

# Disjunction and Repetition in Queneau's Fiction

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The status of Raymond Queneau as an important or even "seminal" novelist is no longer in dispute. Neither is the author of *Zazie dans le métro* (1959) summarily discounted as a mere "amuseur," or a prankster. While his texts have by no means ceased to provoke controversy, they have been shown repeatedly as revealing an informed, lucid, and rather consistent preoccupation with the problems of literary language. Among some fifteen major works of narrative fiction credited to his name, the one that displays the various aspects of that preoccupation perhaps most emphatically is *Les Fleurs bleues*,<sup>1</sup> the novel which, with the exception of *Zazie dans le métro*, is also the most commented on of Queneau's novels to date.

One of the first discoveries a careful reader is sure to make in *Les Fleurs bleues* is the effect of neatly arranged symmetrical structures creating an impression of tight cohesion. In two interwoven narrative sequences, the stories involving the Duke of Auge and Cidrolin unfold as projects of fiction evolving in time and space. Cidrolin is placed in a contemporary setting in modern-day Paris. The Duke is placed in a setting that varies with the passing of time, between 1264 and 1964, and the sequence dealing with his story is spun as an allegorical fable reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide*. Further contributing to an impression of cohesion is the structure of the reflexive dream, a crucial device in the overall narrative strategy, functioning through explicit notations, in both sequences, and promoting a narrative logic whereby the story of one character asserts itself as the product of the other's dream. And functioning within this structure is a system of binary fixtures, polarities, contrapuntal motifs, oppositions or contrasts, "rhymes" of situations, characters, names, and themes: The Duke's first name is Joachim, the same as Cidrolin's (eventually they discover that the rest of their given names are also identical). Both characters have residences named "The Ark." They both get involved in discussions on the meaning of history, and on the nature of dreams. And one could go on multiplying the examples.

As has so often been pointed out, *Les Fleurs bleues* calls for multiple readings, on multiple levels, and suggests an almost infinite number of possi-

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<sup>1</sup>All page references are to the Folio edition of 1978.

ble interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is no forbidding hermeticism in the complexity contrived for such a broad spectrum of possible meanings. On the contrary, by means of the integrating power assumed by the reflexive dream structure, through a special brand of humor and through special effects skillfully casting the protagonists in molds of comic strip characters, the readability of the novel is enhanced. Indeed, there is something reassuring for the reader in knowing that the Duke appears regularly on the scene when Cidrolin is asleep and vice versa, and that, in his dreams, the Duke of Auge is Cidrolin, just as Cidrolin, when he dreams, is the Duke of Auge. Clearly, the reader's interest is kept alive by accounts of the "historical situation" where statements on the meaning of history or on the object of historical discourse become totally indistinguishable from statements on the impotence of language dramatized by a burlesque exhibition of puns of the type, "le Gaulois fumait une gitane," or "les Romains dessinaient des grecques," or "les Francs cherchaient des sols . . ." (13). The reader's interest is also kept alive by situations where a pimp can proffer weighty judgments on the nature of literature of the type, "Les graffiti, qu'est-ce que c'est? tout juste de la littérature" (98), or by situations where an overbearing, boorish blabbermouth like the Duke of Auge can defend his repetitive ramblings by snapping at his interlocutor, "la répétition est l'une des plus odoriférantes fleurs de la rhétorique" (69), or situations where horses read Homer or exchange witty quips with their masters. A stimulant of unfailing efficacy is also the one administered through the frequent use of linguistic oddities resulting from comical word coinage, so familiar by now even to Queneau's most casual readers ("mahomerie," "bouddhoir," "confussionnal," "sanct-lao-tsuaire," "languistique," "chevalchimie," "houature," and the like).

Yet, on this very system of sustained rhetoric, perceptible structures, and functioning language, a second system, an organism living like a parasitic growth, seems to prey. It supplants Queneau's narrative discourse by preventing any kind of privileged or "central" model of fiction from taking hold, by preventing any kind of hierarchy of meaning from establishing its credentials. The multiple meanings the reader gradually notices emerge from a play on the reality of identity, conditioned by a skillful shifting of focus, alternating between two sources of thematic potential, one being disjunctive, the other conjunctive. Their status is precarious. They are competing, threatening to cancel each other out. They are in the grips of a dialectic that seems haunted by its own shadow: the dialectics of consciousness and unconsciousness, history and non-history.

There is an unmistakable process of sapping underway, in force from the very beginning, on every level of the enterprise. As the narrative unfolds, the fiction promoted as the "story" of the two characters grows as a progression in time. But to what end? The story of the Duke of Auge is an antihistory. He is depicted as a Don Quixote, pitted against the forces of history whose im-

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Vivian Kogan, "Raymond Queneau, romancier modèle," *Temps mêlés* 20-21 (1983): 63. Also, Jacques Brenner, *Journal de la vie littéraire 1964-1966*. (Paris: Julliard, 1966) 104-05; and Jacques Chessex, "Raymond Queneau, sage et savant," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* Sept. 1965: 479.

mutability is inexorable. The objects of his quests are thus relentlessly displaced, pushed away into the perilous zones of the unutterable, the history that is doomed never to become articulated discourse, or text. In his cavalcade through the centuries, he is at odds with everything representing established authority: he opposes Saint Louis by refusing to participate in the Eighth Crusade; he scandalizes a bishop by offering support and protection to an alchemist; he protests the jailing of the Marquis de Sade; he refuses to attend the meetings of the States General; and against the background of a rapidly changing world, swept by the waves of the French Revolution, the Duke is sliding into a state of profound alienation.

In one sense, what is developing in this perspective is the dialecticized myth of an antihero, his "rhetorical" march through the centuries standing as a metaphor for an anti-odyssey, an anti-epic. A sense of burlesque reminiscent of the festive exuberance of Rabelaisian wit heightens this effect through the "deflationary" use of frequent parodies of recognizable literary models of epic discourse (Homer's and Cervantes's in particular). But in another sense, the legend of the Duke of Auge the rebel, the antihero, is itself subverted too. In the conclusion everything is contrived to frustrate our expectations. In the beginning of the novel, we are given to understand that the purpose of his excursions is to "exit" from history. Is this accomplished at the end of the fable? At the end of his adventure, his departure from Paris is the beginning of his return journey to his native Normandy, precisely the place where he started. The outbreak of cataclysmic rains that coincides with his departure, an obvious allusion to the biblical episode, makes his return coincide with a change in the landscape surrounding his chateau, suggesting the notion of a postdiluvian beginning: "Une couche de vase couvrait encore la terre, mais, ici et là, s'épanouissaient déjà de petites fleurs bleues" (276). But the chilling ambiguity of that "déjà" is a reminder that cannot be disregarded: the reappearance of blue flowers is not necessarily a sign of hope: this new beginning is also the beginning of the process that reduces flowers to mud, the mud of History. The treatment of this theme here is not without analogies to Camus's *La Chute*: Jean-Baptiste Clamence attempts to cleanse himself of guilt. But how else can he achieve that except by reversing the dominant colors of his public image, by committing acts that are explicitly and unambiguously evil? The Duke's manner of fleeing from the oppressive weight of history is not less absurd. The Duke's adventures end with a fall, a metaphorical fall not unlike that of Camus's novel, but also a metaphorical fall from his horse Demosthenes: he is back where he started, on top of his chateau, his only vantage point on history.

There is something terrifying about the deliberateness of his methodical, long-winded demonstration of unshakable pessimism. Can this stance be explained simply as the outcome of the author's meditation on history? In a hastily written draft of an essay dating from 1942, Queneau does acknowledge that Vico and Spengler, among others, are at the source of his thinking and that he considers history as "la science du malheur des hommes."<sup>3</sup> Implicitly,

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<sup>3</sup>Raymond Queneau, *Une Histoire modèle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) 9.

theme he develops in *Les Fleurs bleues* is quite consistent with that position. Queneau contends that if history were to start over again, everything would be repeated, all possible judgments on the Crusades, on Gilles de Rais and Sade, and on the theology of the Church would have to be just as ambivalent, contradictory, or absurd. But Queneau's argument introduces a new twist. The vision of blue flowers emerging from the slush seems almost a mocking reminder that the Duke's quixotic excursions in history had nothing to do with their reappearance. The periodicity of meteorological phenomena being a self-sustaining process, the circular nature of the Duke's trajectory is void of any didactic value. The circularity arrived at through rhetorical means seems conjured up simply to emphasize the idea of repetition, so as to subvert the conventional model of narrative order based on evolutionary rather than distributional principles. Inevitably, this manner of asserting a circular argument has also the effect of suggesting the fiction of the suppression of history, and thence a sense of the inability of the linear narrative to attain closure, or fixity of meaning beyond that of its own immanent organization and discursive competence.

The story of Cidrolin is dealt with in a similar manner, told to draw attention to the same kind of circular logic. As we become aware of his banal, uneventful life, we also begin to understand that he is subject to an enormous amount of tension. He too must "exit" from history. The "burden" from which he must liberate himself is represented in his case by a conscience dominated by guilt. The meaning of his life cannot be complete until he resolves the mystery of the graffiti he finds on his fence, which he erases carefully as soon as it appears and which a persistent prowler returns to repaint on the same surface and thus renew a suggestive, incriminating message accusing Cidrolin of murder. But the very logic that promotes this fiction is stood on its head when it is revealed that the graffiti writer is none other than Cidrolin himself. At that point, the act of painting, represented until then as an attempt to erase the stigma of an ungrounded accusation, suddenly becomes an act of self-accusation as well. With all rational underpinnings of this act now eliminated and its meaning in suspense, the sapping at this point is complete.

There are no teleological perspectives in the structures underlying Queneau's overall narrative strategy. While there are no limits to what can happen to his characters, nothing is ever alluded to as a physical or metaphysical necessity. Cidrolin's houseboat is named "The Ark" but there are no animals in it. He does not have an explanation, neither does he seem to feel there should be one. To an inspector who noted the inconsistency, unperturbed, Cidrolin replies: "C'est comme ça" (51). In the end of the novel, when animals do gather on the barge and the resemblance with Noah's ark becomes more ostensible he abandons it. History is a presence free from causality. Responsibility, guilt or innocence are arbitrary, gratuitous notions of unknown origin. Cidrolin's act of painting over during the day to cover what he wrote during the night is an act of irreducible repetition. Reminiscent of Penelope's endless weaving and unraveling in Homer's *Odyssey*, the treatment of this theme in this case is suggestive of a variety of possible meanings. Yet, ultimately, it does not "construct" an argument, except perhaps in asserting the primacy of the struc-

tural device over hierarchical meaning. As is the case with Queneau's other rhetorical devices based on repetition, the meaning it points to most emphatically is that of the intertextual and reiterative nature of the narrative process, the "hollowness" of the literary object.<sup>4</sup>

There can be no simple formula to enable reducing *Les Fleurs bleues* to a principle of unity, to a univocal, unidimensional essence. Those familiar with the author's early fiction will recall that this is also typical of *Le Chiendent* (1933), Queneau's first work which is still considered his most ambitious. But this multidimensionality certainly also typifies *Zazie dans le métro* and in a very baffling sort of way, *Le Vol d'Icare*, the last novel Queneau published before he died in 1976. In some respects, *Les Fleurs bleues* is a provocative, rather funny and entertaining book. Through his inimitable mixture of crude realism and burlesque fantasy, Queneau manages the atmospherics of a powerful parable. But the parable itself is also "fable sans moralité," and "allégorie sans clé," as some of the critics' early pronouncements labeled it.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it is a prisoner of its own freedom. Its lesson is diffused, elusive. The circularity of its main argument does not metaphorize anything intelligible. It has no other grace except as a ritual within a ritual, the ritual of its own repetition in the last rites of the symbolic order, at once an affirmation and a negation of the ludic mode of execution enabling its enactment. Unavoidably, *Les Fleurs bleues* is then also unsettling, disquieting. The amount of laughter it provokes can have no purposeful function since it amounts to little more than a meaningless reflex. In some respects, Queneau's comic effects are similar to what Bakhtin discerned in the world of Rabelais as a philosophy of laughter partly inspired by Lucian and "his image of Menippus laughing in the kingdom of the dead,"<sup>6</sup> relating laughter "to death, to the freedom of the spirit and to the freedom of speech."<sup>7</sup> But it is far from certain that a reader's experience at the end of the novel can be a "catharsis" or a "psychoanalysis," as Jean Queval once suggested.<sup>8</sup> In Queneau's absurd world of appearances, laughter becomes an end in itself, as an astute critic put it.<sup>9</sup> Its character is that of a malaise with lingering effects and no known remedy.

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<sup>4</sup>The most explicit display of this type of "Structuralist" perspective Queneau ever attempted in narrative fiction is no doubt the dazzling presentation of 99 variations of a banal episode in *Exercices de style* (1947).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Jacques Brenner 104; and Jean-Pierre Faye, "Cidrolin sursautant," *L'Arc* 28 (1966): 12.

<sup>6</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 69.

<sup>7</sup>Bakhtin 70.

<sup>8</sup>Jean Queval, "Queneau, discours et rêve," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* Feb. 1977: 71.

<sup>9</sup>See Jean Sarrail, "Sur le comique de Queneau," *L'Herne* 29 (1975): 124.

The importance assigned to the rule of disjunction and repetition in the orientation of the narrative project in this case merely reflects another phase, perhaps the most advanced, of a technique Queneau had already inaugurated so brilliantly in *Le Chiendent*, and later applied again with admirable virtuosity in *Exercices de style* (1947), in *Saint Glinglin* (1948), and finally in *Le Vol d'Icare* (1968). It consists in using abrupt juxtapositions of cleverly selected sections of narrative discourses drawn from the most varied traditions and genres, including non-Western structural models of inspiration, playing on their most intricate interrelations. A fairly convincing case has been made in recent scholarship for a Queneau polymath, enlightened by the cumulative lessons of a heritage and wisdom of traceable sources, at work on the task of rewriting the discourses of the West.<sup>10</sup> But to this date, there has been no satisfactory analysis of the "nature" of Queneau's predominant creative impulse. In some respects he seems guided by the lessons of Structuralism: his narrative texts are comparable to those of Roussel, Butor, or Ricardou. They are built around a solid frame or skeleton, meticulously designed, often based on mathematical models, but consistently self-reflective, in keeping with the theoretical premises of Saussurian linguistics. Under the rule of his ludic and combinatorial art, the designs of his constructions seem gratuitous manifestations of a will almost totally abandoned to the fascinations of experimentation. Alas, the interest in such experimentation lies only in the fact that it is contrived as a display of exuberance, on a model not unlike that of the medieval marketplace stage so lucidly analyzed by Bakhtin.<sup>11</sup> For at no point does the appearance of experimentation implicate even the slightest expectation of discovery. The impulse that guides the "transgressive" rhetorical operation in Queneau's fiction is, in that sense, a phenomenon that has not been adequately explained by anyone so far. It has been shown time and again how "undomesticated" or "irrecoverable" he is in relation to either Surrealism, or the literature of commitment of the War years, or the Nouveau Roman. Although critics like Barthes and Blanchot began to point to the self-deconstructive aspects of Queneau's poetics relatively early,<sup>12</sup> experimentation with literary forms and language in Queneau's writings has never been associated with either the "subversive" phase of the Nouveau Roman that became strongly identified with *Tel Quel* or with the deconstructionism that grew out of the positions elaborated under the influence of Jacques Derrida. In the words of Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, Queneau is "at once in and beyond Structuralism."<sup>13</sup> On this side

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. studies such as Claude Debon, "Réécriture et identité dans *Le Vol d'Icare*," *Temps Mêlés* 20-21 (1983): 31-45; also Christopher Shorley, *Queneau's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Allen Thiher, *Raymond Queneau* (Boston: Twayne, 1985).

<sup>11</sup>For some very pertinent reflections on Queneau in the light of Bakhtin's "doctrine," see Thomas Aron, "Le roman comme représentation de langages," *Europe* June-July 1983: 46-58; and Allen Thiher, *Raymond Queneau* passim.

<sup>12</sup>See Roland Barthes, "Zazie et la littérature," *Critique* Aug.-Sept. 1959: 675-81; and Maurice Blanchot, "De l'humour romanesque," *Journal des Débats* 2 Sept. 1942: 3.

of the Atlantic, Vivian Kogan made a similar case, arguing for a Queneau de-  
constructor of the narrative as a genre.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, to the extent that he as-  
sociated himself with group activism, Queneau appeared more at home with  
the preoccupations of less influential coteries such as the Collège de Pata-  
physique of which he had been a very conspicuous satrap since 1950, or the  
OuLiPo which he cofounded with Le Lionnais in 1960.<sup>15</sup>

In light of what is known and relevant today, Queneau displays many of  
the symptoms associated with the "ruptures" defining the present condition of  
Western civilization, a condition often referred to as "Postmodernism." Yet, in  
terms of the gap that exists between his alienating pessimism and the energy  
he translated into creative writing, the meaning of his posture is atypically elu-  
sive. The presence of his published works, in their richness and haunting diver-  
sity, is, in and of itself, perhaps the most tangible evidence of a unique form of  
heroism. In his own way, in the practice of his profession, he learned to deal  
with his pessimism through acts of courage, not resignation. In his quests, he  
learned that uncompromising aggression on the "certitudes" of logocentric  
discourse does not have to lead to nihilism and sterility, and that, ultimately, it  
can accede to the status of an assertive generative principle, thus becoming at  
once the cause and *raison d'être* of a new structural order.

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<sup>14</sup>Vivian Kogan, *The Flowers of Fiction: Time and Space in Les Fleurs bleues* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1982) *passim*, particularly the last chapter.

<sup>15</sup>Inspired by Jarry, the Pataphysicians are dedicated to the "science of imaginary solutions," poking fun at literature's claim to seriousness and self-importance. The OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) is a club of linguists and mathematicians interested in exploring the relations between literature and mathematics.