Title
Queneau Novelist: "Quel diable de langaige est-ce là?"

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QUENEAU NOVELIST:
"Quel diable de *langaige* est-ce là?"

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Throughout Raymond Queneau's novels there is continual transgression of narrative traditions in a multitude of ways. As a result of this transgression language itself is foregrounded. The term "transgression" denotes the exceeding of a boundary or limit, which implies in turn an already existing set of traditions, conventions, rules or laws. Transgression implicitly carries with it the notion of a possibility of renewal in infinite combinations and will thus be considered here in a positive light.

The Saussurian terms of *langue* and *parole* are helpful to situate the way Queneau uses language in his novels. For Queneau, *langue* refers to the system from which he draws elements serving as specific manifestations of that system. Though much of his enterprise consisted of placing components of speech in written form, the language with which Queneau is contending remains that of the written tradition.

Queneau's novels purportedly are about human characters, but by the use of such transgressive techniques as metacommentary and temporal reflexivity, the words used to write about characters and to make descriptions are really calling attention to themselves. Thus the difference in forward narrative propulsion between a "human" character and language as character is that in the first case language serves as a tool for another medium, that of character development, while in the second instance, language is both tool and medium. In

such a situation, violations of literary convention are inevitable. The stable meaning language serves to transmit is precisely and paradoxically that there is no stable meaning to language.

Language is used to say what it is not. Its insinuation into the narrative text as *language* and not as a tool makes the reader aware of its constantly changing forms and possibilities. In other words, the reader is not allowed to forget that language is there as an entity as well as an agent. Anything in written form serves as a means of fixing a language, as opposed to the fluidity and ever-changing aspects of speech. Queneau's efforts at wedging a language aware of itself into the traditional narrative text serve to create a sort of play in the writing. Even though words have been fixed on the page for good, they remain open and flexible in much the same sense as spoken language adapts and evolves. By the transgressive use of language in a narrative text, Queneau hints at alternate possibilities for that language, using his text to demonstrate that words can be employed in many ways.

How is narrative transgression manifested in Queneau's novels? As stated earlier, the principal means is by causing language to call attention to itself. There are several ways to explore the phenomenon of the self-conscious narrative. Four will be discussed here. First we will consider metacommentary or ways in which the narrator intrudes into his story. Our second approach will be to study an aspect of the subversion of traditional style. Then we will examine how narrative progression is stalled by reflexivity in order to undermine that progression. Lastly we will attempt to discover what role is played by the reader in these transgressive texts.

A discussion of the narrator's intrusion into the text is best begun by situating it with respect to narrative mode. For our purposes, and based on Genette's definition, mode is the means by which a narrative furnishes information to the reader. It involves two principal categories, those of distance (upon which we focus here) and perspective.

Distance is useful as a means of illustrating that narrative transgression referred to as metacommentary above. The aspect of narrative mode known as distance is closely allied in Queneau's works with transgressions of the traditional narrative line. Dismantling the illusion of mimesis associated with the latter convention in order to see how the narrative works is the real quest and the true pleasure of Queneau's novels.

How does Queneau violate conventional narrative norms with respect to distance? In order to create a background against which the norm can be shattered, he must first employ a narrative distance which complies with literary convention. By carefully controlling his departures from the conventional, Queneau shows us another possibility by gesturing discreetly—and sometimes not so discreetly— back toward the text itself.

Instead of disguising his writing as an attempt at a transparent mediation between the story he wishes to tell and the discourse, (or means he uses to tell it), Queneau employs a number of methods to deform the text and in so doing shows us what *might* be. Thus his texts often are not used primarily as vehicles for expression but as ends in themselves. The important relation is no longer that between signifier and signified but between signifier and signifier. In the following quote the message is clearly bypassed in favor of the language used to express it:

> Lorsque arrivé à sa hauteur, Bonjour, dit-il et Narcense le regarda. Il commença par employer exclamativement la deuxième personne du singulier de l'impératif présent du verbe tenir, puis énonça les syllabes composant le nom de la personne reconnue par lui. Point surpris d'ailleurs, plutôt interrogateur.[1]

Here, a simple greeting amounting to "Tiens, Narcense?" is turned inside out to expose the grammatical components that went into making the greeting. There is humor in the exposure, as it shows just how much metalanguage is required to explain something so apparently uncomplicated as a brief salutation. Emphasis is placed on discourse as the subject of fiction and not on the fiction itself. Instead of using a strictly linear style giving the illusion of seamlessness, Queneau often arranges his narrative to display prominently the seams, those places demonstrating most convincingly that it was put together.

Another example of Queneau's use of metacommentary to establish a transgressive distance in the text is seen in the frequent appearance of the narrative *je*:

> . . . l'observateur, mourant de faim, s'assit devant une table de marbre veinée de crasse, sur laquelle on avait négligemment posé une cuiller, une fourchette, un verre, un couteau, une salière, *voyons voir si je n'oublie rien*, un couteau, une salière, une fourchette, un verre, ah! et une assiette non ébréchée.[2] (emphasis added)

Here the narrator insinuates himself into the plot just enough to be perceived both as a character and as one who controls what the reader sees. The result of such obvious intrusion is quite simply to undermine in a playful way the traditional concept of distance between the narrator and his text.

A logical extension of metacommentary is the ultimate transgression: a breakdown in the narrative. In the next example, the text contains a sort of echo ending up as an ironic commentary on language itself:

> Stahl reprit la conversation interrompue. On ne pouvait donc (donc) vivre dans un pays perdu comme celui-ci et pourtant il y vivait bien. Pourquoi cela? Comment cela? Il était là parce qu'il le voulait bien. Vouloir, un mot. Il était là parce que. Bref, une histoire triste à la source. Une histoire de femme. On ne peut pas vivre dans un pays perdu comme celui-ci, dit Stahl, et pourtant il y vit bien. On se demande pourquoi....Lui Stahl il était là parce qu'il le voulait bien, enfin, vouloir c'est un mot et parce que, c'est un autre mot.[3]

By means of these repetitions the text parrots itself as it is being created. Finally it can go nowhere but in circles, ending by drawing attention to each of its words *as* words. Emphasis is on the code, on the metalingual functions of language. Such a breakdown in the narrative draws the text in on itself so that attention is focused on literary creation and not on substance or content. This example is the first step toward a more critical difficulty, that of the narrative's ability to exist at all, to say anything new or meaningful, which is, of course, the primary problem of the writer and of literature.

The above examples of metacommentary obviously have a playful dimension. However, the final result of any such act of transgression on the narrative is to call attention to the discourse instead of to the story by creating ruptures in the story line. The story thus becomes somewhat contingent—gratuitous, even—for the real tale is told in the metacommentaries as disruptions. Metacommentary, however, is just one of Queneau's methods of questioning literary convention.

The second means of illustrating transgression through self-conscious narrative is to consider an aspect of Queneau's style and the way in which he undermines it. What Queneau calls the *narrative pure* (pure or conventional narrative) serves as a structural support for many of the more uncommon uses of language in which

Queneau delights. Use of the conventional narrative to provoke transgression includes a variety of the *récit répétitif*, defined by Genette as "raconter n fois ce qui s'est passé une fois..."[4] The following series from *Pierrot mon ami* demonstrates a situation wherein each statement delivers the same basic message by means of verbal and substantive substitutions. (Each is separated from the others by several paragraphs):

—Oui. Dans ce temps-là, *elle dansait* dans une *boîte de nuit*.
[. . .]
...il n'arrivait pas, malgré ses efforts, à découvrir parmi elles une *Léonie* qui *gambillait* dans un *bastringue*.
[. . .]
Voussois se mit à réconsidérer ses amours d'autrefois, sans trouver place pour une *Léonie X* qui *se trémoussait* dans un *beuglant*.
[. . .]
Et toujours pas moyen pour lui d'évoquer le souvenir d'une *petite Léonie* qui *aurait chahuté* dans un *caf' conc'*.[5] (emphasis added)

In this case, one of the characters is attempting, after being questioned, to remember someone whom he used to know. The verb/substantive substitutions move from a usage of standard French to the *argotique*, such that "she danced in a night club" becomes something like "she was a hoofer in a dive." The substitutions incorporate certain semantic changes as they progress. *Dansait* is not strictly speaking the equivalent of *chahuté*, but bearing in mind the Jakobsonian axis of selection and combination, selecting between alternatives implies the possibility of substitution. The substitutions of verbs and nouns made in the examples above have an interesting aspect: the change from one verb or noun to another motivates a corresponding change in the noun which follows it. For example, as the verb changes from the standard French *dansait* to the popular *gambillait*, the noun makes a similar change (from *boîte de nuit* to *bastringue*). In the case of the substantive *Léonie X*, an essentially anonymous designation, the noun used as a substitute for *boîte de nuit* is *beuglant*, which denotes a dance-hall of the lowest order and suggests that Léonie X may have been a prostitute. Finally, the use of the diminutive *petite* in connection with Léonie and in conjunction with the verb *chahuter* in effect motivates the various elements of the sentences. If one were to adopt the Jakobsonian definition of poetry and prose it would be clear in short order that Queneau reverses it. Jakobson searched for ways in which poetry and prose

differ, whereas Queneau once stated that he had never seen any essential differences between poetry and prose. The substitutions seen above are just one indication among many that Queneau uses techniques in his prose often associated with poetry.

The transgressive aspect in this use of the *récit répétitif* is that these repetitions are there essentially for their own sake. Keeping in mind Queneau's involvement with *la littérature potentielle*, the idea of variation, permutation or substitution of sentences is perfectly appropriate. Though there is an element of amusement involved in this sort of arrangement, there are as well serious considerations about how language works and about its potential. The generative possibility of language is one aspect of the work of the OULIPO (which stands for "Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle"). The goal of the *Oulipiens*, according to Queneau, is to propose new structures to writers. These could be of a mathematical nature, for example. The invention of new artificial or mechanical structures contributing to literary activity is another possibility. These should, however, be considered strictly aids to inspiration of creativity. An important point is that the research is supposed to be *fun*. Queneau was well aware that the work of the *Oulipiens* might be considered to be simply parlor games. He reminds the reader that both topology and number theory began as recreational mathematics.

The third point to be made concerns the stalling of narrative progression in Queneau's works and is closely related to literary tradition and its transgression.

The idea of an orderly progression of events is an essential one as it relates to the plot of a story or a novel. Implicit in the notion of progression is a process of transformation or change from one event to another as the story develops. Narrative progression is therefore unavoidably linked to such concepts as time and space, for the story has traditionally unfolded in a causal order of events. One novel's temporal progression is of interest here as it transgresses this causal order. In it, time undermines progression so that events are stalled or interrupted.

Queneau's first novel, *Le Chiendent*, is structured in circular fashion, such that the first sentence of the book is identical with the last. The circular structure is common in Queneau's work, though in no other is it quite so prominent. At the end of *Le Chiendent*, nothing has changed; it all begins again. The story created is doomed to ceaseless repetition of itself. What is more, this repetition is in-

scribed in the very structure of the text. Though the novel's circularity indicates that it is a closed system in relation to the world, *Le Chiendent* remains forever open to itself. Moreover, the circular pattern suggests something about the relationship between the time of the novel and the time of its reading: the reader is eternally implicated in the repetition along with the characters. Instead of being concerned with "what happens next," for it ultimately all only happens again, the reader is forced to confront the components of the narrative, its language, how it works, thereby focusing on the discursive aspect of narrative.

Though progress is negated, as Queneau himself points out, language is a phenomenon which is necessarily linear because it occurs in time. Words come one after the other in writing as well as in speech. There is thus a paradox inherent in the idea of negating progression by circularity in a medium requiring linearity for its completion.

Fiction becomes more than a story when its language is declared to be conscious of its own fictionality. Queneau's use of reflexivity is just this doubling of the text back upon itself. On one level, fiction is exposed as such. At the same time, another fiction is being created which is inclusive of its own self-consciousness. If a text turns back in on itself then its relation to the rest of the world is problematic; the work becomes solipsistic in a sense, for it is an entity knowing nothing but its own modifications and its own existence. In *Le Chiendent* the characters' words at the very end expose the work as fiction. The suggestion that linear time is subject to annulment is involved as well:

[Mme Cloche]: Eh bien, jamais j'me pardonnerai d'avoir marché comme j'ai marché. A propos d'la porte. Et c'qu'est rageant, c'est qu'c'est écrit, tout au long ici même....
—Eh bien, dit Etienne avec bienveillance, faut supprimer cet épisode, le raturer.
—Le littératurer, ajouta Saturnin....si vraiment ça t'chagrine comme ça, t'as qu'à recommencer....
—Alors tu crois que j'peux éponger le temps et r'mettre ça?
—....Tout de même, leu temps, c'est leu temps. L'passé, c'est l'passé. ...Annule tout ce que j'te dis.[6]

The characters' power of auto-criticism and of negating temporality consigns them to the fiction of discourse as distinct from the fiction of story. They act as discursive elements until the moment they

become aware of themselves as characters. Here is a pre-Derridian illustration of the idea of writing *sous rature (le littératurer)*. Even as the characters agree to begin again, there will always remain for the reader a trace of the first reading. The concepts of circle and ceaseless repetition doom at the outset any idea of an origin or of true progression.

Pierrot mon ami expresses its primary reflexive qualities in the epilogue. The novel is almost complete without this final supplement. What lacks in this whodunit besides the absence of a revelation of a crime or criminal is reflexivity as a transgression:

> ...*il voyait le roman que cela aurait pu faire*, un roman policier avec un crime, un coupable et un détective, et les engrènements voulus entre les différentes aspérités de la démonstration, et *il voyait le roman que cela avait fait*, un roman si dépouillé d'artifice qu'il n'était point possible de savoir s'il y avait une énigme à résoudre ou s'il n'y en avait pas...[7] (emphasis added)

Pierrot sees the novel as a novel while it is still being written; he is aware of its making while literary convention decrees that a character and his concomitant awareness of being such should be impossible. The result is that of a continual deferment of an absolute original meaning in the novel.

Though during the course of *Pierrot mon ami* it appears as if he has drifted through the story allowing events to occur by chance, by the end Pierrot is clearly in complicity with the discursive side of the novel. He is able to see "...le roman que cela avait fait...," just as the characters in *Le Chiendent* become aware at the end of the narrative that someone is recounting their stories. Their self-consciousness is the attempt to escape domination by time.

Time in these circular novels of Queneau's is finally a means of pointing out the works' own genesis as works, hence the relation with reflexivity. The use of time as a reflexive agent in the above examples is such that horizontal or linear momentum is seriously perturbed in favor of vertical expansion. The reader is obliged to stop to consider other possibilities for expression existing only potentially, as is true of poetry. Implicated in the disturbed forward momentum is the reader, upon whom certain requirements are placed because of the poeticized structure of Queneau's work, which brings us to the fourth and final area to investigate—the reader's role in these largely unconventional works.

Queneau affords his reader a definite role in the creative process, as is obvious in "Un Conte à votre façon" (1967). The twenty-one elements of the tale are all in place but the reader's task is to organize them in a fashion pleasing to him:

l-Désirez-vous connaître l'histoire des trois alertes petits-pois?
    si oui, passez à 4.
    si non, passez à 2.[8]

The tale continues on in the same manner until the "set of instructions" is complete. The reader's power here is on a par with the narrator's, since his choice is not limited to whether to continue reading or to close the book. He now has a definite role in the creative process. The above example is extreme, but it serves to point out the current emphasis placed on the reader in fiction. The reception of the text by the reader is seen as an essential constituent of narrative. This is especially true in cases such as that above, where the outcome of Queneau's text depends on the choices made by the reader for its meaning. His arrangement of the tale almost like a board game underscores the importance of its reception in an obvious way, certainly far less subtle than many of the earlier examples of transgression in his prose. "Un Conte à votre façon" is a prime example of literature as a game or even as a set of computer instructions. Though he delights in exploiting these aspects of language, Queneau is not simply playing a game. As *Exercices de style* makes clear, language and literature are replete with potential. Queneau demonstrates that literature has vast combinatory possibilities, just as does the language that makes up the literature.

The reading process is a continual transformation of one expectation into another as the reader moves through the text. This activity is the responsibility of the reader himself, for the text cannot on its own formulate expectations. Thus when confronted with a phrase such as "...le long de la rivière, il faisait nuit..." one expects a simple description. The expectation is immediately shattered by the following sentence: "Il faisait nuit ailleurs également, mais peu importe...."[9] The second sentence is perfectly valid, and as the reader realizes the truth, something normally simply assumed, as he realizes that stating it so openly is comic, a new expectation is created. Description can be funny and absurd as well as just utilitarian or decorative.

The fundamental question concerning reader involvement is a provocative one: how far will the reader go in playing the game with a subversive or transgressive text? Why should he even bother with extreme aggression on the part of the narrative? Indeed, if the act of writing is itself violent, as Derrida suggests in *De la Grammatologie*, if it constitutes a *dangereux supplément*, then any reading is of necessity linked to violence as well. Subversive writing, given Derrida's idea, becomes violent in the second degree and calls for a matching quantity of subversion in its reading. Reaction to or reception of the text is the reader's province and the final aggressive act lies with the reader. Writing as violence dictates reading as violence: the ultimate act of subversion toward a literary text is to turn away from it, as suggested by the Latin *subvertere*.

In the case of Queneau, whose prose texts are not as radically unreadable as those of some writers (Robbe-Grillet, Simon, or Sollers, for example), there must nonetheless be a set of guidelines for reading his works. The elegance of his method is that his novels are in fact quite readable. The careful transgressions leave a certain traditional narrative structure intact while suggesting that the novel does not have to be done in traditional fashion, thereby allowing the reader the maximum selectivity in terms of his attitude toward the text. Queneau makes clear his own attitude regarding the transgressive possibilities of language: "Il y a une force du langage, mais il faut savoir où l'appliquer, il y a différentes sortes de levier et l'on ne soulève pas un bloc de pierre avec un casse-noisettes."[10]

The concept of narrative transgression as set forth here should be seen as vitally linked to the reader's understanding of transgression for it to function at all. The reader, therefore, is an essential ingredient in the overall structure.

While questioning literary conventions and cultural institutions with humor and irreverence, Queneau is by no means advocating the anarchic novel or the novel's destruction as a genre. Rather, by pointing out things for what they are (for example conventions, prevailing ideologies, means of expression long taken for granted) he calls for a literature ever aware of its literariness and for a novelistic genre capable of change and evolution.

Notes

1. Raymond Queneau, *Le Chiendent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933), p. 129.

2. Queneau, *Le Chiendent*, p. 31.

3. Queneau, *Loin de Rueil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), pp. 174-75.

4. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 147.

5. Queneau, *Pierrot mon ami* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 192-94.

6. Queneau, *Le Chiendent*, pp. 430-31.

7. Queneau, *Pierrot*, p. 212.

8. Queneau, "Un Conte à votre façon," in *Contes et propos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 223.

9. Queneau, *Le Chiendent*, p. 305.

10. Queneau, *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 45-46.

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
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CONTENTS