

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 117

Raymond Queneau, *Letters, Numbers, Forms: Essays, 1928-1970*. Translated Jordan Stump. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xvi + 251 pp. Introduction, drawings, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03187-8.

Review by D. Brian Mann, North Georgia College & State University.

In this attractive and densely packed volume, Jordan Stump accomplishes a number of very important objectives. First and foremost, he compiles a readable, yet painstakingly accurate critical translation of some of Raymond Queneau's most important essays. This prolific author of some of the twentieth century's superlatively intriguing and playful texts created a writerly world that was born in yet critical of the Surrealist movement's most vital contributions to the arts. He went on to express an encyclopedic variety of original thinking and avant-garde writing with an approach that was often as wildly lucid as it was earnestly serious—as boldly experimental as it was classically conceived.

Second, in what appears initially to be a mere translator's introduction, Stump places his two source works firmly in context with the author's larger body of work and offers his scholarly, yet amusing line of reasoning regarding his choice of essays for this timely collection.[1] Third and most impressive, in this same introduction he creates a thoroughly engaging and surprisingly comprehensive overture to the uniquely coded world of Quenellian studies. The utility of this prologue for the uninitiated reader cannot be overstated, because as experienced readers of this complex, eclectic essayist, novelist, poet, musician, and graphic artist have already learned, to read Queneau—especially for the first time—is to understand that there is always more (or less) to a text than meets the eye, no matter what the language.

Jordan Stump is a likely candidate to accomplish such a project with singular distinction. A professor of French language and literature at the University of Nebraska with nearly two decades' worth of translations, articles, and full-length monographs—many of which are on Queneau—to his credit, Stump's knowledge of his subject is as well-tested as it is convincing. Drawing on this experience as well as on wisdom from a remarkably closely knit network of Queneau devotees and specialists who frequent the Centre de Documentation Raymond Queneau (CDRQ) in Verviers, Belgium, Stump invites us into a world eerily and concurrently lit by the fires of Surrealism, classicism, modernism, and postmodernism, to make no mention of mathematical theory, cinema, Marxism, and world religions.[2] These are the seeds of today's French literature, and as Stump remarks, "few if any twentieth-century writers are as present in the twenty-first-century French novel as Queneau. Read the works of writers like Jean Echenoz, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Iegor Gran, or Lydie Salvayre (and I could name a great many others): you will hear Queneau's voice" (p. x).

Somewhat boldly perhaps, Stump has chosen only a selection of essays from Queneau's original works, and although he admits the subjectivity of this choice, he also pushes it a bit further by assigning his own chronology to them. He brings all this to light in his introduction, of course, and, by the time experienced readers of Queneau get about halfway through its pages, they are enjoying the interesting sensation of a new Quenellian text being created before their eyes. Thanks to this book's imaginative initiation as well as its new chronology and language, those readers will find themselves on a new path—one only traceable through extensive research at the CDRQ or exhaustive reading. Everyone else profits similarly without even realizing it.

Although it would both unfeasible and unwise to try to summarize the full range and depth of these essays, a closer examination of a few of them is certainly appropriate. So with the same degree of subjectivity Stump admits in his own choices, I offer an inevitably insufficient selection of my own. By no means made at random, it is one that focuses on those essays I consider to be particularly useful in understanding Queneau's work as a whole while also highlighting the translator's effort.

In the 1930s we find a Queneau seemingly most concerned with the sociological implications and functions of French literature and language: their role, their image, their utility, and their very nature for both *littérateurs* and reader at large. "The Air and the Song" reveals his premise that the public disdain for literature, especially when practiced by writers themselves, is nothing but a literary pose: "a very curious spectacle they offer us, these literature slayers: even as they heap scorn on literature and art, Art and Literature are precisely what they continue to produce" (p. 12). Such scorn, when coming from "revolutionaries" such as the Surrealists, is every bit as disingenuous, holds Queneau, and, by indicting himself as a former adherent to that movement, he notes further that such activity, even calling it by the name of revolution, amounts to "literary theater" (p. 13). "Intellectual Fashion" adds a wise and amusing comparison of such literary posturing to runway fashion: "You'll see a great many people dressed up in Hegel this spring, but once fall comes around, Kierkegaard will be the thing" (p. 15).

These are minor essays to be sure, but Stump has also included the major ones. "Written in 1937" is, for example, essential to understanding Queneau's early novels. Noting the frustrating differences between written and spoken forms of French and the degree to which the former's troubled relationship to the latter is curious and even absurd, he cites Joseph Vendryes's contention that "the gap between our written and spoken languages is widening... the living (spoken) language will go on developing independently of the other, just as Romance languages have done with respect to Latin" (p. 19).^[3] With Queneau still citing Vendryes, we learn: "the language we French write is a dead language, its vocabulary and rules fixed forever more, unchanging..." Queneau thus proposes that an entirely new French be created: "my subject here is precisely the passage of a new language (that is, French, as it's currently spoken) from the oral to the written phase" (p. 17).

In this essay, the translator's seamless artistry becomes apparent. Gliding easily from Queneau's words to those of his sources and back, Stump adds the third dimension of his English text with meticulous precision and appropriate references to a bountiful, though by no means intrusive, corpus of endnotes. Some of these, such as his explanations of veiled references to Queneau's past experiences with the Surrealists and later research on "*fous littéraires*," are very instructive, even to specialists in the field. Others are useful to those even unfamiliar with French language or, in this particular essay, the peculiarities of the imperfect subjunctive and the *passé simple* (pp. 18, 205).

Queneau's ludic transcriptions of spoken French are playfully and expertly rendered as well. For example: "Yen a qui mégrice su la terè / Du ventre du coccyx ou des genoux," and "Moi j'mégrice du bout des doigts / Tralalala Tralalala / C'eskiya d'plu distinglé" becomes "Onnis erth there are sum hoo lose wate / Innair bellies or coccsykses or their knees" and "Me, I lose wate in my fingertips / Tralalala Tralalala / Thatsa most distinglished way ovemall" (p. 19).^[4] Indeed, as Barbara Wright shows in her translations of *Le Chiendent*^[5] and *Exercices de Style*,^[6] the work of the translator can be every bit as creatively significant as the original text. Respecting his less-than-expert readers, Stump even transcribes the French equivalent into correct French in an endnote: "Il y en a qui maigrissent sur la terre / Du ventre du coccyx ou des genoux" and "Moi je maigris du bout des doigts / C'est ce qu'il y a de plus distingué" (p. 206).

Expert or otherwise, we can see that this particular essay was included in *BCL* to illustrate Queneau's recollection that "I don't believe I spent much time thinking about the growing divergence between the

two French languages; and yet, looking through my papers, I've found two songs dating from this period, which bear little relation to what I was generally doing at this time" (p. 19). However, consulting the source texts as a reviewer, I had trouble keeping track of which essays came from where. For me, an indication of each essay's source, perhaps as a footnote to the title or at the end of each essay, would have been helpful. However, as Stump tells us in the introduction, his primary intention is to bring Queneau's essays to the attention of anglophone readers rather than create an annotated critical edition of the two works in English.

Finally, we find Queneau's revealing discussion of his 1932 trip to Greece when he brought along Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, which elucidates how this indictment of written French came together, bore his first novel, and formed the foundation of his entire *oeuvre*.^[7] As Stump puts it, "in Greece he glimpsed a possibility that hadn't revealed itself to him before... his discovery of the physical reality of the classical idea, the realization that human creations (such as the Theater of Dionysus in Athens) can exist in perfect harmony with the world that surrounds them" (p. xiv).

In "The Technique of the Novel," another essay essential to understanding his *oeuvre*, Queneau explains the narrative and structural unity of that first novel. From this, we come to understand Stump's title for this book: "Rules disappear one they've outlived their usefulness. But forms go on eternally. There are forms that confer all the virtues of the Number onto the novel's subject..." (p. 29). "What is Art?" contains and expands what appears to be Queneau's post-Surrealist *ars poetica*, while further developing the foundational idea already proposed in the previous year's essay on technique: "The classic writer who composes his tragedy by observing a certain number of rules that he know is freer than the poet who writes whatever comes into his head, and who is a slave to other rules that he doesn't see" (p. 36). "Plus and Minus" indicts what Queneau sees as the Surrealists' view of inspiration; "something that comes about as a function of the poet's mood, the temperature, the political situation, subjective accidents, or the subconscious" (p. 40) in favor of a creative process inherently active in genuine artistry: "The true poet requires no consolation, then, and no form of intoxicant. He's never inspired not only because he knows the powers of language, but also because what he is and what he's capable of: he isn't a slave to free association" (p. 41).

By the time we get to "Lyricism and poetry," we realize that Stump has wisely chosen essays that Queneau himself has cross-referenced in *BCL* and *VG*. This makes it easier for the anglophone reader to understand the artist's evolution as a writer and thinker, and it helps us see relationships between ideas that francophone readers of the original works may have missed. We sense Queneau's growing, systematic scorn for the Surrealist movement—something he felt throughout his career—but which is particularly evident during this period. Stump also alerts us to the occasional typographical errors that appear in the original texts—again welcome help for neophyte anglophone readers and experienced Queneaphiles alike (pp. 59-61).

This antipathy is also evident in "Strange Tastes," in which Queneau proposes a careful, reasoned creative ethic on the part of the writer as well as a correspondingly recreational, rather than erudite or attentive interpretive, one from the reader. Evoking Rabelais' "*substantifique moelle*" that can only be enjoyed by overcoming a masterpiece's resistance to interpretation, which Queneau characterizes as "some striving of the minus toward the plus" (p. 67), we also find his emblematic image of the literary work as an onion bulb: "some are happy to pull off only the outermost skin, while others, less numerous, peel it away layer by layer (p. 67). For Queneau, this underlines the reader's right to a superficial reading as well as a profound one, each constituting an equally valid "potential" interpretation.

"Readings for a Front" offers a series of reflections published in *Le Front National*, a weekly magazine that, Stump assures us, has nothing to do with the modern political party of that name. Political nonetheless, these essays are easily attributable to the war years, but they also include further reflections on literature and social issues: the act of reading, writing, and the trials of publishing.

Queneau the social activist holds forth here on the Holocaust and Nazi collaboration, comparing the former's concentration camps to the living conditions of the working poor and drawing parallels between Nazism, black humor, and the newly popular gangster novel. Viewing all three as manifestations of fascism, he offers the contention that "philosophies find their fullest expression in mass graves, however unpleasant a thought that might be" (p. 131).

It is this skeptical view of philosophy that rounds out Stump's collection as well as Queneau's original texts, for Stump has included Queneau's prefaces to two novels, Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*[8] and Faulkner's *Mosquitoes*. [9] Both authors influenced Queneau tremendously, but Flaubert, as seen through Queneau's eyes, seems to emblemize the way Queneau and his translator approach the writer's, as well as the philosopher's, task. In this essay, as well as in the translator's introduction and Flaubert's novel, the dangers of certainty are made very clear. "Stupidity consists in wanting to conclude," Stump assures us, quoting Flaubert in the first sentence of his introduction (p. vii), and by the time we have arrived at this three quarter point in the book, we have learned that—given the awesome range of Queneau's thought and the mesmerizing variety of texts that express them, through his originality, his intricate contradictions, and his effervescent eloquence—he remains always alive, always yet to be understood. "We are a thread and we want to know the entire weave" (p. 154), he laments, and as we complete our reading of the essay "Potential Literature" and its "haikuification" (pp. 189-91) of two Mallarméan sonnets, we see that some things are as resistant to conclusions as they are to translation. We are grateful for the challenge.

Indeed, as Jordan Stump so competently shows in this groundbreaking portrait of one of the twentieth-century's most influential French writers, to "k-know" Queneau is to gaze, tongue-in-cheek, into the classical, modernist, and post-modernist founts of twenty-first-century French literature and criticism. It is to strip away the layers of the onion he saw as the symbol of a literary work and its multiplicity of possible readings. Perhaps it is even to appreciate anew that the Beatles's own "Glass Onion" may, or again may not, poke fun at those who know—those who conclude—that meanings, especially hidden ones, can ever be completely within our grasp. [10]

NOTES

[1] Raymond Queneau, *Bâtons, chiffres, et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950); Queneau, *Bâtons, chiffres, et lettres*, 2d ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1965); and Queneau, *Le Voyage en Grèce* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). Hereinafter, I will refer to these collections as *BCL* and *VG*.

[2] The Centre de Documentation Raymond Queneau is housed in the Verviers municipal library. Directed and maintained by Ms. Suzanne Bagoly, it contains an extensive collection of Queneau's manuscripts, preparatory notes, correspondence, newspaper and tape-recorded interviews, films, and personal reflections on diverse topics. It also offers a comprehensive library of critical studies, secondary sources, and obscure references about the author, published and unpublished. Spending time within its walls, as well as consulting with Ms. Bagoly on whatever Quenellian project is at hand, is just about as obligatory as it is delightful for any serious researcher of Queneau's work.

[3] Joseph Vendryes, *A Linguistic Introduction to History*, trans. Paul Radin (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1951).

[4] Queneau, *BCL* 2d ed., p. 15.

[5] Queneau, *The Bark Tree*, trans. Barbara Wright (New York: New Directions, 1968).

[6] Queneau, *Exercises in Style*, trans. Barbara Wright (New York: New Directions, 1981).

[7] René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. John Veitch (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1945).

[8] Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1976).

[9] William Faulkner, *Mosquitoes* (New York: Liveright, 1955).

[10] The Beatles, "Glass Onion," *The White Album*, Apple/EMI, 1968.

D. Brian Mann
North Georgia College & State University
bmann@ngcsu.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172