

Carol O'Sullivan

**Around the Continent in 99 Exercises: Tracking
the Movements
of the *Exercices de style***

Queneau, Raymond.
Nationality, French.
Status, Distinguished.
Known literary background, Surrealist.
English experience of, Negligible.
(*Observer* review, 1959)

I. Introduction

THE HETEROGENEITY OF RAYMOND QUENEAU'S (1903-1976) body of work makes it extremely difficult to classify. If, as Emmanuël Souchier has put it, «*la notoriété de Queneau s'est essentiellement fondée sur deux livres, Exercices de style et Zazie dans le métro*» (Souchier 2003: p. 64), the two books appeal to different, though overlapping, audiences. While the success of *Zazie* abroad is facilitated by the pre-eminent position of prose narrative in European literary cultures, the generic innovativeness of *Exercices de style* is likely to prove both attractive and challenging to target systems.

Of the two target systems under consideration in this article, the book has made by far the greatest impact in Italy, enjoying numerous adaptations in a variety of media. Philip Toynbee's humorous summary, quoted above, of Queneau's position in "English" culture is, alas, perhaps most notable for its continued applicability nearly half a century later¹. Despite a large number of published translations,

¹Though on the question of Queneau's links with the Surrealists, see Knapp 1976: p. 41-43; Souchier 1991: p. 15-24.

Queneau's profile in English translation has never matched his importance as a writer. Reviews of later editions of the *Exercices in Style* feel obliged to re-introduce the book to an English readership which has never fully assimilated it as a classic. The present article employs a combination of textual and systemic approaches with a view to suggesting some reasons for the difference in reception in Britain and Italy, and the different ways in which the work «se transforme et se renouvelle sans cesse» (Sanders 1994: p. 92-93).

Composed during and immediately following the Second World War, Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* was first published by Gallimard in 1947. The *prière d'insérer* described the text thus:

Il y en a quatre-vingt-dix-neuf, de ces exercices. États divers de la langue française, figures de rhétorique et genres très littéraires sont utilisés pour raconter de différentes façons un même petit fait qui est à peine l'ébauche d'une anecdote. Le pastiche seul a été exclus (qtd. in Deguy 1986: p. 174).

The book was not quick to attract the attention of translators and publishers abroad. An interesting, though not exhaustive, survey of translations of Queneau published in the 1975 special issue of *Cahiers de l'Herne* lists only three translations, into English, German and Serbo-Croat, compared with twelve translations of *Zazie dans le métro* (1959), of which most were published within two years of the original². Equally popular, with twelve translations listed, is the 1942 novel *Pierrot mon ami*.

The publication of the book in English, by some years the earliest full translation to appear, came about through a meeting between Wright and Queneau in Paris following the publication in 1954 of Wright's translation of the short stories «Un cheval troyen» and «À la limite de la forêt». When asked by Wright which of his books he would most like to see translated, Queneau identified, possibly provocatively, the *Exercices de style* (Wright 1997: p. 76). The resulting translation, published in 1958, was followed by many more³. The book's eventual

²In this case the speed of translation is likely to be connected with the release of Louis Malle's film of the book in 1960.

³To give only an approximate list, in Europe alone the text has been translated into Bulgarian (2000), Catalan (1989), Czech (1994), Danish (1994), Dutch (1978), Finnish (1991), Galician (1995), German (1961), Greek (1984), Hungarian (1959, 1984), Italian (1961, 1983), Norwegian (1996), Portuguese (2000), Russian (1992, 2001, 2002), Serbo-Croat (1964), Slovenian (1981), Spanish (1987) and Swedish (1987). I am indebted to Charles Kestermeier's magisterial bibliography-in-progress of all things Queneau, available at <https://people.creighton.edu/~ctk34340/queneau.html> (checked on June 15th, 2006), for details of many of these translations.

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near-universal translation, indeed its multiple translation in several countries, and its appearance in languages of limited diffusion such as Galician and Catalan reflect its status as a classic of modern European literature.

II. «Une nette différence de parti pris»?

A 1986 round table discussion on the book⁴, chaired by Jacques Roubaud, sheds some interesting light on the text's appeal for translators. A number of them speak of the intrinsic pleasure of translating the text, the Slovenian translator Aleš Berger going so far as to speak of a «joie immense» (Various 1987: p. 112). Rather than being commissioned to translate the text, a number of early translators seem to have been the driving force behind its publication in translation. The German co-translators, for instance, were originally spurred to make the attempt by the consensus that the text was untranslatable, and encouraged by Queneau who responded to their initial enquiry with the statement «*Mais c'est parfaitement traduisible et je souhaiterais que vous le fassiez*» (Various 1987: p. 106). Umberto Eco experienced a similar tug towards these exercises «*che per anni mi hanno tentato come traduttore, perché erano ritenuti intraducibili, legati come sono al "genio" specifico della lingua francese*» (see Celotti 1985: p. 140)⁵.

Eco's alignment with other translators comes under scrutiny, however, from Roubaud, who remarks early on in the discussion that, *of course*, the Italian translation (specifically, of the exercise «Alexandrins») is in some sense in a different category from the other half-dozen translations under discussion: «*cela s'entend, il y a une nette différence de parti pris dans la version d'Umberto Eco*» (Various 1987: p. 102). This observation is not entirely borne out by the discussion which follows. Eco's choice to render «Alexandrins» as a «Canzone» in the style of Leopardi⁶ seems not incomparable with the choices of other translators to use a fifteen-syllable Greek folkloric metre, or follow an

⁴ The round table was part of the annual Assises de la Traduction Littéraire in Arles. Participating translators were: Barbara Wright, Aleš Berger (Slovenian), Eugen Helmlé and Ludwig Harig (German), Achilleas Kyriakidis (Greek) and Jan Ivarsson (Swedish). Danilo Kiš (Serbo-Croat) was unable to attend but submitted a paper. Umberto Eco is mentioned in the discussion but no reason is given for his absence.

⁵ «*which have tempted me as a translator for years, because they were considered untranslatable, linked as they are to the specific "genius" of the French language*». Unless otherwise specified, all translations in the notes are by the author of this article.

⁶ On the basis of the minimal importance of the alexandrine as a metre in Italian literature (Eco 1983, p. 15)

established thirteen-syllable Dutch metric tradition (Various 1987: p. 103-104). Admittedly, the intertextual links binding his *canzone* to the Italian tradition are particularly strong (compare «*la pedana d'autobus antica*» (Queneau 1983: p. 71) to «*la vetta della torre antica*» of Leopardi's «*Passero solitario*», etc.). Much has been made of Eco's creativity in translating the *Exercices*: «*si le Sonnet de Queneau est "tributario del genio della lingua francese" le Sonetto de Eco joue de son côté sur le "génie" de la langue italienne*» (Oliver 1991: p. 217). Nevertheless, I would like to argue here that Eco's translation differs in order of magnitude, certainly, but not in type, from Wright's English translation. In any case, differences of approach will be insufficient to explain the differences in reception.

It is true that paratextually, the translations are presented differently. Apart from the obvious (Eco's name appears on the spine and the front of the book; Wright's on the back cover), the translators' *discourses* vary substantially. Eco sees himself in competition with Queneau in the matter of textual play, and attempts to outdo him in virtuosity in certain exercises:

Se in Homéotéleutes Queneau ha alliterato facendo terminare 27 parole in /ule/, perché il traduttore non poteva tentare un doppio esercizio (uno in /ate/ e l'altro in /ello/) realizzando nel primo 28 parole e 30 nel secondo? E se Queneau gioca di parechemi su 34 parole, perché non riuscire a farlo con 67 parole? (Eco 1983: p 14)⁷.

Wright, on the other hand, speaks in much more self-effacing terms about her translation practice and her relationship with her author. The impression given by her low profile at the Arles round table is of great shyness – the only woman present, though the first to translate Queneau's book and one of the few translators to work with Queneau, she speaks seldom and says little. Reading Wright on Queneau and on her own translations, the most striking feature is her admiration for Queneau, which seems entirely uncritical: «Every book Queneau wrote forms a perfect, homogeneous whole. But within that homogeneous whole there is a plethora of the most heterogeneous elements, all of which, on analysis, are always in their right place and in the right proportion» (Wright 1988: p. i). For Wright, the translator's primary

⁷ *If in Homéotéleutes Queneau produced 27 words ending in /ule/, why could the translator not try for a double exercise (one in /ate/ and the other in /ello/), managing 28 words in the first instance and 30 in the second? And if Queneau plays on parechesis with 34 words, why not try to achieve it with 67?*

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aim is to reproduce the author's *tone*, very much in line with what Lawrence Venuti has termed *simpatico*⁸:

Your first task, then, is to try to think yourself into the author's tone of voice – or rather, to feel yourself into it, because this can only be a spontaneous work of the imagination which, further more, can probably only be achieved when you love and admire the work of “your” author (Wright 1983: p. 114).

Nothing more unlike the confidence with which Eco declares that he has slightly revised the selection of exercises included in the revised edition of 1973: «*Réactionnaire*” è un bel pezzo di costume [...] non so perché Queneau l'abbia tolto, ma io ho deciso di lasciarlo» (Eco 1983: p. 5)⁹. In exploiting what he identifies as a «*spazio residuo di libertà*» (Eco 1983: p. 14)¹⁰ literary forms and styles which could, conceivably, be rendered “straight” become overlaid, or substituted outright, with Italian forms and references, as for example in Eco's «Comunicato stampa» which builds on Queneau's «*Prière d'insérer*» by naming a previous bestseller by the «*celebre romancier X [...] di cui i lettori ricorderanno l'avvincente “Le scarpe slacciate”*» (Queneau 1983: p. 49)¹¹.

But the differences are not as great as, perhaps, they may appear from the above analysis. Both translators acknowledge that some of the *Exercices* are culturally bound to French such that they seemed to require “transposition” rather than translation. Among the *Exercices* which must be substituted outright in English, «*Paysan*» and «*Italianismes*» become «*West Indian*» and «*Opera English*». Wright also has to solve the problem of the existence in the French of two exercises in the past tense, in *passé indéfini* and *passé simple*, by constructing a *Reported Speech* around «*Dr Queneau said*». She replaces «*Anglicismes*», inevitably, with «*Gallicismes*», and two exercises based on the transformative procedures of French *argot*, «*Loucherbem*» and

⁸ Venuti 1995: p. 273-5. If we overlook the time lag, Wright's relationship with Queneau is a good example of the «ideal situation [...] when the translator discovers his [sic] author at the start of both their careers. In this instance, the translator can closely follow the author's progress, accumulating exhaustive knowledge of the foreign texts, strengthening and developing the affinity which he already feels with his author's ideas and tastes, becoming, in effect, of the same mind» (Venuti 1995: p. 274).

⁹ «*Réactionnaire*” is a fine society piece [...] I don't know why Queneau took it out, but I decided to leave it in».

¹⁰ «residual space of freedom».

¹¹ «The celebrated novelist X [...] Readers will recall his nail-biting drama “The untied shoelaces”».

«Javanais» become «Rhyming Slang» and «Backslang», both transformations which are effected on language in anglophone culture, though under different social and cultural conditions. «Vulgaire» becomes «Cockney» and «Par devant par derrière» becomes the parlour game «Consequences». As well as the exercises mentioned above and his cherry-picking of elements from both editions of the book, Eco shifts «Italianismes» into «Francesismi», and «Vulgaire» becomes «Romanesco», or Roman dialect.

The statement that «*Eco semble plus scrupuleux dans l'observance des règles de composition de Raymond Queneau*» (Oliver 1991: p. 215)¹² finds a counterpart in Wright's correction of a "mistake" of Queneau's: «In his Haiku, Queneau, with his oh so justifiable poetic licence [sic], omitted one of the obligatory classical elements – the reference to one of the four seasons. (Naturally I, in my pedantic way, restored it [...])» (Wright 1981: n.p.). Though Wright forbears to revise her translation in the light of Queneau's changes to the 1973 edition of the book, she cannot resist including a translation of the new exercise *Tanka* in her preface (Wright 1981: n.p.).

Both translators figure their strategies using ludic imagery. For Eco it is the image of the game with set rules; for Wright the sheer "fun" of translation: «In composing *West Indian* [...] I had the greatest fun in lifting phrases and expressions wholesale from Samuel Selvon's marvellous book *The Lonely Londoners*. In substituting *Opera English* for *Italianismes* I had just as much fun» (Wright 1981: n.p.).

If Wright's perception of the author's intention causes her to retain as many exercises as possible in their original forms, and to ask for Queneau's approval of her substitution of other exercises for the ones which could not be shoehorned into English (Wright 1997: p. 76), Eco too remembers approaching Queneau some time in the 1970s through Italo Calvino to ask for authorisation to add some newly-minted exercises (Eco 1983: p. 3)¹³. The author may no longer be an active collaborator, but he is frequently invoked in the pages of Eco's introduction.

¹² Eco has been more scrupulous in creating a break in sense between the octave and the sestet of his sonnet, and he is also more severely traditional in its rhyme scheme.

¹³ The answer seems to have been positive: «*Credo, se ben ricordo, che l'autore avesse acconsentito*», Eco says vaguely (Eco 1983: p. 3).

III. Italianismes

The *Exercices* has migrated into many different media – appropriate in the case of a text described as being already transmedial, in that it was, at least apocryphally, inspired by Bach’s *Art of Fugue*. In their country of origin, the *Exercices* have been set to music by Les Frères Jacques, recorded, performed in the theatre, rendered in print not only in words but typographically (Massin; Faucheux) and illustratively (Carelman). Massin too consulted Queneau on the desirability of his project and was encouraged by Queneau’s chuckles on seeing some early efforts (Massin 2000: p. 60).

These transmedial journeys have continued in translation. Eco’s translation in fact originally came into being as a piece of theatre written for Paolo Poli (Eco 1983: p. 3), which was further adapted in performance. A review in *Alfabeta* refers to Eco’s «*impervia scommessa di traduttore sui generis*» (Lagorio 1984)¹⁴. A hugely popular 1993 comic strip of the same title by the cartoonists Stefano Disegni and Massimo Caviglia was subsequently published in book form by Mondadori. The comics, based around the story of a rendezvous between two lovers, constitute a sustained satire of Italian culture and politics. A theatre performance based on Disegni and Caviglia’s comics was staged at the 1996 Festival nazionale di satira politica in Forte dei Marmi. Surprisingly, perhaps, given the text’s many incarnations to date, Disegni and Caviglia were unimpressed when a subsequent film, released in 1996 with the title *Esercizi di stile* (Testa 2002: p. 182), told the story of fifteen scenes of farewell directed by fifteen different directors in different styles. Proving once again that where there’s a hit, there’s a writ, Disegni and Caviglia responded in *Panorama* with a further cartoon in the series which implied that their idea had been directly pirated. Most recent, perhaps, of the text’s incarnations in Italy is a new musical piece by Luca Signorini entitled «*Variazioni sul tram*», freely adapted from Queneau’s work, which has been commissioned for the 2006 Ravello Festival¹⁵.

One site of wide diffusion of textual practices inspired by the *Esercizi* is the work of the bestselling novelist and journalist Stefano Benni. References to Queneau abound in Benni’s writing, from the epigraph to the short story «*Achille ed Ettore*», «*Tanto fa l’uomo che*

¹⁴ «outrageous, sui generis translator’s wager».

¹⁵<http://www.amalficoast.com/download/Programma-Preliminare-Ravello-Festival-2006.pdf> (p. 11) (checked on June 15th, 2006).

alla fine sparisce», which is a line from *Zazie nel metrò*¹⁶, to the monster known as the «*doukipoudontan*» (Benni 1996: p. 125)¹⁷, to pick two more or less at random. Benni's enthusiasm for Queneau's work registers methodologically as well as intertextually; his novels, short stories and poems are linked through a dense network of intertextual reference and quotation, both of his own work and of the literary canon, which mirrors that employed by Queneau¹⁸. The device of the exercise in style is reworked in the multi-layered comic parallelisms of *Terra!* (1983), and the endlessly varied games of *pallastrada* in *La compagnia de' Celestini* (1992). Well-known narratives are also offered in multiple versions in different books. One of these is *Moby Dick*, retold twice, once in the story of Captain Quixote Patchwork, told by a character in *Terra!*, the other in a version called "Matu-Maloo" in *Il bar sotto il mare* (1987). The former tells the story of a mad spaceship captain obsessed with obtaining a rare white mineral meteorite; the latter the tale of a whale who falls in love with an arrogant English captain and pursues him around the ocean. Benni's work, even more than that of Disegni and Caviglia, foregrounds the comic possibilities of the *esercizio di stile*, as opposed to that anxiety expressed by Aleš Berger, Queneau's Slovenian translator, «*devant la totalité de l'être, devant le fait plastiquement exprimé qu'il n'existe pas de vérité, que rien ne peut être dit jusqu'au bout*» (Various 1987: p. 122) which the original is capable of inspiring.

Benni's stories have in turn been brought back into what is, in a sense, their language of departure, with the several translations of Benni's major novels published in French translation.¹⁹ In a further return to the source, a graphic novel drawn by Spartaco Ripa, *Capitaine Patchwork* (2002), based on the *Moby Dick* story from *Terra!*, was published in French as a hardcover comic book, and more recently published in two parts as *Capitan Patchwork* in March 2006 in the Italian comics magazine *Skorpio*. The intertextual links between the

¹⁶ «A man does so much that in the end he disappears» (Wright's translation).

¹⁷ The reference is to the phonetic transcription of «D'où qu'ils puent donc tant» as «Doukipudonktan», the famous first word(s) of *Zazie dans le métro*. The wordplay is ingeniously preserved in Françoise Brun's French translation of Benni's *Baol*, which calls the monster a «*kuakipudontan*».

¹⁸ On inter- and intratextual reference in Queneau's work, see Sanders 1994: p. 47-53; Wright 1971: p. xxvi, and notes on p. 203, p. 210, 212. One of the most obviously recurring motifs in Benni's work is the whale; readers are invited to keep an eye out for these sometimes elusive mammals.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Benni's fortunes in English did not progress beyond a mismarketed 1985 translation by Annapaola Cancogni of *Terra!*.

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Exercices and *Capitaine Patchwork* have been stretched to snapping point, and no recognisable relation exists between Queneau's text and Ripa's comic book, but the latter would not exist without the former, and may certainly be seen as part of what has been called the «comet's tail» (see Kujamäki 2001: 46) of the text.

IV. Poor lay Zanglay

By contrast, the transmedial future of the *Exercices in style* in Britain has been very sparse. Repeated reprintings of Wright's translation in Great Britain have led to critical praise, but limited creative response. Of adaptations we may only name Colin Crumplin's *Hommage à Queneau*, a project involving one hundred drawings of cups in different styles, published in book form in 1977 with Arts Council funding. What may prove to be a more influential version, Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercices in Style*, published earlier this year by Jonathan Cape, is in fact an import from the United States. The publication in Europe is not the first link between this project and the home continent of the *Exercices de style*. Madden, a New York-based illustrator and cartoonist, began the project as a regularly updated website (www.exercicesinstyle.com, checked on June 15th, 2006) inviting contributions from other cartoonists. Contributors included the Slovenian cartoonist Klemencic and the French cartoonist Tanitoc, and much of the material on the site was also available in French and Italian translation. It is at present too early to assess the possible impact of this publication on Queneau's profile (or indeed on comics culture) in Britain; further translations into European languages are likely, and these too may have interesting repercussions.

V. Exercises in the Polysystem

Thus far, the present study has been intertextual rather than systemic: an exploration of the reverberations of a single text as manifested in other, individual, texts. In Even-Zohar's original conception of the polysystem as «a network of multi-relations», its inapplicability to individual texts is taken as a given (Even-Zohar 1979: p. 304). The relevance, and indeed necessity, of a systemic approach to this study becomes evident, however, when we attempt to *account for* the impact of the *Exercices* in the target cultures under examination. What are the connections between the timing of the translations, their reception in the TC and the stance and status of their translators?

With a view to answering these questions at least provisionally, bases for discussion may be sought in the work of subsequent scholars

who have experimented with the application of Polysystem Theory to the discussion of individual texts. Most helpful to us here is the model suggested by Nam Fung Chang which sees the global polysystem as composed of six sub-polysystems which exert different, sometimes conflicting, pressures on translators (Chang 2001: p. 321). Chang identifies the key polysystems as political, ideological, economic, linguistic, literary and translational. Of these the third, fifth and sixth are particularly relevant to our discussion here.

We might begin by identifying the germane features of the British and Italian literary polysystems, which we expect to offer «certain “recognised” literary models [...] for translations to emulate» (Chang 2003: p. 321)²⁰. Two such features demand immediate attention. One is the position of French literature (particularly contemporary, experimental French literature) in the two polysystems. Queneau's national, cultural and linguistic background is intrinsic to his work, but reviews of his body of work as a whole reveal sharply differing preconceptions as to its importance and relevance. Among Italian reviews, Eugenio Montale's damning dismissal in the *Corriere della sera* («Cose piacevoli, fino a un certo punto anche divertenti, ma nulla più») (Montale 1952: p. 3)²¹ is an exception. Most Italian critics engage respectfully with Queneau's work and with the philosophical and literary traditions that underpin it.

English reviews, on the other hand, make clear with what mixed feelings French literature was reviewed at the time. Toynbee describes the original French text as

an exasperating example of French ingenuity, marred by French absurdity. [...] brilliant in conception, often very funny in execution but half-ruined by that almost cowardly facetiousness which so many modern French writers release around them like a protective smoke-screen (Toynbee 1959).

If not exaggeratedly and self-consciously intellectual, French literature must be a site of triviality, humour or mild salaciousness. The first English translation of *Pierrot mon ami* was described by a reviewer as

«so very French», and the same critic went on to say that it was all very unassuming and amusing, and that most of us enjoyed that kind of

²⁰ This must be differentiated from the scholarly polysystem, which has a certain amount of interaction with both the literary and translational polysystems. In the scholarly polysystem Queneau's status as a serious writer is widely acknowledged.

²¹ «enjoyable pieces, even funny up to a point, but nothing more».

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fun...Zazie dans le métro, translated ten years later, was described as «Exactly what foreigners think French novels ought to be – improper without ever exceeding the bounds of decency» and «a delightfully improper novel, without a moral of any kind» (Wright 1971: p. vii-viii).

Even positive reviews of the *Exercices de style* in Britain repeatedly stress the text's essentially humorous nature (cf. Enright 1980: p. 318; J.R.B. 1980: p. 92; Strachan 1986: p. 51)

The other, perhaps less obvious but no less relevant, feature of the literary polysystems is the profile of literary translators. In both polysystems, writers have much higher status than translators,²² meaning that their work tends to get more exposure and their translation decisions, if any, get more careful consideration. Italy has a long tradition of writers translating prose fiction. By the time Eco's *Esercizi* appeared (1983), Queneau had been translated into Italian by such well-known literary figures as Franco Fortini (*Zazie nel metrò*, 1960); Sergio Solmi (*Piccola cosmogonia portatile*, 1982) and Italo Calvino (*I fiori blu*, 1967)²³. In Britain, by contrast, there has never been an established tradition of writers translating prose. It is not merely a question of timing, but also a question of the status of previous translations by Queneau, which affect his reception in the two polysystems under discussion.

Clearly these factors are closely related to the functioning of what Chang calls the «translational» polysystem, «whose norms may be partially reflected in certain classroom exercises where the texts to be translated are not posited to serve any real purpose, and students are instructed to just translate, as if in a cultural vacuum» (Chang 2003: p. 321). The unspoken assumptions underlying translation, its default mode, as it were, come across clearly from the Arles round table discussion, in which many translators differentiate explicitly between translation and the procedures which they adopted to render the *Exercices* into their TL, to an extent which reveals a powerful investment in the definition of translation as literalism. Hence Achilleas Kyriakidis's remark that «*les Exercices de style sont probablement le seul livre dans l'histoire de la littérature qui serait trahi par une traduction fidèle*» (Various 1987: p. 107), and the observation by Danilo Kiš that

²² This is not to suggest for a moment that a translator is not also a writer.

²³ Interestingly, an early translation of some of the *Exercices* by the poet and translator Giorgio Caproni, published in a 1961 anthology of humorous writing, apparently failed to make any impact; a further indication, if one were needed, that the translator's status is not the factor solely responsible for a text's reception in the target polysystem.

«les Exercices de style ne peuvent être traduits, ils ne peuvent qu'être l'objet de variations dans une nouvelle langue et devraient porter la mention "d'après Raymond Queneau"» (Various 1987: p. 105).

This view of translation is by no means limited to translators; it is shared by critics too, as is clear from a review of a recent edition of *Exercices in Style* in which Walter Redfern opines that «Barbara Wright has been true, if not faithful, to Queneau» (Redfern 1999: p. 1113). If, as Oliver says, each exercise «n'existe qu'en fonction des 98 autres textes qui composent les Exercices du style» (Oliver 1991: p. 203), then syntagmatic equivalence, to use Popovič's term²⁴, which would allow an indefinite number of substitutions so long as the global structure was maintained, seems an entirely appropriate aspiration for a translator. It is significant that Eco distances himself from the prevailing understanding of the word "faithful": «essere fedeli [...] non voleva dire essere letterali» (Eco 1983: p. 15)²⁵, which does not stop him from defining his aim as «più che tradurre, ricreare in un'altra lingua» (Eco 1983: p. 14)²⁶. Translators, as Chang rightly observes, are subject to different normalising pressures which «pull the translator in different directions, and reach an equilibrium with the resistance of the translator, if any» (Chang 2003: p. 321). The mention of the translator's resistance to norms (e.g. rejection of discourses of fidelity, abandonment of the author as final arbiter of translation choices) recalls Gideon Toury's observation that not only «special socio-cultural circumstances» but also «special cognitive efforts are [...] required, if one is to approximate the reconstruction in target-language material of the network of relationships constituting a source-language text» (Toury 1995: p. 272; my italics).

Lastly, we must consider the economic polysystem, «whose norms would bind translation activities to certain "economic principles"» (Chang 2003: p. 321) including the fact that economically speaking, the pre-eminent literary form in all polysystems under discussion is the novel. Experimental, generically innovative literature is likely to sell fewer copies and be read by a much more restricted, elite audience. The position of comics in the economic and literary polysystems is relevant, as they are at once a low-status, even marginalised literary form, which relieves them of some of the normalising pressures exerted on more

²⁴ See Bassnett 2002: p. 32.

²⁵ «to be faithful [...] did not mean to be literal»

²⁶ «more than translation, recreation in another language»

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canonical forms, and a popular form, which makes them potentially influential through a wide readership.

Using the information given above, we are now in a position to begin to account for some of the differences in the success and reception of the *Exercices* in Britain and Italy. A combination of the relative status of the translators, their expressed stance, which diverges more than their real translation practice, and the relative status of French literature in the target culture, may go some way towards explaining the greater impact made in Italy.

One last task remains, however: we have not yet succeeded in accounting for the marked success of the *Exercices* in North America, by contrast with Britain²⁷. A less ingrained hostility to European avant-garde literary culture, as evidenced in reviews, may help to frame the take-up of the *Exercices* and other Oulipian texts as literary models by writers including Harry Mathews, Bernadette Mayer and Harryette Mullen.²⁸ I would, however, relate the phenomenon more specifically to the pressure exerted by the linguistic polysystem, which in Chang's terms requires «conformity to the norms of a language variety» (Chang 2003: p. 321). Systemically, this pressure on British-English literary imports is expressed through localisation, as in the case, for instance, of Wright's translation of «Le dimanche de la vie» («The Sunday of Life»), which was "Americanized" by James and Ann Laughlin in collaboration with the translator (Wright 1997: p. 77). US reviewers were quick to note that the *Exercices in style* had undergone no such localisation. Reviewing the 1981 edition both John Weightman, in the *New York Times*, and John Updike, in the *New Yorker*, comment on the Britishness of such exercises as «West Indian» and «Cockney», and invite further translation to address the exercises which «cry out for American equivalents» (Updike 1981: p. 153). Weightman's suggestions include «Brooklyn speech, black American [and] the Senatorial political style». If it was the text's innovativeness which made it attractive to target cultures²⁹, then its deficiencies added to its resonance among North American readers, including Madden, discussed above, and

²⁷ Wright's translation was published in New York by New Directions in 1958, simultaneously with the British first edition, and again in 1981.

²⁸ See, for instance, Mullen's 2002 collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary* and Mathews' «35 Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare» in *Shiny* 9/10 (1999), p. 97-101.

²⁹ According to Even-Zohar's «hypothesis that systems attract and welcome translated work with the very features that the systems themselves lack» (Gentzler 1993: p. 118).

Douglas Hofstadter, who responds with an exercise entitled «Américain» (Hofstadter 1997: p. 231), set on the Manhattan subway and in Grand Central Station.

VI. Conclusion

To conclude, Queneau’s innovative text may be considered to exemplify, even to epitomise, the ways in which texts circulate in translation and adaptation, gathering fresh energy and even, perhaps, eventually returning to refresh and reinvigorate the original source language. A systemic viewpoint can be of great assistance in accounting for some of the phenomena discussed above, but the text also demands its share of the credit. As Souchier has put it, «*les Exercices ont porté leur voix au-delà de toute attente et promu le lecteur au rang singulier d’“écrivain”*» (Souchier 2003: p. 68). It is surely not coincidental that the text has embedded in the target culture to a much greater extent in those cultures (i.e. Italy and the US) where the translation has, intentionally or not, kept the text open to creative response; let us not forget that Umberto Eco ends his introduction by describing the *Exercices* as a game in which faithfulness «*significa capire le regole del gioco, rispettarle, e poi giocare una nuova partita con lo stesso numero di mosse*» (Eco 1983: p. 15)³⁰. In this he is only extending in turn the original invitation made by the text and described by Carol Sanders (1994: p. 92):

Après avoir montré dans ces 99 exercices que même l’incident le plus quotidien est d’une richesse presque inépuisable, Queneau semble inviter le lecteur à prendre part à la création et à remplir lui-même la centième case vide.

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³⁰ «means understanding the rules of the game, respecting them, and then playing a new match with the same number of moves».

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