linguist, and he also has a passionate interest in the French language. He has given a lot of thought to one aspect of it—the French language as *actually spoken*. In *Bâtons, Chiffres et Lettres*, he

* *The Trojan Horse & At the Edge of the Forest*. Gaberbocchus

writes: "I consider spoken French to be a different language, a very different language, from written French." And in the same book, he says: "I came to realise that modern written French must free itself from the conventions which still hem it in, (conventions of style, spelling and vocabulary) and then it will soar like a butterfly away from the silk cocoon spun by the grammarians of the 16th century and the poets of the 17th century. It also seemed to me that the first statement of this new language should be made not by describing some popular event in a novel (because people could mistake one's intentions), but, in the same way as the men of the 16th century used the modern languages instead of latin for writing their theological or philosophical treatises, to put some philosophical dissertation into spoken French."

Queneau did in fact "put some philosophical dissertation into spoken French"—Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*. At least, he says that it was with this idea in mind that he started to write "something which later became a novel called *le Chiendent*." I won't say anything about the correspondence between it and *le Chiendent* now, but this novel, *le Chiendent*, is one of the easiest to read of all Queneau's novels, and also one of the most touching and thought-provoking. It is also almost farcically funny in parts.

This research into language is, of course, carried on in the *Exercices*. You get plenty of variations of the way different people actually speak—casual, noble, slang, feminine, etc. But you may have noticed that the exercise on p.129 starts like this:

JO UN VE UR MI RS SU DI AP RL TE
(that's in French, by the way. The English translation naturally looks quite different:

ED ON TO AY RD WA ID SM YO DA HE

Now please don't think that I'm going to try to persuade you that this is Queneau's idea of how anyone speaks French. You can't really discover 99 different ways of speaking one language. Well, perhaps you can, but you don't find them in the *Exercices*. I have analysed the 99 variations into roughly 7 different groups. The first—different types of speech. Next, different types of written prose. These include the style of a publisher's blurb, of an official letter, the "philosophic" style, and so on. Then there are 5 different poetry styles, and 8 exercises which are character sketches through language—reactionary, biased, abusive, etc. Fifthly there is a large group which experiments with different grammatical and rhetorical forms; sixthly, those which come more or less under the heading of *jargon*, and lastly, all sorts of odds and ends whose classification I'm still arguing about. This group includes the one quoted above, which is called: *permutations by groups of 2, 3, 4 and 5 letters*. Under *jargon* you get, for instance, one variation which tells the story in mathematical terms, one using as many botanical terms as possible, one using greek roots to make new words, and one in dog latin.

All this could be so clever that it could be quite ghastly and perfectly unreadable. But in fact I saw somewhere that *Exercices de Style* is Queneau's best seller among the French public. I have already intimated that however serious his purpose, Queneau is much more likely to write a farce than a pedantic treatise. His purpose here, in the *Exercices*, is, I think, a profound exploration into the possibilities of language. It is an experiment in the philosophy of language. He pushes language around in a multiplicity of directions to see what will happen. As he is a virtuoso of language and likes to amuse himself and

his readers, he pushes it a bit further than might appear necessary—he exaggerates the various styles into a *reductio ad absurdum*—*ad lib.*, *ad inf.*, and sometimes, —the final joke—*ad nauseam*.

I am saying a lot about what I think, but Queneau himself has had something to say about it. In a published conversation with Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, he says: "In *les Exercices de Style*, I started from a real incident, and in the first place I told it 12 times in different ways. Then a year later I did another 12, and finally there were 99. People have tried to see it as an attempt to demolish literature—that was not at all my intention. In any case my intention was merely to produce some exercises; the finished product may possibly act as a kind of rust-remover to literature, help to rid it of some of its scabs. If I have been able to contribute a little to this, then I am very proud, especially if I have done it without boring the reader too much."

That Queneau *has* done this without boring the reader *at all*, is perhaps the most amazing thing about his book. Imagine how boring it might have been—99 times the same story, and a story which has no point, anyway! I have spent more than a year, off and on, on the English version of the *Exercices*, but I haven't yet found any boredom attached to it. The more I go into each variation, the more I see in it. And the point about the original story having *no* point, is one of *the* points of the book. So much knowledge and comment on life is put into this pointless story. It's also important that it should be the same story all the time. Anybody can—and automatically does—describe different things in different ways. You don't speak poetically to the man in the ticket office at Victoria when you want to ask him for "two third

returns, Brighton." Nor, as Jespersen points out, do you say to him: "Would you please sell me two third-class tickets from London to Brighton and back again, and I will pay you the usual fare for such tickets." Queneau's tour-de-force lies in the fact that the simplicity and banality of the material he starts from gives birth to so much.

This brings me to the last thing I want to say, which is about the English version. Queneau told me that the *Exercices* was one of his books which he would like to be translated—(he didn't suggest by whom). At the time I thought he was crazy. I thought that the book was an experiment with the French language as such, and therefore as untranslatable as the smell of garlic in the Paris metro. But I was wrong. In the same way as the story *as such* doesn't matter, the particular language it is written in doesn't matter as such. Perhaps the book is an exercise in communication patterns, whatever their linguistic sounds. And it seems to me that Queneau's attitude of enquiry and examination can, and perhaps should?—be applied to every language, and that is what I have tried to achieve with the English version.

B. W.

