Case studies in English

1.3. Discursive typologies

Case study 1.3
Raymond Queneau, *Exercices in style,* 1947,
English translation by Barbara Wright, 1958.
Initial "Notation" and selection of six exercises.

Notation

In the S bus, in the rush hour. A chap of about 26, felt hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone's been having a tug-of-war with 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 on to it.

Two hours later, I meet 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.

Narrative

One day at about midday in the Parc Monceau district, on the back platform of a more or less full S bus (now No. 84), I observed a person with a very long neck who was wearing a felt hat which had a plaited cord round it instead of a ribbon. This individual suddenly addressed the man standing next to him, accusing him of purposely treading on his toes every time any passengers got on or off. However he quickly abandoned the dispute and threw him self on to a seat which had become vacant.

Two hours later I saw him in front of the gare Saint-Lazare engaged in earnest conversation with a friend who was advising him to reduce the space between the lapels of his overcoat by getting a competent tailor to raise the top button.

Official Letter

I beg to advise you of the following facts of which I happened to be the equally impartial and horrified witness.

Today, at roughly twelve noon, I was present on the platform of a bus which was proceed- ing up the rue de Courcelles in the direction of the Place Champerret. The aforementioned bus was fully laden - more than fully laden, I might even ventureto say, since the conductor had accepted an overload of several candidates, without valid reason and actuated by an exaggerated kindness of heart which caused him to exceed the regu- lations and which, consequently, bordered on indulgence. At each stopping place the perambulations of the outgoing and incoming passengers did not fail to provoke a certain disturbance which incited one of these passengers to protest, though not without timidity. I should mention that he went and sat down as and when this eventuality became possible.

I will append to this short account this addendum: I had occasion to observe this passenger some time subsequently in the company of an individual whom I was unable to identify. The conversation which they were exchanging with some animation seemed to have a bearing on questions of an aesthetic nature.

In view of these circumstances, I would request you to be so kind. Sir, as to intimate to me the inference which I should draw from these facts and the attitude which you would then deem appropriate that I adopt in re the conduct of my subsequent mode of life.

Anticipating the favour of your reply, believe me to be. Sir, your very obedient servant at least.

Blurb

In this new novel, executed with his accustomed brio, the famous novelist X, to whom we are already indebted for so many masterpieces, has decided to confine himself to very clear-cut characters who act in an atmosphere which everybody, both adults and children, can understand. The plot revolves, then, round the meeting in a bus of the hero of this story and of a rather enigmatic character who picks a quarrel with the first person he meets. In the final episode we see this mysterious in- dividual listening with the greatest attention to the advice of a friend, a past master of Sartorial Art. The whole makes a charming impression which the novelist X has etched with rare felicity.

Cross examination

—At what time did the 12.23 p.m. S-line bus proceeding in the direction of the Porte de Champerret arrive on that day?
—At 12.38 p.m.
—Were there many people on the aforesaid S bus?
—Bags of 'em.
—Did you particularly notice any of them?
—An individual who had a very long neck and a plait round his hat.
—Was his demeanour as singular as his attire and his anatomy?
—At the very beginning, no; it was normal, but in the end it proved to be that of a slightly hypotonic paranoiac cyclothymic in a state of hypergastric irritability.
—How did that become apparent?
—The individual in question interpellated the man next to him and asked him in a whining tone if he was not making a point of treading on his toes every time any passengers got on or off.
—Had this reproach any foundation?
—I've no idea.
—How did the incident terminate?
—By the precipitate flight of the young man who went to occupy a vacant seat.
—Was there any sequel to this incident?
—Less than two hours later.
—In what did this sequel consist?
—In the reappearance of this person across my path.
—Where and how did you see him again?
—When I was passing the Cour de Rome in a bus.
—What was he doing there?
—He was being given some sartorial advice.

Sonnet

Glabrous was his dial and plaited was his bonnet,
And he, a puny colt—(how sad the neck he bore,
And long)—was now intent on his quotidian chore—
The bus arriving full, of somehow getting on it.
One came, a number ten—or else perhaps an S,
Its platform, small adjunct of this plebeian carriage,
Was crammed with such a mob as to preclude free passage;
Rich bastards lit cigars upon it, to impress.
The young giraffe described so well in my first strophe,
Having got on the bus, started at once to curse an
Innocent citizen—(he wanted an easy trophy
But got the worst of it.) Then, spying a vacant place,
Escaped thereto. Time passed. On the way back, a person
Was telling him that a button was just too low in space.

Telegraphic

BUS CROWDED STOP YNGMAN LONGNECK PLAITENCIRCLED HAT APOSTROPHISES UNKNOWN PASSENGER UNAPPARENT REASON STOP QUERY FINGERS FEET HURT CONTACT HEEL ALLEGED PURPOSELY STOP YNGMAN ABANDONS DISCUSSION PRO-VACANT SEAT STOP 1400 HOURS PLACE ROME YNGMAN LISTENS SARTORIAL ADVICE FRIEND STOP MOVE BUTTON STOP SIGNED ARCTURUS

Analysis

In his *Exercises in Style* (1947), Raymond Queneau presents ninety-eight variations on a rather mundane semantic core. This core, introduced in the first text of the *Exercises*, is a narrative: the narrator sees, on a Paris bus, a young man with a long neck wearing a hat with a cord instead of a ribbon. The narrator observes that the young man scolds another passenger for not respecting the space he believes he's entitled to on the bus. The argument is cut short when a seat becomes available and the young man takes it. Two hours later, the narrator sees the same long-necked young man again, this time in front of the Saint-Lazare train station. He is speaking with a friend who advises him to add a button to the coat he's wearing.

The title of the text that opens the volume and introduces the story is *Notations*, a term that suggests what is being presented are loose notes—simple annotations for a future project. A musical connotation is also perceptible in *Notations*: the word “note” echoes through the text, and the reference to musical notation is one of the term’s possible meanings. This is no coincidence, since, as Queneau explains in the preface to his *Exercises in Style*, the idea of creating a work composed of variations on a rather trivial theme came to him after attending a concert performance of *The Art of Fugue* by Bach.

Exercises in Style has sparked a vast amount of commentary, and it is not our intention to revisit the many interpretations, translations, or literary and artistic extensions that Queneau’s work has inspired. We will simply note that critics generally distinguish between *technical variations* (which involve modifications while maintaining a recognizable textual base) and *tonal variations* (which completely rewrite the story in different registers, genres, or tones). The six exercises we have selected explore a range of discursive genres: literary genres (such as narrative and sonnet), as well as everyday discursive forms: the official letter, the “please insert” notice (blurb), the interrogation, and the telegram. In each case, these are genres familiar to the reader. The exercises caricature the conventions of each genre and demonstrate—just as Bach does in *The Art of Fugue*—how a minimal narrative core can give rise to a remarkably rich creative process.

The basic structure (description of the character, moment of tension on the bus and its resolution when the young man finds a seat, final scene in front of the Saint-Lazare train station) is preserved across the various variations. However, since form and content are inseparable, the story itself is transformed. This is evident in our selection of exercises, where generic conventions not only introduce new details but also confer new meanings on elements that were already present in the original narrative.

The text titled *“Narrative”* follows the conventions of the genre it employs: a narrative is a presentation, through language, of real or imagined events. The narrator may be a character within the story or an external voice recounting events unrelated to their own experience. As with any narrative, the reader must reconstruct a structure that moves from an initial situation to a conclusion. This task is straightforward if the narrator respects chronological order and omits no key details—but we know that this is not always the case. Logical relations (marked by connectors indicating addition,

opposition, causality, concession, consequence, etc.) and the chronological sequence of events may be immediately clear on first reading, but there are also narratives that leave it to the reader to reconstruct—or imagine—the order and the meaning of events.

Queneau's "Narrative" is fairly traditional and does not stray far from the narrative core presented in "Notations." A first-person narrator recounts a series of events involving a character he saw twice in the same day. Although this is a personal experience of the narrator, the central focus is not on himself but on the character he observed. The story follows the basic structure (character description, episode on the bus, final episode in front of the Saint-Lazare station) and poses no difficulties for the reader's comprehension because the chronology of events is clearly marked ("One day at about midday," "Two hours later") and certain logical relations between events are also signalled ("This individual suddenly addressed...," but "quickly abandoned the dispute..."). When comparing "Narrative" to "Notations," we notice that additional details have been included, as if the genre encouraged the narrator to be more precise: not only is the bus line mentioned, but its number is also added in the writing of the exercise. Furthermore, it is specified that the long-necked young man's irritation stems from his belief that his neighbour is stepping on his feet intentionally every time someone walks past. Later, the suggestion to add a button to his coat is expanded with the detail that the task should be entrusted to a "competent tailor."

The "Official Letter" also exaggerates the characteristics of the chosen genre: the narrator presents the events he recounts as something worth recording, something that could have an impact on his future life. His letter is intended as a testimony for an institution for whom this account would be important. Like all testimonies, that of the author of this official letter is also subjective. We can observe that, while he provides many details, opinions, and even personal hypotheses about what he recounts, he omits other information that was present in the "Notations" — for instance, the description of the character and his hat. As the conventions of the genre require in this case, the narrator uses a very formal register, a series of set phrases (especially at the beginning and end of the letter), and he concludes by stating that he expects a response.

In the "Please insert" notice (a type of blurb or promotional notice that publishers send to journalists to promote a book and its author), the story—which is supposed to serve as the foundation for an entire novel—is reduced to its bare minimum (a mention of the bus, and a mention of the friend's advice later on). The young man is presented as an enigmatic and quarrelsome character, later described as "enigmatic," while the narrator is referred to as "the hero of this story." As is typical of the genre, a writer and their style are highlighted, hence the mention of the author's fame, their "masterpieces," and their ability to create "clear-cut characters." The writer of this promotional piece is unconcerned by the apparent contradiction between the emphasis on detailed character creation and the claim that the author's work is intended for a broad audience ("an atmosphere which everybody, both adults and children, can understand"). The text's final sentence is as emphatic as it is formulaic: "The whole makes a charming impression which the novelist X has etched with rare felicity."

In the "*Cross-examination",* the questions appear to be asked by an investigator or a police officer. This story is conveyed through the answers of the person who acted as the narrator in the other exercises, and who now becomes a witness. These answers add details (such as the precise time the bus passed) and interpretations that are humorous in their excess (for instance, the description of the character as "a slightly hypotonic paranoiac cyclothymic in a state of hypergastric irritability") or in their incongruity (for example, when he refers to the young man's second appearance as "a sequel" to the bus episode). The concise style of the questions mimics that of a police cross-examination.

The “*Sonnet*” presents the story with new details: the writer has become a poet and describes the young man with the long neck as “a puny colt—(how sad the neck he bore, / And long),” who finds himself surrounded, on the bus, by “rich bastards" who "lit cigars upon it” and who, at the end, receives sartorial advice from a “person” (a literary term referring to an impertinent individual, originally an insult in the 17th century). What matters here is the use of the traditional sonnet form: 14 alexandrines with enclosed rhymes (ABBA) in the two first quatrains, followed by greater freedom in the tercets. The conventional thematic organization is also respected, notably due to the conclusive nature of the final tercet.

The discursive genre of the exercise “Telegraphic” is the telegram, a genre much less used today but very common in 1947. The fact that telegrams were charged by the number of words explains why articles and prepositions are omitted, why only essential information is conveyed, and why it is expressed in a very concise manner. In the *telegram style*, pauses—which in a written text would be indicated by various punctuation marks—are marked by the word “stop.” This usage likely originates from military telegrams, where, to avoid misunderstandings, pauses were clearly marked by the word “stop.” The addition of the signature “Arcturus” at the end of the text respects the conventions of the genre (telegrams are signed). The version of the story about the young man with the long neck retains the essential elements presented in the “Notations”. Using the telegram style after more than fifty versions of the story written in different tones and genres is particularly amusing.

In conclusion, we can say that a simple story can give rise to very different texts. Indeed, when a speaker recounts an experience, whether real or imaginary, they rely not only on their language but also on a great number of conventions. Even though it is an individual who produces an utterance, they always do so based on relatively stable and recognized types—the discursive genres. In his *Exercises in Style*, Queneau plays with the discursive genres of literature as well as those of everyday life. The abundance of variations on the same story shows us how discourse adapts to the infinite possibilities of human sensitivity and activity within a society and how, in a complementary movement, discursive genres shape human experience.