

EXERCISES IN STYLE

Other books by Raymond Queneau from the same publisher

The Bark Tree (1933)

The Sunday of Life (1952)

The Flight of Icarus (1968)

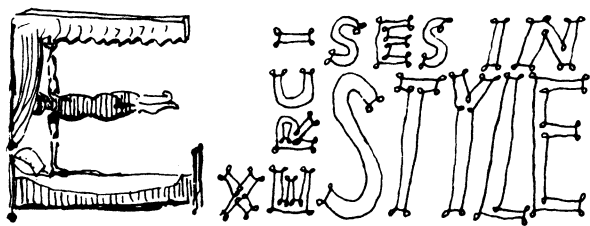
We Always Treat Women Too Well (1947)

Zazie in the Metro (1959)

Reprints in preparation:

The Blue Flower (1965)

Dates refer to original French publication



RAYMOND QUENEAU

Translated by Barbara Wright

JOHN CALDER
LONDON

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Reprinted 1981
Reprinted 1998
Reprinted 2008

First published in France as *Exercices de Style* in 1947 by
Editions Gallimard.

This edition published in English by John Calder Publishers 1998.

The music on page 124 is by Pierre Philippe and is in his handwriting.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

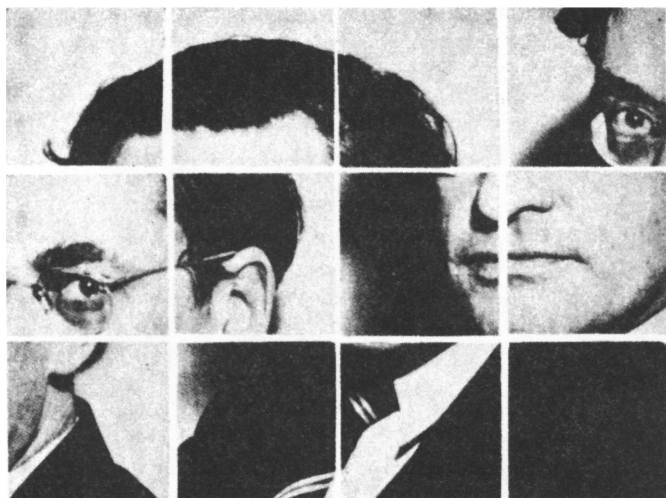
Queneau, Raymond
Exercices in style.
I. Title
843'.9'1F PQ2633.U43E9

ISBN 0 7145 4238 5 / (pbk.)

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire



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2312
3123

see : permutations. pages 129-133

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NOTES FOR THE 1981
PAPERBACK EDITION

Asked whether, to herald this new edition of the *Exercises in Style*, I might have anything to add to my 1958 preface, I was a little surprised to discover that I did indeed have quite a bit to add. By now the book is very well known in many countries and has maybe even become a classic, but literati the whole world over still have a great deal to learn from the simple, mocking, amused linguistic lesson that Queneau here conceals beneath his characteristic humor. Prophets proverbially getting more of a raw deal in their own countries than elsewhere, it is perhaps the French who have learned the least. To take a few categories at random: would anyone like to assert that French art critics, sociologists, or philosophers, have been converted to Queneau's thesis that it is rather a good

idea to write a) unpretentiously, and b) so that we, the vulgar, can understand them?

Since 1947 there have been at least six new editions of this book in France, one of them a superb luxury affair, with each variation printed in a different typographical form invented by Massin, and the whole followed by "33 parallel exercises in style, drawn, painted and sculpted by Carelman." In the introduction to that (1963) edition, Queneau explains that the idea for the *Exercices* came to him in the 1930s, after he and his friend Michel Leiris had attended a concert at the Salle Pleyel where Bach's *The Art of Fugue* had been played. What particularly struck Queneau about this piece was that, although based on a rather slight theme, its variations "proliferated almost to infinity." It would be interesting, he thought, to create a similar work of literature.

By 1942 he had produced the first 12 variations on his "slight theme." These were refused by the puzzled editor of "an extremely distinguished literary review." Undismayed, Queneau kept adding exercises over the years until by 1946 he had composed 99. "I stopped there," he wrote, "judging this quantity to be sufficient; neither too many nor too few: the Greek ideal, you might say." All the later published editions stop at 99 too, though in the most recent (unornamented) edition (1973) there are some no doubt significant expulsions and substitutions, which I'll say more about later. In spite of this self-imposed restriction to 99 for the purposes of the ideal Greek volume, Queneau later published further exercises in various reviews, and in the luxury volume I have mentioned he gives us in an appendix a list of "possible exercises in style"—no less than 124 of them!—ranging from "The Seven Deadly Sins" to a further plethora of abstruse rhetorical terms such as anacoluthon, or anadiplosis. (The conscientious reader of the present volume may well consider, however, that he has already enlarged

his rhetorical vocabulary quite sufficiently. Translating it did wonders for mine.)

The translation is based on the original 1947 French publication, and nothing has been changed from the first English edition. I was given the opportunity to make the odd discreet revision, but I decided that rather than mess about with a word here or there I would prefer to let the whole stand as it is. There are certainly a few words that I would write differently today, but I don't think they stand out too flagrantly. On a rereading, I was at first a little taken aback by, for instance, the expression "teddy boy," but I was quite reassured when I found it in your very own most recent Webster, where it is defined as: "A young British hoodlum who affects Edwardian dress." Maybe the study of what would automatically have been translated differently in 1981 would be an amusing exercise in style in itself.

A few remarks about some of the substitutions (approved by Queneau) in my version. It wouldn't have made any sense to try to reproduce *in English* the way French peasants (in the nineteenth century) spoke French. There wouldn't have been any point, either, in informing Anglo-Saxons about the way Italians tend to pronounce French. In the former case I substituted *West Indian*, and I had the greatest fun in lifting phrases and expressions wholesale from Samuel Selvon's marvelous book *The Lonely Londoners*. In substituting *Opera English* for *Italianismes* I had just as much fun, and it was also in a mild sort of way an act of revenge. I had translated three classical operas. With some reluctance, I might add, because, without *too* much exaggeration, it seemed to me that just about the whole of the libretti consisted in the protagonists declaiming—at great length—either: "Ah, how I suffer!" or: "Ah! I am in raptures!" However, I did them, and apart from superhuman efforts to make the texts singable, I also tried to make them as simple and as little

ecstatic as possible. But this made some of the singers a little uneasy. Unless the phrases were of the order of: "Ah! if to do it he continues . . .," they had the vague feeling that they weren't really poetic. I understood how this had come about when I studied some of the published—and much sung—opera translations of the time. So in *Opera English* I took great—and perhaps sneaky—satisfaction in appropriating whole phrases from these well-worn translations. To take just one example, I swear to you that "His words deep within my heart are sculptured" is stolen, *in toto*, from one of these poetic libretti.

A confession about the *Modern Style* exercise. In 1958, way before the recent revival of "art nouveau," I simply didn't know the strange fact that for this particular *genre* the French use English words—which are translated into English by French words. I refuse to take the entire responsibility for the discrepancy in style here, though, because I consulted Queneau and naively asked him what sort of English "modern style" he thought I should use. He replied that he wasn't qualified to advise me. With hindsight, I now tend to think that he was thus amusing himself hugely at my ignorance. However that may be, I solved (?) the problem by once again having fun, and shoving in all the (modern) journalistic clichés I could think of.

And now a word about Queneau's own substitutions in his 1973 edition. *Reactionary* and *Feminine*, for example, have been expunged, and replaced respectively, and perhaps mysteriously, by *Ensembleliste* (which I think has something to do with "set theory"), and *Lipogramme*. A lipogram, as of course you know (although your abovementioned Webster won't help you if you don't), is "a writing from which all words are omitted which contain a particular letter." Here, Queneau has performed the staggering feat of writing a whole exercise without using the letter E—the most boringly characterless of all

letters, because the most common. For *Haiku* he has substituted *Tanka*: “An unrhymed Japanese verse form of five lines containing 5,7,5,7, and 7 syllables respectively—compare HAIKU.” In his *Haiku*, Queneau, with his oh so justifiable poetic license, omitted one of the obligatory classical elements—the reference to one of the four seasons. (Naturally, I, in my pedantic way, restored it: “Summer S. . . .”) Just in case you might feel cheated not to have his *Tanka*, I’ll translate it for you here, for free:

The S bus arrives
A behatted dude gets in
There follows a clash
Later outside Saint-Lazare
There is talk of a button

There’s still a whole lot more I’d love to have room to say. Such as that, whereas in my 1958 preface I amateurishly analyzed Queneau’s exercises into “roughly 7 different groups,” the sumptuous 1963 illustrated edition includes, as a bonus, a real, proper, professional analysis by Dr. Claude Leroy, a psychiatrist, who compares Queneau’s “deformation of language” with that obsessively practised by some psychiatric patients, for reasons best known to their unconscious. This essay is called: “Study on the loss of information and the variation in meaning in Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*.” And though the doctor ends his study by describing it as “long and weighty, and, like all analyses, destructive. . . .” it is actually of the greatest fascination, and one more pointer to the fact that, however funny we may find Queneau’s exercises—and even after all this time, many of them still make even me laugh aloud—there is a great deal more to them than funniness.

Which brings me back to my original preface. Just

two remarks. Firstly: *Le Chiendent*, which I there called “one of the easiest to read of all Queneau’s novels,” was translated some years ago under the title *The Bark Tree* and, so far as I know, is still available. And lastly: The Paris metro no longer smells of garlic. It is the cleanest, best, and most efficient system of public transport in the whole of my limited experience of the public transport systems of the world.

BARBARA WRIGHT

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 ways—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 reremerde

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*.

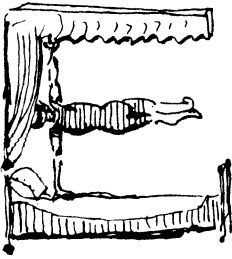
I am saying a lot about what *I* think, but Queneau himself has had something to say about it. In a published conversation with Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, he says: "In *les Exercices de Style*, I started from a real incident, and in the first place I told it 12 times in different ways. Then a year 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

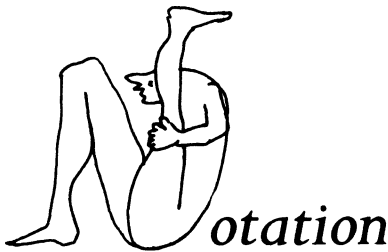
returns, Brighton." Nor, as Jespersen points out, do you say to him: "Would you please sell me two third-class tickets from London to Brighton and back again, and I will pay you the usual fare for such tickets." Queneau's tour-de-force lies in the fact that the simplicity and banality of the material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



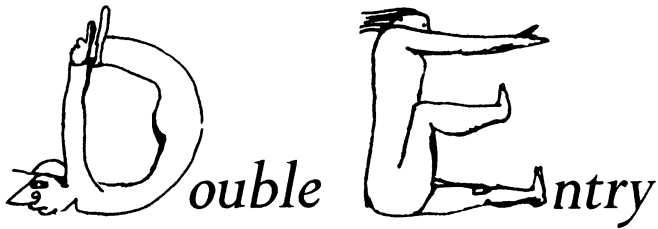
RESISTANCE
IN
THE
WEST



In the S bus, in the rush hour. A chap of about 26, felt hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone's been having a tug-of-war with it. People getting off. The chap in question gets annoyed with one of the men standing next to him. He accuses him of jostling him every time anyone goes past. A snivelling tone which is meant to be aggressive. When he sees a vacant seat he throws himself on to it.

Two hours later, I meet him in the Cour de Rome, in front of the gare Saint-Lazare. He's with a friend who's saying: "You ought to get

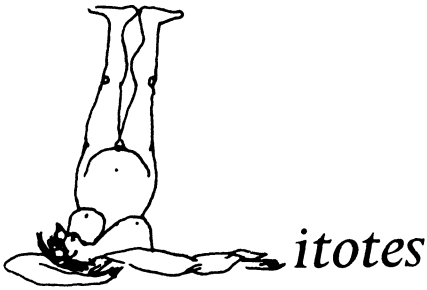
an extra button put on your overcoat.” He shows him where (at the lapels) and why.



Towards the middle of the day and at midday I happened to be on and got on to the platform and the balcony at the back of an S-line and of a Contrescarpe-Champerret bus and passenger transport vehicle which was packed and to all intents and purposes full. I saw and noticed a young man and an old adolescent who was rather ridiculous and pretty grotesque; thin neck and skinny windpipe, string and cord round his hat and tile. After a scrimmage and scuffle he says and states in a lachrymose and snivelling voice and tone that his neighbour and fellow-traveller is deliberately trying and doing his utmost to push him and obtrude

himself on him every time anyone gets off and makes an exit. This having been declared and having spoken he rushes headlong and wends his way towards a vacant and a free place and seat.

Two hours after and a-hundred-and-twenty minutes later, I meet him and see him again in the Cour de Rome and in front of the gare Saint-Lazare. He is with and in the company of a friend and pal who is advising and urging him to have a button and vegetable ivory disc added and sewn on to his overcoat and mantle.



Some of us were travelling together. A young man, who didn't look very intelligent, spoke to the man next to him for a few moments, then he went and sat down. Two hours later I met him again; he was with a friend and was talking about clothes.



In the centre of the day, tossed among the shoal of travelling sardines in a coleopter with a big white carapace, a chicken with a long, featherless neck suddenly harangued one, a peace-abiding one, of their number, and its parlance, moist with protest, was unfolded upon the airs. Then, attracted by a void, the fledgling precipitated itself thereunto.

In a bleak, urban desert, I saw it again that self-same day, drinking the cup of humiliation offered by a lowly button.



etrograde

You ought to put another button on your overcoat, his friend told him. I met him in the middle of the Cour de Rome, after having left him rushing avidly towards a seat. He had just protested against being pushed by another passenger who, he said, was jostling him every time anyone got off. This scraggy young man was the wearer of a ridiculous hat. This took place on the platform of an S bus which was full that particular midday.



How tightly packed in we were on that bus platform! And how stupid and ridiculous that young man looked! And what was he doing? Well, if he wasn't actually trying to pick a quarrel with a chap who—so he claimed! the young fop! kept on pushing him! And then he didn't find anything better to do than to rush off and grab a seat which had become free! Instead of leaving it for a lady!

Two hours after, guess whom I met in front of the gare Saint-Lazare! The same fancy-pants! Being given some sartorial advice! By a friend!

You'd never believe it!