

EXERCICES DE STYLE

Exercices de Style was written by Raymond Queneau over several years before being published in 1947, not much over a decade before he co-founded the Oulipo. It is rooted in what is often called a “banal story”. My view differs: I see its core as a curious event-series. Queneau's radical approach was to relate this *very same* brief events-sequence in an additional 99 sharply different ways – some even more pithy; others more detailed, fleshed out and elaborate; still others engage in word-play (such as anagrams and syncopes). These latter versions result in distinctly non-French words yet their meaning is plain as we are by then so intimately familiar with events' essence and sequence.

Instead of a gravitational pull towards boredom one is charmed, gradually seduced, often amused – before succumbing to a certain awe engendered by the author's ingenuity and brilliance. The recountings' accumulation makes me think of a super-elongated musical theme and variations. Beyond being, astonishingly, a French bestseller, some consider *Exercices* Queneau's masterpiece.

Barbara Wright's translation was published in 1958 and again (perhaps retooled) in 1981. I was taken aback by finding out a most prestigious translation-prize was awarded her as I found the end result – despite cunning word-choices, obscure slang and felicitous phrase-turns – somewhat dispiriting. Among my discontents were her dubious “replacements” (e.g. Cockney for *Vulgaire*) in obvious pandering to an English-speaking readership. Queneau's transmutations are almost inevitably euphonious, even in word-twists and contortions not found in any dictionary (though these cannot be fairly called neologisms). This, unfortunately, cannot be said about Wright's text which sounds plain, sometimes coarse and occasionally indecipherable. Perhaps French is a more melodious tongue.

New Directions, in 2012, published a volume of distinctly greater girth. This 100-page swelling is due to the inclusion of several variants appearing in other publications, nearly 20 stabs heretofore never published and 10 homages by contemporary writers. The problem with those previously unpublished lies in their being (mostly) incomplete, mere drafts. For some time now, when “great” personages are microscoped, we have been subjected to scholarship's mania: every paper-slip excavated must be brought to the public's attention, producing multi-volume mega-biographies consuming decades of the author's toil, resulting in a crushing minutiae-mountain of interest to only a handful of ardent acolytes. There are reasons why, say, certain poets disavow early collections. Queneau's fragments are neither revelatory or delicious – save the one where all people are morphed into sardines – and their inclusion in this volume does not burnish his formidable legacy.

The homages – with a lovely exception from Oulipian Harry Mathews –

present a different irritation-flavour as they are mostly riffs straying so wantonly as to bear the most tenuous relation to subject's matter. After all, the challenge of writing a fresh *exercice* is to find a way to be faithful to the same narrative yet in a manner both original, inspired and compelling. One may also consider reacting to or ricocheting off previous examples.

In order to provide context, I present *Exercices'* template, called "Notation", in Wright's translation. And then, though erring, I believe, only on the side of loquacity – in contrast to Queneau's brevity which I so admire, but it couldn't be helped – yet followed by an atonement – I now offer my own two genuflections.

NOTATION

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 onto 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.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Now everyone: yesterday's dress was good but you can all do a little better.

Now a general note: never look in the direction of Quark. Never make eye contact, not even for a moment. He will be there. Count on it. He'll be one of the first people on the 'S' bus at Contrescarpe and he will get the perfect aisle seat.

Now you six: yesterday when you were passing Snorky you were going a little too fast. Take your time so Munion can bump him or step on his feet, whatever he does. And don't say any words other than "excuse me". Annoyed, irritated facial expressions are good, just don't overdo it. Just be yourselves putting up with a noon rush-hour. Try to be polite but don't be afraid of forcing your way through.

Now Snorky: once we're done, go see Brynwyk. Brynn, I want you to adjust that string on his stupid felt hat. Make it more coarse, more sloppy, ungainly. I don't know. More disfigured. And Snorky, no shirt-collar. Just wear a T-shirt under your coat. We need to see that lovely long neck of yours.

Now Snorky: two more things. Speak slower. Little pauses between sentences. And don't raise your voice too much. All we need is for Tekyla to hear what you're saying. So speak in a voice even more whiny and your tone should be more peevish. Accusing but not too irritated. Sound more like a big baby.

Now Munion: during the time you're stepping on his toes, elbowing him and whatever, it's good you never look at him. But when he starts talking to you, it's right that you look at him but your face should look more confused. Inside, you should be thinking – *What is this guy talking about?* OK?

Now Tekyla: you need to get up the instant you hear Snorky say “jostle”, OK? And when you get to the aisle, use your body to block it. If you need time, be indecisive, like you're trying to figure out which door you want to exit from. And Snorky, feel free to give Tekyla a little shove so you can quickly get to her empty seat.

Now by the Lazare: Thimber, same thing. Don't look at Quark. He will be there. But he doesn't exist as far as you're concerned. And get in place a little earlier. By the way, I loved the luxurious way you were smoking your cigarette. Before Snorky arrives, I liked the way you were making small talk with people around you. And when Snorky gets near, be sure to wave excitedly to get his attention. And then go ahead and ad lib for a minute or so, insignificant stuff like the weather and so on. But when you get to the button-spiel make sure you speak really clearly, a little louder, so people hear you. Be more emphatic, more insistent. And use your arms to punctuate your points. Not flailing around but firm. So it underlines the importance of the button.

Now Snorky: you were good. I liked the way your face had this blank look on it. Now don't wreck it. Keep it simple. Just keep that inner bewilderment inside you, about why it's so goddamn important to have a button sown higher up on your lapel. And Thimber, your suit was great, nice and crisp. But your hair could be better, more slick, maybe it needs some gel. Talk to Brynn.

Now everyone: that's it. All you need to do is focus and you'll be just fine. Any questions? Good.

Now final words: you two, go right away to Brynn and the rest of you go away. Have a nice quiet evening, don't drink too much. Get some really good sleep. I know you'll be great but just in case, I'm wishing you all a big, fat *merde!*

LIMERICKS

At noon I boarded bus 'S',
Not my favourite, I readily confess.
There's always a crowd,
So boist'rous, so loud –
But a tranq always helps me – more or less.

This youngster with a preposterous neck,
Chicken-head bobbing: he'll peck.
Hat entwined with rope,
(A sartorial dope),
I thought – what a turd of dreck!

Some feathers he wanted to ruffle –
Was angered by a man: a scuffle?
“When anyone goes by
You jostle my thigh!”
Swiftly neck found a perch: *finis* kerfuffle.

Hours later by the *Gare Lazare*,
(Having arrived there just *par hasard*)
That guy with the neck
was harangued by a *mec* –
His apparition, I felt, was bizzare.

This poncey *mec* was a dandy:
“You must get a button, colour sandy.
Sew it high on the lapel
So it'll fasten really well –
It will be, when it's cold, quite handy.”