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Christopher Shorley

Excerpt

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Introduction

Il venait d'ouvrir les yeux.

Le Chiendent, p. 7

Queneau and his reader

‘QUAND j’énonce une assertion, je m’aperçois tout de suite que l’assertion contraire est à près aussi intéressante, à un point où cela devient presque superstitieux chez moi’, announced Queneau in the course of an interview in 1962 (*Charbonnier*, p. 12), thus formulating in characteristically elusive style what is perhaps his most basic attitude. Like Rabelais’s Trouillogan, for whom he had a sneaking admiration (*ibid.*, p. 14), he is notoriously reluctant to commit himself to a fixed opinion about any subject – and particularly about his own work. This does not mean that he refrains from all comment; on the contrary, he offers a wide variety of illuminating reflections on his writings. But there is no guarantee that his views can be taken as definitive, or that a declaration dating from one period will not conflict with some earlier or later statement. Thus the claims he made – mostly in the forties and fifties – to the effect that his books were significant above all for their radical treatment of the French language were flatly contradicted by his admission, in the late sixties, that his advocacy of ‘le néo-français’ had been unjustified. It would be a fruitless exercise, then, to seek total consistency between Queneau’s stated views.

One of Queneau’s assertions, however, remains constant throughout his career, and claims a more permanent validity. He repeatedly insisted that it is not his responsibility to have the last word on the works that he writes – and

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more than once resorted to the same simple image to explain his position:

Je suis un pommier. Je donne des pommes. A vous de choisir si vous les aimez rondes ou oblongues, sphériques ou piriformes, lisses ou ridées, pommelées, ou bien vertes et pas mûres. Vous ne voudriez tout de même pas que je vous fournisse par-dessus le marché la fourchette et le couteau.¹

Rather than himself determining the way or ways in which his books are to be considered, Queneau prefers to leave the widest possible scope for his reader. Indeed he rejects utterly the notion of the passive reader whose sole function is to absorb a preordained content presented in a readily palatable form. Instead he invites the active participation of a reader who is prepared for a literary text to make demands on his own resources: 'Car toute œuvre demande à être brisée pour être sentie et comprise, toute œuvre présente une résistance au lecteur, toute œuvre est une chose difficile' (*Voyage*, p. 140). The intention is not to threaten the collaboration between author and reader, but simply to give more balance to it, by extending the reader's sphere of activity. The initial access to a work, if difficult, is not impossible, and the reader will – ideally – progress from this point of contact to an increasingly rich and varied response to the work as a whole:

L'œuvre ne doit pas être difficile par simple provocation [...]. L'œuvre doit être susceptible d'une compréhension immédiate, telle que le poète ne soit pas séparé de son public possible [...]. Et cette compréhension immédiate peut être suivie d'appréhensions de plus en plus approfondies. (*ibid.*)

An essential prerequisite for the collaboration which Queneau seeks is an awareness of the exercise in question. He effectively prevents his reader from ever taking for granted the nature of his activity, namely running his eyes along lines of print and turning the pages which make up the artefact known as the book. Hence Saturnin, in a monologue towards the end of *Le Chiendent*, addresses a whole series of remarks to the reader and informs him that given the number of the page, 'il ne reste plus beaucoup à lire, spa?' (p. 279). Similarly one of the rebels in *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes* refers back to something a colleague has said 'quelques pages plus haut' (*Sally Mara*, p. 307).

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This permanent awareness is a vital part of the act of reading, but the reader must first be involved through his initial encounter with the text – through the ‘resistance’ with which he is confronted in the first few pages. Most conventional criticism of Queneau has taken little account of experiences of this order, concentrating instead on organising and assessing the experiences that remain when a book has been read in its entirety.² However, this first contact – made before critical reflection sets in – can be crucial in determining the reader’s response to a work as a whole. In the words of another novelist: ‘Starting a novel is opening a door on a misty landscape; you can see very little but you can smell the earth and feel the wind blowing.’³ And the openings of most of Queneau’s novels create precisely this effect: the atmosphere is communicated immediately, while the larger design remains obscure. Further, it is obscured deliberately, so that the reader is completely enveloped in the immediate situation and deprived of all landmarks. In *Le Chiendent* the action of the first few pages is difficult to follow because Queneau intentionally avoids naming his characters, designating them instead by pronouns or by vague terms such as ‘la silhouette’, ‘l’autre’ and ‘la femme’. At this stage all the outlines are blurred – it is only later that the focus sharpens and characters and events are brought into relief. In the meantime the reader is left to ponder on an anonymous, alien urban setting and thus to experience directly, rather than take for granted, the milieu from which the rest of the novel will develop. *Pierrot mon ami* begins with a still more explicit loss of definition, with Pierrot being instructed to remove his spectacles, so that his surroundings in the Parisian funfair where he works ‘se perdaient dans le brouillard’ (p. 7). The reader, like Pierrot, is plunged into a world in which he can hear sounds and voices without seeing where they come from. In the opening sequence of *Un Rude Hiver* the visual outlines are clearer, but the sense of bewilderment is much the same:

Les Chinois avançaient précédés par deux sergents de ville [...]. Derrière les deux flics marchaient primo deux Chinois ayant sans doute quelque autorité sur leurs compatriotes, secundo un Chinois porteur

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d'un parasol jaune, tertio un Chinois porteur d'un objet également jaune formé de deux ellipsoïdes enfilés sur un bâton selon leur plus grand axe.

(pp. 7–8)

Even after this weird situation is explained – it is the feast of the Chinese New Year, being celebrated in Le Havre during the First World War – the reader's initial sense of strangeness still lingers: the normal world has been completely 'de-familiarised'.⁴

In each of these cases, although the reader may not be aware of it at the time, he is sharing the perceptions of one of Queneau's characters. The Chinese parade, it transpires, is being watched by Lehameau, the central figure in *Un Rude Hiver*; the beginning of *Pierrot mon ami*, as has been noted, is presented from Pierrot's standpoint; and it eventually emerges that the first scene of *Le Chiendent* is the product of the observations of Pierre Le Grand. In each case, therefore, the reader in effect participates in the initial act of observation from which the fictional creation springs. The example of Pierre Le Grand is particularly telling in this respect, since Queneau emphasises Pierre's privileged role of observer and even hints that he is of almost equal status to the novelist himself (see *Chiendent*, p. 25).⁵ But perhaps the reader's strongest sense of collaboration with one of Queneau's observers comes at the beginning of the Saint Glinglin trilogy. Here, once again, the privileged observer goes under the name of Pierre; and the whole of the opening section, both in the original *Gueule de pierre* and in its reworked form in *Saint Glinglin*, consists of Pierre's abstruse meditations, which are based on his observation of marine life in an aquarium. Only after encountering this bizarre extended monologue does the reader proceed to a broader, more balanced view of events in the subsequent sections of the text.

The feeling of unfamiliarity and 'difficulty' is not limited to the level of actions and events, moreover. The opening line of *Zazie dans le métro* runs: 'Doukipudonktan, se demanda Gabriel excédé' (p. 9). The reader is inevitably disconcerted by the unfamiliar combination of letters, and even when he comes to recognise them as representing the question 'D'où qu'ils puent donc tant?' he is still left with the realisation that the words before his eyes, like the situations they evoke, are

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in some degree foreign to his normal experience.⁶ *Le Dimanche de la vie* opens with the deviation from standard literary syntax, with similar effect (while introducing yet another observer in the process): 'Il ne se doutait pas que chaque fois qu'il passait devant sa boutique, elle le regardait, la commerçante, le soldat Brû' (p. 11).

The initial experience of strangeness, then, is of the utmost importance: it simultaneously presents the reader with problems – with 'resistance' – and invites him to transcend these by involving himself in the work before him. It constitutes, in one critic's neat phrase, 'un malaise dans lequel il est utile de jeter le lecteur'.⁷ But even after this feeling is dispelled and the 'mist' begins to lift over the 'landscape' of the novel, the text still retains some of its difficulty. The sequence of events in most novels requires minute examination if the reader is to make any sense of them, and the task is complicated by the fact that explanations lurk in unexpected parts of the text. In *Les Enfants du limon*, for instance, a mysterious violinist mentioned in the second part of the first book (p. 10) is named only much later (pp. 57, 88); equally it is explained at one point that Agnès is to marry Denis in November (p. 55), but only later is Denis identified with 'le petit Colter', who has already appeared several times before the news of the wedding is given. One Pierre is belatedly accounted for as Hachamoth's chauffeur (pp. 183, 184). In the words of the original *prière d'insérer* to the novel: 'Le lecteur sera donc amené devant ce problème de la *reconnaissance*, problème que posent également différentes démarches de certains personnages du roman.'⁸ And this process of reconstructing facts and situations on the basis of pieces of evidence dispersed through the text is vital to the reading of most of Queneau's works.⁹

The reader has still other, more important tasks to perform. He frequently has little firm evidence with which to work but rather a profusion of clues which are as likely to mislead him as to help. And as hard facts become scarcer, so the scope for speculation increases. In the early stages of *Zazie dans le métro* there is much uncertainty about what Zazie's uncle, Gabriel, does for a living: is he a night watchman? (p. 38); does he *really* wear lipstick? (p. 39); if he

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is an artist, what sort of artist can he be? (p. 55). When it eventually emerges that he is a dancer in a night-club for homosexuals, it seems that no more secrets remain – until the last page of the novel, when Marceline, who has hitherto been presented as his wife, is revealed as a man called Marcel. Further, Zazie's mother does not share the reader's surprise; and if Jeanne Lalochère knows that 'Marceline' is not a woman, perhaps other characters know it too. As the reader finally becomes aware of the deception which has been practised on him, he is left to dwell on its implications for the rest of the story. In *Le Chiendent* an impenetrable mystery surrounds the sudden death of the waitress, Ernestine, following her wedding feast. She could have been murdered by interested parties seeking her supposed fortune, such as Mme Cloche or Dominique Belhôtel and his wife, or else poisoned by the two enigmatic waiters lent, for the wedding feast, by the Restaurant des Alliés; and death from natural causes cannot be excluded. The deaths of Agnès and Chambernac, in *Les Enfants du limon*, are never adequately explained. Once again, the reader is free to conjecture – as he is when confronted with the calamitous fire in *Pierrot mon ami*, where several interpretations are possible but none can be proved. The *prière d'insérer* to the first edition of *Pierrot mon ami* recalled the words of Claude Bernard: 'Il y a un certain plaisir à ignorer, parce que l'imagination travaille.'¹⁰

It becomes increasingly clear that just as Queneau emphasises the reader's responsibility – his obligation to work with the text – so he allows him a large degree of freedom. On the one level the reader is at liberty to apply his imagination to the situation before him, 'filling in the gaps' by his own conjectures. But more crucially still, he has freedom of interpretation – and is urged to use it. The original *prière d'insérer* describing *Gueule de pierre* emphasises the point:

Comme tout mythe, il est susceptible d'interprétations diverses. Au lecteur de les découvrir, car – pourquoi ne demanderait-on pas un certain effort au lecteur? On lui explique toujours tout au lecteur. Il finit par être vexé de se voir si méprisamment traité, le lecteur.¹¹

Certainly *Gueule de pierre*, and with it the whole of the Saint Glinglin trilogy, is open to widely divergent readings. If the centre of the work is taken to be the Kougard/Nabonide

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family, then the events can be interpreted in personal and psychological terms. But if the fortunes of the community as a whole are regarded as the basic interest, the work can be treated as an exercise in social anthropology. Both interpretations are perfectly plausible, but neither can be said to invalidate the other.¹² And the possibility of yet other readings is not excluded.

In Queneau's works it is more than usually futile to talk of predetermined 'meanings', for he positively encourages the reader to make his own judgement. And by extension, the reader is not obliged to embrace the text in its full complexity, or to extract meaning from any given element within it; he is free to concentrate on the elements of his own choice. As Queneau argues, resorting to another favourite image: 'un chef d'œuvre est [...] comparable à un bulbe dont les uns se contentent d'enlever la pelure superficielle tandis que d'autres, moins nombreux, l'épluchent pellicule par pellicule' (*Voyage*, p. 141). It is doubtless no mere coincidence that the onion is a recurrent leitmotif in *Le Chiendent* (pp. 29, 36, 199, 211), or that one of the characters is seen peeling one (p. 19).

Through the various ways in which he exercises the reader, Queneau also brings into question the act of reading itself.¹³ More specifically, by allowing the reader so much personal scope in his response to the text, he stresses the essentially individual and subjective aspect of the reading process.¹⁴ It is an obvious – but perhaps too easily forgotten – fact that this process is at the origin of any act of literary criticism. Yet however much articulation and formalisation of the reading experience is involved in criticism, the initial, unmediated experience of the text is in itself decisive. Such is the argument of the critic Françoise van Rossum-Guyon:

La critique en effet est d'abord et avant tout une lecture. Lecture d'une aventure, qui n'est pas seulement celle des personnages, mais aussi celle des objets, des idées et des thèmes, ainsi que celle des descriptions, des images et des mots. Lecture d'une aventure qui n'est autre que celle de l'avènement d'un sens par la médiation des formes.¹⁵

But clearly, the orientation and emphasis of a particular reading depend on the intellectual predilections of the individual reader. As Jean Starobinski has pointed out:

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Les divers types de lecture choisissent et prélèvent des structures *préférentielles*. Il n'est pas indifférent que nous interroguions un texte en historiens, en sociologues, en psychologues, en styliciens ou en amateurs de beauté pure. Car chacune de ces approches a pour effet de changer la configuration du *tout*, d'appeler un nouveau contexte, de découper d'autres frontières, à l'intérieur desquelles régnera une autre loi de cohérence.¹⁶

With Queneau's fiction Starobinski's idea is perfectly illustrated, for the response has been exceptionally diverse. Critics have discerned and discussed different layers in the texts and applied to them all manner of criteria. And some have actually acknowledged the basis of their criticism in the active reading role Queneau offers to them.¹⁷

Critical approaches

Many modern writers receive more attention from critics than has Queneau, but few can have provoked a more varied critical reception. And yet there has been little attempt to compare and combine differing attitudes to his work. This was perfectly understandable in the early years of Queneau's career, when none of his works enjoyed any degree of commercial success and he was more or less unknown outside a small circle of admirers.¹⁸ During this time his potential impact was severely restricted for various external reasons: the linguistic originality of *Le Chiendent* (1933) had been in part foreshadowed by Céline's annexation of popular speech in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, published in the previous year; *Un Rude Hiver* appeared just before the outbreak of the Second World War; and wartime conditions did not favour a wide circulation for *Les Temps mêlés* (1941), *Pierrot mon ami* (1942) and *Loin de Rueil* (1944). Although the volume of criticism has steadily accumulated since Queneau came to prominence in the post-war period¹⁹ – especially since the first academic thesis, in 1955,²⁰ and the first full-length book, in 1960²¹ – there has been a widespread tendency to apply rigid and exclusive interpretations to his work. For however much Queneau stresses that his work can be viewed on various levels – that the reader can choose between a number of different 'layers of the onion' – his critics have

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often concentrated on one level and shown a marked reluctance to consider others, or even, sometimes, to acknowledge their existence.

The most blatant examples of exclusive criticism are to be found in the writings of those who refuse to go beyond the most superficial characteristics of Queneau's writings. Not surprisingly, many of these examples date from the early stage of Queneau's career, as in the review of *Les Derniers Jours* where L. de Gérin-Richard sees little further than 'la grossièreté de son langage, et même parfois de sa pensée'.²² But much later Robert Poulet bases most of his review of *Zazie dans le métro* on the fact that Zazie says 'Mon cul' twenty-one times and the novel contains forty-four examples of the use of 'merde et ses dérivés'.²³ Criticus, in his discussion of the same book, develops a similar condemnation of Queneau's supposed wilful vulgarity, and concludes that *Zazie dans le métro* never rises above 'les galipettes d'un clown qui méprise son public, autant que la langue, la grammaire et toute la littérature'.²⁴ The significance of these comments lies not so much in their vehement castigation of Queneau as in the narrow point of view from which their judgements are made. For while presenting Queneau purely as a 'fumiste' and an iconoclast they ignore the other vital characteristics of his work. And there are indications that this highly selective image of Queneau persisted; as a reviewer of an entertainment based on Queneau's writings pointed out in 1966: 'Ce spectacle met seulement l'accent sur le Queneau chansonnier, joueur de mots, insolent et burlesque. C'est [...] limiter son œuvre et donner de celle-ci ce que le public en sait déjà'.²⁵

Other critics, who are willing to acknowledge that Queneau's work does have substance and depth, sometimes cling to outdated and inaccurate views of it and thereby inhibit more comprehensive approaches. During the period when he regularly expounds his views on 'le néo-français' – a fusion of literary and popular language – Queneau explains how during a journey to Greece he had been so struck by the total separation of these two registers that he attempted to re-unite them by translating the *Discours de la méthode* into the style of contemporary spoken French, and this attempt

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turned into his first published novel, *Le Chiendent* (see, for instance, *Bâtons*, pp. 17, 42, 59).²⁶ This explanation established the orthodox view on *Le Chiendent* and Queneau's attitude to language for a number of years. Later, however, in a small article entitled 'Errata' (*Voyage*, pp. 219–22),²⁷ Queneau gives a revised version of the story, indicating that it was really J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* that he had undertaken to translate in Greece, and acknowledging that 'le néo-français' has not advanced as he had hoped. This account has, however, gone unnoticed in some quarters. Thus Stanley E. Gray, some time afterwards, refers to *Le Chiendent* as 'a curious formalistic construction modelled on the *Discours de la méthode*'.²⁸

When critics do acknowledge the existence of different levels in Queneau's work, it is often merely in order to assert the primacy of one as against others. If there is occasional confrontation of critical attitudes in this matter, there is little dialogue between them. In his survey of Queneau's work, Félicien Marceau states bluntly: 'La forme est sans doute, dans cette œuvre, ce qu'il y a de plus important.'²⁹ On the other hand, Claude Simonnet, when interviewed about his book *Queneau déchiffré*, declared that he emphasised content far more than form, adding: 'La forme! Elle a empêché beaucoup d'approfondir Queneau.'³⁰ There is more than an echo of Félicien Marceau in a *Times Literary Supplement* review: 'It is form [...] not content, which reveals the preoccupations of the man in Raymond Queneau's novels.'³¹ But this claim, at least, does not go unchallenged, for Richard Cobb counters it, arguing that 'Queneau is not just a writer who indulges in intellectual gymnastics' and stressing that his preoccupations are not revealed by form alone.³²

The opposition of form and content reveals a basic division in Queneau criticism. But on each side of this division there are two main groups, each of which concentrates on a different 'layer' within Queneau's fiction. And in all four groups of critics clear indications of a certain exclusiveness are to be found.

The criticism which presents form as the essential element in Queneau's fiction can be divided into linguistic