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Science Into Poetry

Marjorie Welish

►—I been thinkin'
 —Sit down . . . it'll pass . . .
 —Nope, it's no use . . . I'm still thinkin'
 —Well, what's your thinking? Thinking-wise that's . . .
 —I dunno . . . A lot of it is in French.,
 — *Pogo*, January 16, 1961

Entry 2176 of Raymond Queneau's journal quotes this dialogue from the comic strip *Pogo*, and although it is atypical of Queneau's practice to cite the American English, it is altogether typical and definitive of his journal entries. Condensed in the extreme is the theme of consciousness that shadows the mind in thought, but that's not the half of it. To say "I've been thinking" is to say, in effect, "I've been wondering," but as with so much assumed to be self-evident, the meaning of "think" turns out not to be so and is misinterpreted as "analysis of grounds of concepts." That Queneau has snagged this gem of semantic slippage allows us to glimpse his dedicated inquiry into the raveling of sense as language makes and unmakes thought.

Linguistic snafus, translation caught in between languages, a dictionary of received ideas to stupefy the reader—these are a few of the demonstrable instrumentalities to be found in Queneau's fiction and poetry. The journal where he logged his truly encyclopedic lists of readings and crystallized his poetics into epigram became the workbook where he sketched experimental possibilities for writing provoked from his readings, high and low.

That Queneau had a mania for reading is a gross understatement. Legendarily, at age 15 he read the first volume of the *Dictionnaire Larousse* from start to finish, an event symptomatic of a lifelong passion for acquiring knowledge and of the will to do so methodically. Possessed with an encyclopedic capacity (he would become the director of the *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade* in 1954), Queneau (1903–1976) was nonetheless given to pursue the grounds of knowledge by reading philosophy and mathematics—number theory in particular—and deploying rules and procedures derived from it for literary ends. In 1960, with the chemical engineer and mathematician François Le Lionnais, Queneau founded the informal collective Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature

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Potentielle), the aim of which was to explore the literary possibility of structures given and invented.

It was Queneau's conversations with Le Lionnais as Queneau (already dedicated to experimental limits) completed one his most infamous works, *One Hundred Million Million Poems*, that prompted the foundation of the Oulipo. In effect a sequence of ten sonnets, *One Hundred Million Million Poems* is designed so that any line in a given sonnet can be exchanged for the corresponding line in any of the others without compromise to the rhyme scheme or conventional grammar. As each of the ten sonnets runs the usual 14 lines in length, this fungibility makes for a total of 10¹⁴ possible combinations of lines—enough poetry to provide 190,258,751 years of uninterrupted reading, according to Queneau's calculations.

Fanatical perhaps, but not as idiosyncratic as it seems. Rules for generating form or even instructions for realizing "pieces" were widespread practice in post–World War II culture: in music, systematizing all elements of serial music was the most notorious of these. In his *Boulez on New Music Today* (1963), Pierre Boulez advocated composition through algorithm in the belief that creativity manifested through powerful conceptual strategies and tactics—not scattershot inspiration—will yield significant if not immortal artifacts. Postwar literature, music, visual art, and dance have tested this formalism and have proved it truly creative time and time again.

Raymond Queneau is a number cruncher in imaginary worlds, yet he is also keen to explore the properties of bases 1, 2, 3, and 4 and the arithmetic fecundity whose potentiality yields to fiction. His second of no fewer than 18 novels, *The Blue Flowers* (1965), interleaves two situations, medieval and modern, and from these derives the incongruity of language and mores so ingrained in Queneau's view of culture. In these picaresque adventures the medieval and modern are notable in their sameness: the cathedral Notre Dame still under construction or the block of flats supposedly under construction—perpetually under construction from the viewpoint of the observer—all is cliché that marks the conventions of their time, especially as seen through the literary formula that we take history for. Switching back and forth between then and now is marked by clear signs: of fiasco or of falling asleep. Ends are the ends of farce and romance, and both, Queneau demonstrates, are conventional givens.

However rudimentary this characterization, *The Blue Flowers* is indeed an animated demonstration of numbers and sets, as influenced by Georg Cantor, the inventor of set theory. Like folk tales in which there are no characters but rather types that are

members of classes that iterate their relations and haul their functions after them whatever the situation, Queneau's tales are so clearly coded with respect to combinatory operations and corresponding sets that at least in *The Blue Flowers* the reader believes she could reconstruct the scheme that generated the story.

Italo Calvino (an Oulipian since 1973) thought well enough of *The Blue Flowers* to translate it himself. He also wrote a commentary on the arcane *Little Portable Cosmogony* (1950), Queneau's postwar effort at science in verse. Queneau, whose pastime was reading encyclopedias, would become a writer of a kind of encyclopedia whose subject was the emergence of life from chaos through the coagulation of biologically informed physics and the repeated emergence of newer life, the human inflection of which produces technologies. With his interest in rendering exact sciences in terms of speculative ordering systems, it is no wonder that Queneau wished to "transmute" (Calvino's word) science into poetry:

The Earth appears under- and overripe,
she bellows
flour distilling dust which clucks within
the duct,
and where the night's crust aspires
coarse growth
drops of the microbial mouth in the
mute well
The Earth emerging under- and
overripe, she imbibes
feverish storms which vomit sweat
A calm establishes itself Clouds have
melted
like leaden lead soldiers prevailing
upon the thickening infant-tillage
to take up the yoke of the ripeness of
time on earth.

(translation mine)

In Queneau's poems written from 1920 on, words as verbal association commingle with the adventures and misadventures of inquiry. For "Place de la Bastille" (from *Courir les rues*, published in 1968) the poet strikes a documentary tone as he (dis)proves that Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason, which states that nothing happens by chance, applies to the annual celebration of Bastille Day:

Extant is a letter by Leibniz
dated 14 July 1686

in which he draws attention to
the Principle of Sufficient Reason
this date in the history of philosophy
explains why each year the people of Paris
dance all night in the public squares

(trans. by Teo Savory)

Explanations fascinate Queneau, and he reserves a special tenderness for their inadequacy. Once upon a time, as we read in “The Archipelago” (from *L'instant fatale*, 1948), the archipelago and the mischievous volcano were at odds in making their own laws, the latter engulfing boats and “excreting crustaceans,” the former, nice enough until crossed, venting his anger in martial law and mutilation. Arrested, condemned to hard labor, the volcano escapes by throwing himself into the sea:

he put a shovel on his shoulder
and a compass-saw under his arm
to mutilate Stromboli with
He was arrested imprisoned judged
condemned to hard labour
but in the Gulf of Mexico he escaped
and throwing himself into the sea
made up the famous Antilles of which
the principal islands are:
Trinidad Martinique Dominica Jamaica
the Bahamas Haïti Santo Domingo
Puerto Rico and Curaçao

(trans. by Teo Savory)

And as cosmogonies provide our myth of origins, so cosmologies give us our fictive explanations. What is interesting about Queneau and evidenced in his poems is a connoisseurship not much applied to noting perceptual phenomena but rather to inventing orders of knowledge and teasing out intellectual incongruities in our logic. Beyond this, the incommensurability of philosophical and linguistic registers that analysis tries to distinguish but everyday communication confuses is not entirely non-sense: it marks the contest of disjunctive worlds trying to sustain themselves in nonnegotiable situations. Or negotiable but indecipherable because (as Pogo indicates) they are in a foreign language. (Entry 2296: “problem posed by Le Lionnais: to a rational order . . . respond with an alphabetical order.”)

The Oulipo attracts many gifted in math and also professional mathematicians, Jacques Roubaud conspicuous among them. Like Calvino, he writes on Queneau from within the practice and with deep respect, although not without some skepticism. At issue is

whether axiomatic geometric principles may be translated into literary principles. Roubaud discusses one of Queneau's last tests, presented to the Oulipo workshop in 1976, in which modes of organizing language conducted axiomatically extend through Queneau's translating David Hilbert's musing about the relation of points, lines, and planes to a statement relating words, sentences, and paragraphs: "A sentence having been given, and a word not belonging to this sentence in the paragraph determined by the sentence and this word, there exists at the most one sentence including this word which has no other word in common with the first given sentence."

Roubaud wonders on our behalf of what use this is for literature. An answer: it is productive of conceptual frameworks. A further answer: it is an imaginative constraint rich in potential. In other words, precisely insofar as translating mathematical axioms into literature will expose the incommensurability of two worlds, imaginative potentiality may be revealed. Of potentiality in play and of play in thought, Queneau has much to say. It is well known that as a workshop Oulipo, emphatically tolerant of curiosity and productivity indifferent to masterpieces, disaffects much of the reading public. That is the cost of valuing experiment.

Beyond his abiding interest in semantic drift and confusion, Queneau was keen to advance research into syntax, even syntax writ large, and computer programming allowed him to enjoy happy adventures and misadventures in plot construction. "A Story As You Like It" is a product of such research. With subroutines that loop and proffer alternative routes or quit, the story demonstrates as well as any the potential of programming for folk tales, fantasies, histories, epics—literature as monumentally installed in its genre as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. (Entry 2223 says that Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* is neither an *Iliad* nor an *Odyssey*. This is Queneau's shorthand for labeling Gertrude Stein's narrative innovative.)

Queneau may be avant-garde in his having anticipated the French New Novel of the 1950s, but he is also a modernist who values tradition—indeed, reads it in order to learn from its models. Interviewed by Georges Carbonnier, Queneau said that his fiction is the product of experiment as rigorous as a sonnet. By this he means that Oulipian forms are neither more nor less invented than the sonnet—that is, neither more nor less arbitrary, neither more nor less disciplined. And, we might add, neither more nor less conventional. From the indestructible myth of Oedipus to the clichéd routines of vaudeville, the formula tagged by Queneau as "The Relation X takes Y for Z" continues to thrive. (Think of Samuel Beckett's "Come and Go," a play consisting entirely of three gossips exchanging places, two against one, until

permutations are exhausted.)

The significant payoff here lies in how abstract rules may be enjoyed for their creative heft even if embedded in banal practices. The Oulipo, Queneau's brainchild, is premised on experimentation through indifferent methods in the belief that such instrumentalities of permutation and combination will generate literature readily open to worlds beyond the author's immediate experience. If banality is welcomed, it is in large measure because the analytic mind can track the commonplaces in their status as atomic units. For many heirs of Flaubert, moreover, banality is morbidly fascinating. Banality, which is hardly the same thing as profundity (may the record show), a social practice of commonplaces that constitute what most people call philosophy. Like Beckett, Queneau exploits "philosophical" platitudes that provoke tantrums when they do not stupefy actors into inaction.

Entirely relevant to this poetics of indifference, then, is that Roland Barthes, writing his early polemical *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), should seize upon Queneau to advocate for stylistic objectivity in what he himself will help develop: a Structuralist mentality to analyze the sociolects of myth and fiction. Queneau had already anticipated objectifying social habits and styles in the most popular book of his entire career, *Exercises in Style*, begun in 1942 and published in 1947, and the novel *Zazie dans le métro*, written in 1945 and published in 1959. An underground and shady odyssey, *Zazie dans le métro* depicts not a wonderland exactly, but the linguistic puzzles throughout ensure that the characters take offense at any remark and thereby perpetuate miscommunication. (The Louis Malle movie based on the novel appeared in 1960.) Styles fascinate Queneau as well as forms, and *Exercises in Style*, inspired by a concert performance of Bach's *Art of Fugue* and a best-seller ever since its publication, proffers style at the expense of form and form at the expense of subject matter. A banal vignette in which a long-necked, irritable man is first noted taking a seat on a bus and is then caught standing on the street paying petty attention to a friend's coat button becomes the pretext for 99 rhetorical and modal deformations, from litotes to blurb, precision to permutation, and through a multitude of genres and forms, from haiku:

Summer S long neck
plait hat toes abuse retreat
station button friend

to sonnet

Glabrous was his dial and plaited was his
bonnet,

And he, a puny colt—(how sad the neck
he bore,
And long)—was now intent upon his
quotidian chore—
The bus arriving full, of somehow
getting on it.

One came, a number ten—or else
perhaps an S,
Its platform, small adjunct of this
plebian carriage,
Was crammed with such a mob as to
preclude free passage;
Rich bastards lit cigars upon it, to
impress.

The young giraffe described so well in
my first strophe,
Having got on the bus, started at once to
curse an
Innocent citizen—(he wanted an easy
trophy

But got the worst of it.) Then, spying a
vacant place,
Escaped thereto. Time passed. On the
way back, a person
Was telling him that a button was just
too low in space.

(trans. by Barbara Wright)

One language as another foregrounds linguistic register and formal register simultaneously, and the changes style performs illuminate the logic of contrariness and what the British critic John Weightman has called “the impossibility of realism in any unitary sense.” Queneau’s style manual earns its continuous celebrity.

In light of Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Beckett, yet also Roussel, Jarry, and Stein, Queneau assumes the birthright of research into narrative and investigation into adventure and quest. Queneau helped initiate the New Novel’s enhanced research into narrative orders, in which counters stand in for characters; he gave inspiration to many great and near-great writers, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Marguerite Duras; and he developed protocols for investigating literary potentiality stimulating to many more through the ragged band of luminaries that constitute Oulipo, from the mathematical writings of Jacques

Roubaud to the storied stories of Italo Calvino, from the ingenious fictions of Georges Perec to the exquisitely algorithmic pieces of Harry Mathews. Procedural to the core are Gilbert Sorrentino and Harryette Mullen, still engaging Oulipian poetics. These writers are ambitious for the quest itself yet also the quarry: innovation. Experimental writing is by definition its own adventure, a way characterized most definitely with error yet also with discovery and potential conceptual originality, which in time may well prove significant. Raymond Queneau's aphoristic encyclopedia embodies all of it. (Entry 2363: "For madcap fellows such as I / Cantor had already blazed the trail.") ■

Marjorie Welsh's books include *Signifying Art: Essays on Art After 1960*, *The Annotated "Here" and Selected Poems*, and most recently *Word Groups*.

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