Raymond Queneau

Translated by Barbara Wright

Foreword by Umberto Eco

With an essay by Italo Calvino

Illustrations by Stefan Themerson

ALMA CLASSICS
# Contents

Foreword – *Umberto Eco*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exercises in Style</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Entry</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litotes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphorically</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrograde</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprises</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dream</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prognostication</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchysis</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rainbow</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Game</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesitation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Subjective Side</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Subjectivity</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-Building</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativities</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animism</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anagrams</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinguuo</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homoeoteleuton</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Letter</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blurb</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onomatopoeia</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical Analysis</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insistence</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported Speech</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Couplets 38
Polyptotes 39
Aphaeresis 40
Apocope 41
Syncope 42
Speaking Personally 43
Exclamations 44
You Know 45
Noble 46
Cockney 48
Cross-Examination 49
Comedy 51
Asides 53
Parechesis 54
Spectral 55
Philosophic 57
Apostrophe 58
Awkward 59
Casual 61
Biased 63
Sonnet 65
Olfactory 66
Gustatory 67
Tactile 68
Visual 69
Auditory 70
Telegraphic 71
Ode 72
Permutations by Groups of 2, 3, 4 and 5 Letters 76
Permutations by Increasing Groups of Letters 77
Permutations by Groups of 9, 10, 11 and 12 Letters 78
Permutations by Increasing Groups of Words 79
Hellenisms 80
Reactionary 81
Haikai 83
Free Verse 84
Feminine 85
Gallicisms 87
Foreword

Reading through the contents pages of *Exercises in Style*, it would appear that Queneau wasn’t working to an overall plan. They’re not in alphabetical order, nor do they increase in complexity. An expert in rhetorical figures will see immediately that Queneau doesn’t employ the full range of these figures, or indeed only rhetorical figures.

Figures of speech which are oddly missing include synecdoche, metonymy, oxymoron, zeugma – the list of illustrious absentees goes on. On the other hand, it’s true that if Queneau had wanted to follow the classic repertoires of such figures compiled by Pierre Fontanier, not to speak of the German rhetorician Heinrich Lausberg, the total number of exercises would have ended up as far more than a hundred.

Nor did Queneau restrict the exercises only to rhetorical figures: in the contents we find parodies of literary genres (like the ode) and of ordinary acts of speech (the abusive, for example). However, on looking more closely, the expert in rhetoric will notice that figures of speech and thought and tropes are much more widely represented in the exercises than the titles alone would indicate. In the case of highly technical figures, such as synchysis or epenthesis, Queneau uses the scientific term with a kind of bravado, also because (one just has to read the exercises with “difficult” titles) readers realize immediately that they’re not expected to understand so much as admire the author’s linguistic virtuosity. You need to understand the rule behind the figure in order to admire it properly, but Queneau leaves it up to the reader to find
that out – the element of puzzling it out is probably part of the game he’s playing.

Yet, quite apart from the fact that all the more readable exercises contain rhetorical figures of various types – and more than one per exercise – a reader comes to realize that certain exercises play on a specific rhetorical figure even when the title is generic and accessible.

The first example of this is ‘Notation’ itself, which is a demonstration of *sermo manifestus*, in other words of plain and explicit language. ‘Double Entry’ is an exercise on synonyms and paraphrase – while ‘Retrograde’ exemplifies *hysteria proteron*, *Surprises* is a survey of exclamations and both ‘Hesitation’ and *Awkward* use the figure of *dubitatio* (since in *dubitatio* the speaker asks his audience for advice on how to organize his speech given the difficulty of the material). ‘Precision’, in addition to being a skilful example of redundancy, could also be defined in terms of hypotyposis – a detailed description of an object with the intention of rendering it visible to the listener/reader – as could also the five exercises ‘Olfactory’, ‘Gustatory’, ‘Tactile’, ‘Visual’ and ‘Auditory’.

The two exercises entitled ‘The Subjective Side’ and ‘Another Subjectivity’ are an example of *sermocinatio* (in which the speaker appears to quote another person, adopting his style of expression – this figure also applies to numerous other exercises).

‘Word-Building’ is an example of *mots-valise* or portmanteau words. ‘Negativities’ demonstrates the technique of *correctio*. ‘Insistence’ and ‘You Know’ use pleonasm. ‘Ignorance’ is an example of *reticentia*, and similitude lies at the basis of the group of exercises on the five senses just mentioned. ‘Telegraphic’ is a splendid example of *brevitas*. ‘Hellenisms’ provides a classic example of *oratio emendata*, and the figure of *locus communis* is brazenly on display in ‘Reactionary’. ‘Proper Names’ appears, on strict analysis, to be a bizarre and not entirely explicable case of Vossian antonomasia.
Yet it is also the case that all this display of rhetorical expertise is not taken too seriously: Queneau frequently plays around by taking the figures literally (to use an unavoidable oxymoron) – that is to say, he applies the technique of a rule to the letter while disregarding its meaning, and turns this into a further element of the game.

To illustrate this point: prosthesis, epenthesis and paragoge all consist in repositioning a letter or phoneme – the first to the front, the second to the middle, the third to the end of a word – but the examples given in the manuals of rhetoric for these figures make sense, so to speak: *gnatus* instead of *natus*, *speciality* instead of *specialty*, *amongst* instead of *among*. But in the exercises which exemplify these figures (though in strict classical terminology they are not figures so much as *virtutes* or *vitia elocutionis*, adornments or defects of speech), Queneau shifts letters and syllables around – fore and aft and in the middle – with gay abandon, pushing the figures to the point of absurdity. He does the same with apheresis, syncope and apocope, which, rationally handled, should produce examples like *mittere* for *omittere*, *ma’am* for *madam*, and *legit* for *legitimate*, but as with the additions of letters and phonemes, the subtractions pour forth in a torrent, the intention being not to construct a literary effect but to create noise, even pandemonium. The same occurs with polyptotes, which normally is the limited repetition of a word in different syntactic contexts, as in the expression “*Rome seule pouvait Rome faire trembler*” (“Only Rome could make Rome tremble”), but in Queneau’s exercise on the figure the term *contribuable* (“taxpayer” in the English translation) is repeated so often as to produce an effect of obsessive nonsense.

Synchysis gets similar treatment. It is a syntactic figure in which anastrophe (“never a breeze up blew”) and hyperbaton (“some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall”) are combined to create a confusion in the sequence of words which make up the sentence. But Queneau applies the figure to an entire text (and not for the only time in the
RAYMOND QUENEAU

book, since synchysis or *mixtura verborum* is necessarily employed in the exercise entitled ‘Permutations by Increasing Groups of Letters’).

Many exercises involving variations on alliteration and paronomasias – such as ‘Homoeoteleuton’ (where the alliteration is on the final letter) and ‘Parechysis’ (where it’s on the first) are taken to the point of paroxysm. Queneau uses rhetorical figures to obtain comical effects, but at the same time he’s also poking fun at rhetoric itself.

He can’t therefore have taken rhetoric, either as a science or a technique, too seriously, despite being deeply conversant with it: it is this which probably explains the nonchalance and casualness with which he puts the exercises together, heedless of system or classification and just following his own whim.

At this point, readers might think they understand why Queneau, having opted to try out various rhetorical figures at random, in other exercises turns his back on rhetoric to look at literary parody and social convention or refer to different technical and scientific jargons. Yet rhetoric is not simply a matter of figures of speech, pertaining only to *elocutio*. It includes *inventio* and *dispositio*, memory, *pronuntiatio*, the various genres of oratory and of *narratio*, the different techniques of argumentation, the rules of *compositio* – and the standard manuals of rhetoric also cover poetics, with the whole range of literary genres and types. In short, reading the *Exercises* shows us that while Queneau doesn’t try out everything there is in the *ars rhetorica*, he tries out all sorts of things which are included in it. His book becomes an exercise on rhetoric itself, indeed a kind of demonstration that rhetoric is to be found everywhere.

What the *Exercises* teach us above all is that there is no precise dividing line between figures of expression and figures of content. Take the exercise ‘Metathesis’. In the English version the “cord”

x
(“srote de filecle” in the original) becomes “srot of strnig”, the result of an almost mechanical intervention on the phonic or written form of the word – but doesn’t the shift of letters suggest images, which as such already belong to content? Naturally there are devices – metathesis is one – which start by manipulating the expression to set off reverberations at the level of content (in the same way a good spoonerism should give rise to embarrassing double entendres), while there are exercises which start with content (with metaphorical substitution for example) to produce changes (in this case of bold lexical substitution) at the level of expression. But seen in a broad semiotic context, tout se tient.

If we say, “There are many bullfighters in pain,” people may laugh. The effect has been obtained by a simple metaplasm, the omission of an S in the word Spain. But why is it less funny to say “there are many gullfighters in Spain”, which employs another metaplasm? Because, semantically speaking, “bullfighters” have more to do with Spain than “gulls”. The concept arises of a semantic encyclopedia which has to supply for every word in some ideal dictionary a series of information which is not merely grammatical. The difference between a mechanical and a significant slip of the tongue lies precisely in these connections (or in these incongruities). Thus not even the merely metaplastic exercises can be entirely non-semantic. Not even those which seem deliberately to be without meaning, such as all those which shift letters around within words, can fail to affect our sense of the content. Taken one by one and out of context, they wouldn’t make us laugh: they would appear to be the work of some unhinged typesetter whose boss has gone on holiday. They become comic in the context of Queneau’s project, the metalinguistic challenge which underlies the Exercises as a whole.

Queneau posed himself this question: is it possible to treat a basic text by varying it in every way imaginable, so long as each
variation adheres to a specific rule? It is this which makes even the variations which are empty of meaning appear meaningful, at least at a metalinguistic level. The *Exercises* play both with intertextuality (they are parodies of other types of discourse) and with con-textuality. If the volume consisted only of ten exercises instead of ninety-nine, it would be less entertaining (and similarly, although perhaps a bit tiresome, it would be even more entertaining if it were made up of ninety-nine thousand variations). The comic effect is global: it is created by *accumulatio*, the dominating rhetorical figure which each exercise in turn serves to exemplify. As one laughs over a mechanical switching-around of letters in a word, one is laughing at the same time at the challenge the author is pursuing, at the mechanisms he needs to put into practice in order to achieve his aim, and at the nature both of a particular language and of the capacity for language in general.

I read somewhere that the idea of the *Exercises* came to Queneau when he was listening to symphonic variations (I also wonder if he had in mind Cyrano’s variations on his nose in Rostand’s play). As Roman Jakobson has shown, a musical variation is a syntactic phenomenon which – within the context of its companion text – creates expectations and predictions, memories and deferments – and precisely by so doing produces an effect of meaning. Whatever the case, Queneau has chosen not only to vary the musical theme grammatically, but also the way we listen. We can listen to a musical piece while blocking our ears rhythmically in such a way that the sounds are filtered and become a sort of breathing, an ordered noise, a cacophony controlled by a rule. But to get the most out of this experiment we need to know that the symphony is still going on in its uninterrupted wholeness, and it works even better if we’ve already listened to it before somewhere else.

Therefore each exercise takes on meaning only in the context of the others – “meaning” – and therefore content – being the
operative word. However amusing the metaplastic wordplay and its mechanical shifts of letters and phonemes can be, it is not merely that which is involved.

Yet the *Exercises* also show us that it is very hard to distinguish between the comedy of language and the comedy of situation.

The distinction appears to be clear. If the Minister for Education, in the middle of a formal dinner, has a choking fit while saying “Skol”, we have a comic situation, and the amusing story can be told in different languages. But if an English person wants to express an opinion on some educational reform which has gone wrong and says that the Minister for Education “choked on the word *skol*”, we have a comedy of language – which is normally untranslatable.

But it isn’t a question of a division between the world of facts on the one hand and the world of signs on the other. For a start, in order for us to find the spectacle of a minister choking during a toast comic, we need to belong to a particular culture in which there is a hidden desire to see people in power humiliated. It’s not in the slightest bit funny – at least in our culture – if we’re told about a a paraplegic choking on a glass of beer. The situation (as pure fact) becomes comic only to the extent that the events and the people involved in them are imbued with symbolic significance. A comic situation may not be linguistic, but it is always semiotic.

In the same way, if an English person laughs on being told the Minister of Education has choked on the word *skol*, it wouldn’t be in the least comic if we said that the same happened to the Minister for Foreign Trade. As with the “bullfighters”, our reaction depends on an encyclopedic representation of what public education involves (and what the minister responsible for it should be like). This type of information has been described as “knowledge of the world”; without wishing to enter on the thorny question of how we define such a concept in semiotic terms, it should be noted that all comedy of language is tied to extra-linguistic contexts.
Yet it is also true that those exercises which could be characterized as metalogical, linked to psychological or social models, are dependent on the language they use as a medium. They are possible in French because Queneau’s French reflects a civilization and refers both to a specific social context (France, Paris) and a particular time. To translate these exercises literally would mean incurring the fate of those translations of American thrillers which make improbable and pseudo-literal attempts to transpose situations, jargons, professions, turns of speech which are typical of a different world. A word such as “downtown” for example, cannot accurately be translated into any other language. It is not always the centre of a city (for example it isn’t in New York), it is not necessarily the historic part, nor is it in all cities the part along the river: sometimes it’s the maze of narrow streets where local criminals operate, sometimes the area dominated by skyscrapers and the banks. In order to understand the meaning of “downtown”, you would need to know the history of each individual American city.

However, Queneau’s *Exercises* can, at least to a certain degree, be translated, because none of them are purely linguistic and they are all bound up with intertextuality and historical circumstance – nor can any be entirely detached from the particular language – the spirit of French – in which they were originally written. With both aspects, it is not so much a question of translating as one of recreating in another language within a different social and historical and intertextual context, which is the approach both Barbara Wright and I (in my Italian translation) have followed.

– Umberto Eco
Exercises in Style
On the S bus, in the rush hour. A chap of about twenty-six, soft hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone’s been tugging at 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 come across 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 onto 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 headgear. 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 inconvenience him every time anyone gets off and makes an exit. This having been declared and having spoken he rushes and goes towards a vacant and a free place and seat.

After two hours, and a hundred and twenty minutes later, I see him and come across 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 corozo disc added and sewn onto his overcoat and mantle.
A few 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 discussing clothing matters.
At the very heart of the day, tossed among the shoal of travelling sardines in a white-bellied beetle, a chicken with a long, featherless neck suddenly harangued one of their number, a peace-abiding one, and its parlance, moist with protest, was unleashed into the air. Then, attracted by an empty space, the fledgling made a dash towards it.

In a bleak, urban desert, I saw it again that selfsame day, drinking the cup of humiliation over a mere button.
You ought to put another button on your overcoat, his friend told him. I came across 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 wearing a ridiculous hat. This took place on the platform of an S bus which was full at noon that day.
Surprises

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 later, guess whom I came across in front of the Saint-Lazare! The same fancy-pants! The same fancy-pants! Being given some sartorial advice! By a friend!

You’d never believe it!
I had the impression that everything was misty and pearly around me, with multiple and indistinct apparitions, amongst whom however was one figure that stood out fairly clearly, which was that of a young man whose overly long neck in itself seemed to proclaim the character at once cowardly and quarrelsome of the individual. The ribbon of his hat had been replaced by a piece of plaited string. Later he was having an argument with a person whom I couldn’t see, and then, as if suddenly afraid, he threw himself into the shadow of a corridor.

Another part of the dream showed him walking in bright sunshine in front of the Gare Saint-Lazare. He was with a companion who was saying: “You ought to have another button put on your overcoat.”

Whereupon I woke up.