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Jordan Stump, *The Other Book: Bewilderments of Fiction*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. 273 pp. \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8032-3430-7.

Review by David Bellos, Princeton University.

“Do you know *Oliver Twist*?”

If you’re asked this question by Jordan Stump, think twice before answering. To an affirmative reply, he will surely pounce on you with a much trickier follow-up: “So what is it that you know when you ‘know *Oliver Twist*?’”

The Other Book: Bewilderments of Fiction isn’t about Dickens, as it happens, but its painstaking, meandering, intense and at times infuriating inquiry into the nature of the existence of literary objects, conducted exclusively through an interrogation of Raymond Queneau’s debut novel, *Le Chiendent*, would no doubt produce more or less identical results with any work, irrespective of its language, period, status or charm. [1] For it is indeed not easy to say in any determinate way what it is that we know when we say we know a work of literature.

A reader has access to a work only through a copy of it. What is it that the copy is a copy of? The word “copy” generally refers to an object made in the image of something else, but in the case of books, there is no physical “something else” for a copy of the book to be a copy of. The “other book” of Stump’s title is that theoretical construct that we all adhere to in our discourse about literature, but which it is uncommonly difficult to pin down—the book itself, i.e. the book as an object of knowledge distinct from any particular copy of it.

Le Chiendent happens to have quite a rich dossier of abandoned drafts and variants that Stump has read and studied. Do these alternative unpublished episodes and fragments form part of the book in the sense of the true object of knowledge of a literary reader who seeks to “know” *Le Chiendent*? Stump is reluctant to say yes too quickly for all the obvious methodological reasons. But to his credit he is equally reluctant to say no. It is tautological to exclude the abandoned drafts on the grounds that Queneau knew what he was doing and would therefore have included them had they been part of the “true book.” It is also unnecessarily self-limiting to assert that this or that abandoned episode, once read, does not already form part of your overall knowledge of “the book.” Nor can it be known for sure—since it is always a matter of judgment—whether or not their inclusion would have improved the book. A “book” has no determinate extension: its outer shores are subject to the ultimately random availability of drafts and variants. Stump deals only with pre-texts to the so-called final version of *Le Chiendent*, but had he taken another kind of example text, he could have pursued the same bewildering demolition of the determinacy of a literary text with reference to re-writings (Balzac’s corrections to his own self-declared “definitive edition” of the *Comédie humaine*, for example) and to other authors’ later commentaries and explications of their own work, such as Flaubert’s letters to Louise Colet as extensions of the “text” of *Madame Bovary*.

Jordan Stump is a distinguished translator of modern French fiction, and so it is no surprise that the longest and most challenging chapter of *The Other Book* questions the enriching and

corrosive impact of translation on the idea of the book as theoretical object. Barbara Wright's English version, first published in 1968 as *The Bark Tree*, then reissued as *Witch Grass* in 2003, positively ripples with inventive, creative re-workings of Queneau's allusive and punning style. Stump asks two questions of this avatar-book: by introducing alternative jokes and allusions, does it enlarge the concept-book that we call *Le Chiendent*, or does it just alter it? (But just by altering it, I guess, it must also be held to extend it.)

Second, is it right? That seems at first glance to be a very primary question to find in such a sophisticated and thoughtful book, but it has to be asked--and in some specific cases, the answer has to be no. (Entertainingly but quite significantly for the conduct of his argument, Stump trips himself up when trying to correct Barbara Wright's conversion of liters per 100km to mph--let me just say that in this instance, Wright is not wrong.) But what the mistakes and dubious choices made by the translator prompt in Stump's generous and subtle mind is not a schoolmasterly reprimand, but a questioning of his own reading of the original. And that's the point that is made again and again in this chapter and throughout *The Other Book*: the "text," the "book," *Le Chiendent* must be held to exist in and for itself, but it can never be accessed except through a medium (copy, manuscript, translation) that is not it.

Stump's final chapter pursues this interrogation through a close study of the "critical edition"--in this case, Henri Godard's apparatus of notes, appendices and introductions to Queneau's novel in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition of 2002. He could have been much harsher with Godard's impossible claim that "the book contains a meaning sufficient to itself" and with some of the completely fatuous information provided in the notes (the street address of the Trianon-Lyrique, for example). But Stump is ever the gentleman, and seems to actually mean what he says when he declares, quite frequently, "I don't mean to criticize..." But he should! His entire, long-drawn-out argument points to the impossibility of there ever being either a "definitive text" or an end to the amount and type of information that can be added to a "text" to make it become more like itself.

In conclusion, Stump could have adopted Vassily Grossman's title, for in this respect literature is indeed like life: *Everything Flows*. *The Other Book* is not for those who want a quick introduction either to the theory of the text or to Raymond Queneau, but in its leisurely loops and branches it is richly informative, always engaging and frequently thought-provoking. To my taste, it is just a tad too polite.

NOTES

[1] Raymond Queneau, *Le Chiendent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933).

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