

Raymond Queneau's
Dubliners

Raymond Queneau's *Dubliners*:

Bewildered by Excess of Love

By James Patrick Gosling

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To my wife Elizabeth and brother Paul,
exemplars of diligence and support.

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?

– W. B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'

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INTRODUCTIONS

This book is an examination of two erotic, black-comedic, satiric novels by Raymond Queneau, a French novelist and poet. Both are set in Ireland and were first published separately in 1947 and 1950 under the pseudonym ‘Sally Mara’, and later republished under Queneau’s own name in *Les Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara*. However, this is not a standard work of literary analysis, it is a broad-ranging exploration of Irish and French culture and history in the mid twentieth century. It is about the intellectually vibrant and scandalous Saint Germain des Prés, Paris of the nineteen forties, and Dublin during the 1916 Rising and the nineteen thirties; it is about James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the Irish language, and about a range of French writers and the French language. It links authorial choices to contemporary events, and derives significance from the names of characters. For more curious readers there are numerous footnotes with references and a comprehensive bibliography. It concludes by suggesting that *Les Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara* was planned by Queneau as an integrated work that humorously, if silently and ironically, purports to represent all stories.

Learning French

I came to French literature and Raymond Queneau rather late in life, as modern continental languages were not options at the Christian Brothers schools in early 1960s Dundalk. However, degrees in Biochemistry actually helped a little as there was a requirement at University College Dublin to learn some French (or German or Russian) so as to be able to understand scientific articles in the chosen language. Much later, when cooperating with scientific colleagues in Belgium and France, I signed up for night classes with L’Alliance française de Galway. These led, after some years, to a bourse from the Cultural Service of the French Embassy in Dublin and, during the hot summer of 1982, a month-long total immersion course at the University of Aix-en-Provence. In the class *Moyenne II*, along with students of all ages from a range of countries, I struggled with new words, constructions and grammar. Our teacher, Nathalie Moreels, was a young graduate student from nearby Manosque who was writing a thesis on Jean Giono (1895–1970), the famous



Picture 0.1. Raymond Queneau in 1951 in his office at *nrf*-Gallimard, rue Sébastien-Bottin (since 2011, rue Gaston Gallimard), Paris 7^e. Anne-Isabelle Queneau, *Album Queneau*, 2002, p. 192. Photograph: Succession Raymond Queneau.

Manosquin novelist. Although language skills were the focus of the classes, Natalie Moreels seemed to spend much of her time passionately talking about, or having us read selected passages from, works by modern French writers. She was particularly passionate in her advocacy of the books of Giono, Michel Tournier and Boris Vian, including *Que ma joie demeure* (Giono), *Le Roi des aulnes* (Tournier), and *L'Écume des jours* (Vian). It was through reading the works of Vian and about his life that I discovered his friend Raymond Queneau – and ‘Sally Mara’.

Raymond Queneau: His life and Works

Raymond Auguste Queneau (1903–1976) was a novelist, poet/songwriter, literary editor, screenwriter, encyclopaedist, mathematician and painter. He was also a literary innovator and theoretician and, at times, left-wing political demonstrator. He cofounded *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (OuLiPo, 'workshop of potential literature'), a continuously fertile association of writers interested in constrained writing techniques.¹ Although he never visited Ireland and is little known there, he was a significant literary heir of James Joyce, translated *Vingt ans de jeunesse* (*Twenty Years A-Growing*, originally *Fiche bliain ag fás*) by Muiris Ó'Súilleabháin, and located two of his early post-war novels in Dublin, both published under the pseudonym 'Sally Mara'. In each an explicit interest in the Irish language is evident; the first is even represented as a direct translation into French from the Irish.²

Queneau was born in Le Havre, where he noted the 1916 Dublin uprising in his journal,³ took a degree in philosophy in the Sorbonne, worked in a bank for a short time, and was for some years an adherent of the Surrealist movement led by André Breton. He married Janine Kahn, sister of Breton's then wife, in 1928, and became a reader with Gallimard in 1938. At Gallimard he later became general secretary and, from the early nineteen fifties, he instituted, directed – and personally edited some early volumes of – the prestigious *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*.⁴

¹ Michel Lécureur, *Raymond Queneau: Biographie* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres / Archimbaud, 2002) is the source of much of the biographical detail given here.

² Maurice O'Sullivan, *Vingt ans de jeunesse*, trans. by Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1936). (Raymond Queneau as) Sally Mara, *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes*, Michel Presle trad. (Paris: Éditions du Scorpion, 1947; Paris: Gallimard, 1971). (Raymond Queneau as) Sally Mara, *Journal Intime*, Paris: Éditions du Scorpion, 1950. Published together in: Raymond Queneau, *Les Œuvres Complètes de Sally Mara* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962; L'Imaginaire / Gallimard, 1979 etc.). Page numbers in *Les Œuvres Complètes de Sally Mara* cited refer to the 1962 edition, and they agree in earlier L'Imaginaire versions (e.g. ISBN 2-07-028752-1, last page 360). In later L'Imaginaire versions (e.g. ISBN 978-2-07-028752-9) there are more words per line and, therefore, less pages; last page 351).

³ Entry for 26 April 1916 in Raymond Queneau, *Journaux: 1914–1965*, ed. by Anne-Isabelle Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 27. Hereafter, *Journaux*.

⁴ "So far as I can ascertain, the three Pléiade volumes [*Histoire des littératures* 1ère éd, 1956] planned and commissioned by Queneau offer the most comprehensive account of world literature available in any language." Roger Shattuck, 'Farce and Philosophy', *New York Review of Books*, February 22, 2001,

He had a complex personality. Jean-Yves Pouilloux describes him thus: ‘Queneau est un grand sentimental naïf proche de la mélancolie, mais par une sorte de pudeur, il blague de la façon la plus grivoise et canularisque.’⁵ (Queneau is an ingenuous sentimentalist close to melancholy, but, with a degree of modesty, he jokes in a manner that is both extremely licentious and mischievous.) One might add that of all his novels, those by ‘Sally Mara’ may exemplify, as well as any, his distinctive sense of humour.

In all, Queneau wrote sixteen novels with diverse themes and in diverse styles, two longer works in verse, many collections of poetry, and numerous short works and articles. His first novel was *Le Chiendent* (1933), a highly structured story, initially about the intellectual awakening of a commuting office worker but concluding with a prescient, if surreal, vision of the war to come. His last was *Le Vol d’Icare* (1968), about a missing fictional character written as for the stage. He is best known for *Zazie dans le metro* (1959) and for the experimental collection *Exercices de style* (1947), which has repeats of the same banal anecdote in 99 different styles. A few of his poems became popular songs, for example in 1949 Juliette Gréco had a hit with *Si tu t’imagines*. He was always a voracious and eclectic reader with a continuous interest in philosophy, language and mathematics.⁶

Translations into English of many of his prose works are available in publication series designed to bring valued works from the past to new readers, like: Oneworld Classics (*Exercices in style*, *The Sunday of Life* and *The Flight of Icarus*), New Directions (*The Blue Flowers*), New York Review of Books’ Classics (*Witch Grass* and *We Always Treat Women Too Well*), and Penguin Twentieth Century Classics (*Zazie in the Metro*). Critics consider ‘the concept of ‘play’ to be fundamental to interpreting his works’, see him as a ‘gifted story teller who showed particular sensitivity in his depictions of female characters’ and a ‘notable creator of parodies of

pp. 1–2 of article.

⁵ Jean-Yves Pouilloux, Conférence au lycée La Bruyère, Versailles, J.J., 1 December 1999), <http://web2.crdp.ac-versailles.fr/pedagogi/Lettres/queneau/fbjyp112.htm> [accessed 24 November, 2014]

⁶ Queneau’s published journals (*Journaux: 1914–1965*) contain lists of the books that he read, and in many cases repeatedly reread, for each month for much of his life. A thorough assessment of his reading over an even longer period with the books read listed by author name is also available. Florence Géhéniau, *Queneau analphabète: Répertoire alphabétique de ses lectures de 1917 à 1976* (two volumes) (Bruxelles: F. Géhéniau, 1992).

fiction within fiction itself', and have even held that he may yet win his most lasting reputation as a poet.⁷ In an analysis of *Zazie dans le Metro*, shortly after its publication in 1959, Roland Barthes concluded:

This [revelation of the void at the heart of literature] is a very difficult and enviable operation; it is perhaps because it is a successful one that there is, in *Zazie*, this last and precious paradox: a dazzling comedy yet one purified of all aggression. As if Queneau psychoanalyzes himself at the same time that he psychoanalyzes literature: Queneau's entire oeuvre implies a quite terrible imago of literature.⁸

Orthography, or the representation of words by their spellings was an obsession, irritant and plaything for Queneau. His fascination with the French language and with verbal gymnastics is evident in much of his output. This interest started early and was stimulated by reading in 1922, while still a student, *Le Langage: Introduction linguistique à l'histoire* by Joseph Vendryes, the renowned linguist and Celticist.⁹

Queneau was particularly conscious of differences between the demotic or spoken and literary forms of languages, an interest that was amplified greatly during a long visit to Greece with his wife, Janine, in 1932. In his novels he occasionally spelled words, or short phrases, phonetically; sometimes radically changing the letters used, causing the reader to pause, reflect, pronounce them mentally, or aloud, and then, perhaps slowly, realise what was intended. The opening 'word' of *Zazie dans le metro* is particularly obtuse and famous: 'Doukipudonktan',¹⁰ Or as it would be written normally, 'D'où qu'ils puent donc tant?' (How can they stink so much?) This orthographic sally, although more complex, is similar to the many that occur throughout Queneau's works. At one time, but only for a time, he was in favour of a triple reformation of written

⁷ Karen L. Taylor, *Companion to the French novel* (USA: Facts on File, Infobase Publishing, 2007), pp. 325–27. Timothy Unwin, 'On the Novel and the writing of literary history', in: Timothy Unwin, ed, *The Cambridge companion to the French novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 7. Vivian Mercier, *The new novel: from Queneau to Pinget* (New York: Noonday Press, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971), p. 45.

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Zazie and Literature' in Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill, USA: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 117–123 (p. 123).

⁹ Joseph Vendryes, *Le Langage: Introduction linguistique à l'histoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1921).

¹⁰ Raymond Queneau, *Zazie dans le Metro* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959; folio), p. 9.

French: vocabulary, syntax and spelling.¹¹

As we have seen, Queneau was a comic writer of serious intent who, although much more productive and diverse in his outputs, might be compared to Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan, aka Myles na gCopaleen) – one of his novels (*Le Vol d'Icare*) has a fictional character who goes 'absent without leave', as many do in Flann O'Brien's earlier *At Swim-Two-Birds*; and others are cyclic (or helical) in structure, as is O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. Queneau was particularly preoccupied with philosophical and metaphysical systems, and with numbers; in Greece he had also been greatly taken by the mathematical harmonies of ancient architecture. In consequence he became intent on giving his stories structures determined by numbers. He was also committed to endowing his writing with multiple implications and references, as he believed that:

Un chef-d'œuvre est [] comparable à un bulbe dont les uns se contentent d'enlever la pelure superficielle tandis que d'autres, moins nombreux l'épluchent pellicule par pellicule: bref un chef-d'œuvre est comparable à un oignon.¹²

(A masterpiece is comparable to a bulb, of which some are content to peel the outer skin, while others, less numerous, dissect it layer by layer: in brief, a masterpiece is like an onion.)

Sometimes to this purpose, he liked to obscure or 'hide in plain sight' aspects of a work, leading to a situation where readers can never be sure that they have penetrated all aspects. Take the final line of his poem 'Pour un Art Poétique', which, via the ambiguity of the word *voiles* (plural of *la voile*, 'the sail' but also of *le voile*, 'the veil'), suggests as much:

¹¹ Raymond Queneau, *Bâtons, Chiffres et Lettres – édition revue et augmentée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 19.

¹² Lécureur, p. 215. Ezra Pound's opinion that 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree' is similar to the above definition but would admit works that may be inaccessible to the common reader. Quoted in Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011; Phoenix, 2012), p. 233. Elsewhere Queneau wrote 'L'œuvre doit être susceptible d'une compréhension immédiate, telle que le poète ne soit pas séparé de son public possible [...], abstrait du monde culturel où il vit. Et cette compréhension immédiate peut être suivie d'appréhensions de plus et plus approfondies.' (A work should be open to immediate comprehension, so that the poet is not set apart from his potential public [...], distanced from the cultural milieu where he lives. And this immediate comprehension can be followed by deeper and deeper insights.) Quoted in Jean-Pierre Martin, *Queneau Losophe* (Paris: L'un et l'autre, Gallimard, 2011), p. 193.

Prenez un mot prenez-en deux
 faites-les cuir' comme des œufs
 Prenez un petit bout de sens
 puis un grand morceaux d'innocence
 faites chauffer à petit feu
 au petit feu de la technique
 versez la sauce énigmatique
 saupoudrez de quelques étoiles
 poivrez et puis mettez les voiles¹³

During his early career Queneau was very much a writer's writer, and his books, bestsellers only later, were greatly appreciated by literary colleagues who sometimes devised ad hoc prizes in recognition of his achievements. It was *Zazie dans the metro* (1959) that brought Queneau to the attention of the greater Francophone reading public. It features Zazie, a foul-mouthed pre-adolescent girl visiting Paris from the country, Gabriel, a tall and strongly built female-impersonating dancer at a night club and Zazie's designated minder in Paris, a range of Parisian denizens, a group of tourists, and the city of Paris itself. Queneau became 'le père de Zazie' and at last made large amounts of money. Sally Mara later became 'la grande sœur de Zazie' (Zazie's big sister).

Queneau as Sally Mara: Part 1

Queneau's two novels published under the pseudonym 'Sally Mara', are *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes*, 1947 (*On est toujours* hereafter, translated as *We always treat women too well*, 1981), set during an alternative, imaginary 1916 Irish rebellion against British rule, and *Journal intime* (1950), set in 1934/1935 Dublin. Given that he set these two comic-erotic novels in Ireland and that one of them is an irreverent sendup of the 1916 Rising, it is actually a little surprising that Queneau is not better known in Ireland. As I mention further on, he and these works are occasionally referred to in, or are the subject of newspaper articles, but I encounter few who have heard of him or them.

¹³ Translated: Take a word, take a few | like eggs cook them through | take a little bit of sense | then a great lump of innocence | heat them on a low flame | on the little fire of technique | pour on the sauce enigmatic | add some dust from a star | pepper it, veil it, send it off far. From the collection *Le Chien à la mandolin* (1958). Raymond Queneau, *Œuvres complètes 1*, ed. by Claude Debon (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1989), p. 270. Unless indicated otherwise translations from French or Irish are by the author.

In *On est toujours*, seven rebels occupy a building and kill or eject the staff, only later to discover a beautiful young English counter assistant trapped in the lavatory, who then sets out to undermine their rebellion by seduction and distraction.¹⁴ In *Journal intime*, Queneau presented their own language to French-speakers as if it were a foreign language; Sally Mara, the supposed author, is writing her diary in ‘newly-learned-French’, while at the same time learning her ‘own’ language (Irish) as a ‘foreign’ language in order to write a novel (*On est toujours*) in Irish. But basically this is a young Irish woman’s Bildungsroman or ‘coming of age tale’, but an unusually naïve, athletic, young woman from a seriously dysfunctional family with a drunkard brother and a murderous, vampirish father. However, much in Sally’s story, although bizarre and laced with black humour, may be still relevant today. Sally and her sister Mary have been kept ignorant of the basic facts of life (which they are determined to unravel) and she is constantly exposed to sexual harassment, and has very limited opportunities to understand (even statues are censored) or express her burgeoning sexuality.

Both of these novels were apparently just written quickly for money; their initial publisher, ‘Éditions du Scorpion’, specialised in violent and erotic pulp fiction. In spite of their re-publication in 1962 by Gallimard in *Les Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara* (which also included, as a third element, *Sally plus intime*, a varied collection of witticisms), for many years afterwards critics examining Queneau’s works largely regarded them as unworthy of serious attention; too much sex, too black-humoured. Jean-Yves Pouilloux starts his commentary on them with a representative summary of such dismissive comments.¹⁵ However, since the publication

¹⁴ It has also been cogently interpreted as ‘a significant Hegelian depiction of dubiously progressive history being enacted in a peripheral setting (a sub-post office) in a peripheral country’. Douglas Smith, ‘Raymond Queneau’s 1916 Easter Rising: *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes* as (post-)historical novel’, *Irish Journal of French Studies*, 13 (2013), 151–73. In 1947 also, six months ahead of the appearance of *On est toujours*, Éditions de Minuit published a slim beautifully designed volume of three short stories by Raymond Queneau. The title story, ‘Une trouille vert’ tells of a man, habitually given to multiple fears of being harmed, who, having eaten too much chestnut purée, rises at two o’clock in the morning ‘pour aller pisser aux vécés’ and finds himself (like Gertie Girdle) sitting on the toilet seat, trapped in the lavatory for hours by imagined ‘nothings’ prowling the corridor outside. Raymond Queneau, *Une Trouille verte* (Paris: Aux Éditions de Minuit, 1947), pp. 35–41.

¹⁵ Jean-Yves Pouilloux, ‘Les Œuvres Complètes de Sally Mara: Notice and Notes’, in, Raymond Queneau, *Œuvres Complètes, tome III* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 1719–46.

of Evert van der Staar's edited volume of commentaries in 1984, they have gained stature among scholars.¹⁶ Interestingly, in the nineteen eighties the 'Sally Mara' works in German translation were outselling *Zazie dans le Métro* and even *Les Exercices de style*.¹⁷ Sam Ferguson concludes his analysis of them as follows:

Finally, how are we to answer those who would downplay the significance of this part of Queneau's corpus? It constitutes a game, yes, but a thoroughly *oulipien* one, and one that also seriously challenges our assumptions concerning the boundaries of text, paratext, and author, and thus deserves serious consideration.¹⁸

But there are also elements of these works that become more interesting and significant, when they are viewed from an Irish perspective. Declan Kiberd has convincingly argued that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the identity of modern Ireland was largely constructed for Irish people through literature.¹⁹ Poems, plays, novels and short stories by Yeats, Joyce, Synge and others also reflected, in new ways, basic aspects of the human condition and were, and still are, read and admired around the world. Since many of their foreign readers had little or no other contact with Ireland, the striking images of Irish life and society in these works also constructed foreign images of Ireland. Relevantly, the two 'Sally Mara' books provide an example of how, shortly after the end of WWII, one curious and playful Frenchman who was a long-term reader of Irish novels, plays and poetry – but who had never visited – envisioned Dublin and Ireland. Of course, to understand and appreciate fully Queneau's peculiar views of Dublin with their inevitable biases and lacunae, including exaggerations and distortions introduced for comic effect, a reader of these works would need to know

¹⁶ Evert van de Starre ed, *Études sur Les Oeuvres Complètes de Raymond Queneau - Sally Mara* (Gronigen: C.R.I.N., 1984).

¹⁷ Paul Fournel, 'Queneau en quelques chiffres' in *Queneau aujourd'hui*, presented by Georges-Emmanuel Clancier (Paris: Clancier-Guénaud, 1985), 225–32. The German sales figures cited are: *Zazie dans le Métro* 20,000, *Exercices de style* 44,000, *Sally Mara* 60,000. It should be noted that 60,000 is probably a combined figure because, starting in 1962, the two 'Sally Mara' novels were published separately by Fischer Taschenbuch as well as together in a single volume by Stahlberg Verlag (all translated by Eugen Hemlé).

¹⁸ Sam Ferguson, 'Metalepsis and the 'auteur supposé' in Raymond Queneau's 'Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara'', *French Studies*, 66 (April 2012), 178–192 (p.192).

¹⁹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

quite a lot about the city and the country, their history, social conditions and literature. Queneau's fictional Ireland/Dublin might even be seen as providing a starting point from which to consider the 1916 Insurrection and life in nineteen thirties Dublin. The elements of Irish history and of Dublin relevant to Queneau's stories are surprisingly diverse, and include the National Gallery of Ireland and its collections, tramway routes, social deprivation, the Inishkea Islands, aids to learning Irish, and, during the 1916 Rising, a premises on a corner of Sackville Street occupied by insurgents, as well as the role of the 'gunboat' *Helga*.

Inevitably, given the extraordinary breadth of Queneau's reading and knowledge, the 'Sally Mara' books also raise matters that have nothing directly to do with Ireland. These include the Surrealist movement, French cinema, writers as varied as Paul Claudel, Valéry Larbaud, Raymond Radiguet and Boris Vian, French interest in Celtic art and philology, and even Buddhist scripture. Also of interest is Queneau's own life, circumstances and contacts in the fascinating psychological and intellectual maelstrom that was the late 1940s urban village of Saint Germain des Prés.

Raymond Queneau and Ireland

Albeit from a distance, Queneau was very aware of Ireland, its literature, language and history. As already mentioned, his first substantial indirect Irish link was as translator of the Blasket Island autobiography of Muiris Ó Súilleabhán *Fiche bliain ag fás* (1933), or rather of the English translation *Twenty Years A-Growing* (1933), into French (Colour plate 1). According to Michel Lécureur, Queneau's biographer, Frank Dobo, a literary agent, proposed this task, and *Vingt ans de jeunesse* (1936) is always included in lists of Queneau's publications. Earlier, in 1934, also for Frank Dobo, Janine (Queneau's wife) and Raymond had jointly translated (as 'Jean Raymond') Edgar Wallace's *Kate Plus Ten* as *Le Mystère du train d'or*, which, interestingly, has a prologue set in a purely imaginary County Galway.²⁰

Although both frequented the noted literary café-bistros such as *Le Flore* and *Les Deux Magots* in 1930s Paris, the social circles in which Queneau and Joyce moved do not appear to have ever significantly overlapped. Their biographers Michel Lécureur, and Richard Ellman and

²⁰ Lécureur, p. 198. Edgar Wallace, *Kate Plus Ten* (London: Ward and Lock, 1928).

Gordon Bowker²¹ record no meetings or remarks regarding personal impressions of the other, although they do recount interactions with persons they both knew well – mainly figures in publishing such as Eugene Jolas and Jean Paulhan²². Neither, apparently, was Queneau friendly with any other of the notable Irish people living in Paris before, or even after, writing the Sally Mara books. A list of Queneau's meetings with people from 1915 to 1938, included in his published journals, only mentions a 'Légation d'Irlande' in 1936.²³

One Irish person Queneau did know is Samuel Beckett, but mainly in his capacity as a 'reader', then Secrétaire Général at Gallimard, and later as a member of the committee that judged candidates for the Prix Goncourt. In letters to others, Beckett mentioned a few meetings with Queneau, and in general, from Beckett's point of view, their interactions were not happy occasions, including as they did a refusal to publish the novel *Murphy* in 1938 and the failure of *Malone meurt* to win the Goncourt in 1951.²⁴

²¹ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce - Revised Edition* (Oxford: OUP, 1983). Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011; Phoenix, 2012).

²² An American who grew up in France, Eugene Jolas was co-founder of the literary magazine *Transition*. He played a major role in Paris in encouraging and defending Joyce's *Work in Progress*, which would later become *Finnegans Wake*. Jolas earlier had encouraged Queneau to undertake the work that gradually evolved into *Le Chiendent*, published in 1933. Jean Paulhan (1884–1968) was a giant on the French literary scene during his whole career, and edited Gallimard's *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (*nrf*) during its illustrious interwar years, and after WWII. At Gallimard he was a close colleague of Queneau.

²³ *Journaux*, p. 329.

²⁴ Beckett's published letters provide an intermittent but interesting commentary on his interactions with Queneau and it is clear from these that he did not like him. To Thomas McGreevy, 3 April 1938: "I sent a copy of *Murphy* to Raymond Queneau who has just been appointed reader to Gallimard & whom I met in the *Volontés* Galère." To Georges Dutuit, 27 July 1948: [re publication of *Murphy*] "Queneau – not worth bothering: he is anti, and *Murphy* is far too vulnerable." To George Belmont, 11 July 1951: "... and enthusiasm from Jean Rostand about Queneau's [*Petit*] *Cosmogonie* [*portative*, 1950]. The latter I saw briefly the other day, with Duthuit, he was literally gasping and you could see his tongue." (Note: Queneau was asthmatic, though less so in later life.); 28 September 1951: "Nice of you to have pressed Queneau to read my book [*Malone meurt*, a candidate for the 1951 Prix Goncourt]. But he must be as little fitted to read it as I am to read his. To Georges Duthuit, 3 January, 1952: "In between times Faulkner's *Moustiques*,

Other possible sources of information on Ireland for Queneau were French people who knew Ireland well. Samuel Beckett's good friend, student at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and colleague at Trinity College Dublin, George Pelorsen (later George Belmont) was a close friend of Queneau in the 1930s.²⁵ In his 2002 memoir Belmont/Pelorsen recalls an evening in Queneau's apartment in the late thirties when he held forth on his experiences in Ireland, telling of strange happenings and magical sunsets. However, comparing the Sally Mara books with this account, it is clear that Pelorsen's vivid, romantic impressions had little influence on Queneau's depictions of Ireland.²⁶ In sum, there are no readily available indications that Queneau interacted significantly and directly with any of the Irish people living in Paris before or after WW2. The only Irish writer he was ever close to was Iris Murdoch; and she had left Dublin as a baby. (There will be more on their friendship later.)

However, James Joyce was an enormous influence on Queneau. Having already read *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners*, it was the French translation of *Ulysses (Ulysse)* by Auguste Morel and Stuart Gilbert (revised by Valéry Larbaud) and published in 1929, that truly shaped Queneau's approach as a writer of fiction. He wrote later:

[...] c'est consciemment que j'imité cet écrivain qui est le premier à avoir apporté une structure complexe au roman, à en avoir fait un microcosme, à l'avoir élevé à une dignité supérieure.²⁷

([...] I consciously imitate this writer who is the first to have given a complex structure to a novel, to have created a microcosm with it, to have raised it to a higher level of being.)

with a preface by Queneau that would make an ostrich puke, but worthy of the text." To Jane Hale, 29 January 1988: Dear Ms Hale / Thank you for yr letter. / I met Queneau once or twice early in his career. That was all. If there is any affinity between his work & mine I am unaware of it. / With best wishes / yrs sincerely / Samuel Beckett. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. I, 1929–1940*, ed. by M.D. Fehsenfeld, L.M. Overbeck, G. Crain, D. Gunn, p. 613; *Vol II*, ed. by G. Craig, M.D. Fehsenfeld, D. Gunn, L.M. Overbeck, pp. 84, 264, 300, 310; *Vol IV, 1966–1989*, ed. by G. Craig, M.D. Fehsenfeld, D. Gunn, L.M. Overbeck, p. 702 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 2011, 2016).

²⁵ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

²⁶ Georges Belmont, *Souvenirs d'Outre Monde – Histoire d'une Naisance* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 2001) pp. 209–15. See also his novel, partly set in Ireland, Georges Belmont, *Un homme au crépuscule* (Paris: Julliard, 1966).

²⁷ Lécureur, p. 153.

Queneau, like Joyce, created texts that are constrained by preconceived forms, much as a composer might comply with a sonata or rondo form, or a poet follow convention in writing a sonnet – or a limerick. However, the forms chosen by both Joyce and Queneau are quite idiosyncratic as well as fluid, and not reused. With Joyce both the broad and fine structures of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are related to epics and myths, day and night. Many of Queneau's novels are also highly structured and, again like Joyce's works, are infused to a greater or lesser extent with philosophical themes. *Le Chiendent* was inspired by J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment with time* (1927) and Descartes's *Le Discours de la méthode* (1637). Its graded structure of sections that are narrative, conversational, monologue (interior, etc.), or in the style of a letter, a diary or a dream, emulated in some respects the stylistic diversity and complex organisation of Joyce's *Ulysses*. *Pierrot mon ami* (1942), a crime novel without a crime or a criminal, embodies a Hegelian world-view with Pierrot as a 'sage'. *Les Fleurs Bleues* (1965), one of his most popular works, explores the epistemological conundrum, 'Could a life be just a dream?' by means of two closely interwoven stories and sets of characters; one contemporary, the other starting in 1264 and then repeatedly jumping 175 (the digits of both these numbers adding to give 13) years through the centuries, that combine at the end.²⁸

Queneau the Mathematician

Numbers and life go together; all living things, with varying degrees of precision react to quantities and numbers. Humans probably had counting systems as early as they had language. The mathematical sophistication of ancient civilisations such as in Babylon, Egypt and Greece is astounding. We all use and calculate numbers every day. Nevertheless, many otherwise erudite people have something of an aversion to mathematics, so I feel that I must apologise in advance for the following excursion into 'significant numbers' and even a little number theory. For Queneau had a serious interest in mathematics and the depth of this interest and his significance as a mathematician have been ably dissected.²⁹ Over the years

²⁸ *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*, pp. 30–31. Lécureur, p. 153. Claude Simonnet, *Queneau déchiffré* (Paris: Éditions Slatkine, 1962). Jean-Yves Pouilloux, *Comment: Les Fleurs bleues de Raymond Queneau* (Paris: Filiothèque, Gallimard, 1991). Michel Bigot, *Comment: Pierrot mon ami de Raymond Queneau* (Paris: Foliothèque, Gallimard, 1999).

²⁹ Florence Wilden, 'Fallen Worlds and Artificial Temples: Mathematics' Redemptive Role in the Work of Raymond Queneau', *Symposium*, 50 (1996), No.

he became a member of La Société mathématique de France (1947) and of the American Mathematical Society (1963).³⁰ His personal contributions to mathematics relate to ‘number series’, and what are known among specialists as ‘Queneau numbers’ and the ‘Queneau-Daniel’ group. The latter arose from a very short article he wrote on a fascinating poetic form ‘la sextine’ (the sestina), usually attributed to the Occitan troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel.³¹ Consequently, an analysis of any of Queneau’s writings may throw up a soupçon of maths. However, I promise that there will be no algebra, geometry, calculus, fractions or even decimals.

For Queneau, a number could have a personal or a mathematical significance, or both. He was born on the 21 (3 x 7) February, 1903 (1 + 9 + 0 + 3 = 13). He was christened Raymond Auguste Queneau, all names with seven letters, 21 in total. So Queneau saw ‘7’, and perhaps ‘21’, as representative of himself, and ‘13’ as a sign for birth and resurrection, but also death, grief, unhappiness. Actually, the numbers 7 and 13 have complex associations in many cultures. Many things of significance are reckoned to occur in ‘sevens’ such as days in the week, deadly sins, wonders of the world, colours in the rainbow and so on. Thirteen, also, is taken seriously in many societies, in which it is seen as either unlucky or lucky. Along with the seasons, the most prominent marker of transition through the year is the lunar cycle, but 12 lunar months (~354 1/3 days) are too short for one year and 13 too long. Consequently, the standard 12 months have rather arbitrary lengths and after December (#12) comes

3, 190 – 204. Paul Braffort, *Science et littérature: les deux cultures, dialogues et controverses pour l’an 2000* (Paris: Diderot, 1998), pp. 185–89. Alessandra Ferraro ‘Writing and Mathematics in the Work of Raymond Queneau’ in *Mathematical Lives: Protagonists of the Twentieth Century from Hilbert to Wiles*, ed. by Bartocci et al., trans. by Kim Williams (Berlin: Springer, 2011), pp.131–36. Michael P. Sacololo, ‘How a Medieval Troubadour Became a Mathematical Figure’, *Notices Amer. Math. Soc.*, 58 no. 5 (2011), 682–87. Peter RJ Asveld, ‘Queneau Numbers – Recent Results and a Bibliography’ (2013). See: https://www.researchgate.net/.../312211171_Queneau_Numbers_Recent_Results_and_... (accessed January 2019).

³⁰ Œuvres complètes I, pp. lxxiii, lxxiv.

³¹ ‘Note complémentaire sur la Sextine’, *Subsidia Pathaphysica Troisième et nouvelle série* (1963) No. 1, 79–80. A sestina has six stanzas of six lines each followed by a three-line envoi. There are no rhyming words, rather the same words that end each line of the first stanza are also used to end the lines of the others, rotated in a set pattern that Queneau demonstrated is mathematically interesting. Related spiral permutations are now called ‘quenines’. Search ‘sestina’ on YouTube to learn more and listen to ‘Sestina’ by Elizabeth Bishop.

January (#1) again. In addition, after 'twelve noon' comes 'one o'clock'. Therefore, 13 may be regarded as representing 'death' or 'rebirth', or, more generally a 'transition', and any transition may be good or bad.

With respect to his mathematical preoccupations, Queneau was interested in number series and prime numbers, both important topics in Number Theory. With respect to number series (for example, the well-known Fibonacci series, where each number is simply the sum of the two previous numbers, giving 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, ? ..., examples of which are to be found throughout nature), he published articles on 's-additive sequences'.³² He was also interested in prime numbers (*nombres premiers*). A prime number is a whole number only divisible by '1' and by itself, therefore: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13 etc. Primes owe their great importance to the fact that all numbers greater than one are primes or are multiples of primes (composites), as follows: 2, 3, 2 x 2, 5, 2 x 3, 7, 2 x 2 x 2, 3 x 3, 5 x 2, 11, 2 x 2 x 3, 13 etc.). Queneau's serious interest in primes is evident in a chapter ('Conjectures fausses en théorie des nombres', 'False conjectures in Number Theory') in a collection of his mathematical and related works, and his general interest is evident from his reading matter and throughout his writings.³³

Le Chiendent (1933), Queneau's first novel, has seven chapters each with 13 sections giving a total of 91 sections. Ninety one is not just 13 x 7, but also the sum of the numbers 1 to 13, and its digital root (9 + 1) is '10', which in turn can be seen as representing 'existence' ('1') and 'nothingness' ('0'), and so on.³⁴ His later novel *Les Enfants du limon*

³² Raymond Queneau, 'Sur les suites s-additives', *Journal of Combinatory Theory*, 12, 1972, 331–71.

³³ *Bords: Mathématiciens, Précurseurs, Encyclopédistes* (Paris: Hermann, 1963). For example, in July 1947 he read Aimé Férier's *Les Nombres Premiers: Principaux résultats obtenue depuis Euclide*. By the way, on page 35, Férier mentions 'prime twins' (primes separated by just one [even] number, e.g. 11 and 13) and quadruplets (11, 13, 17, 19) but says nothing about primes separated by four (cousin primes e.g. 7, 11) or six (sexy primes e.g. 7, 13), or sextuplets (7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23).

³⁴ *Bâtons, Chiffres et Lettres*, p. 29. Queneau may have been aware that 91 is also the smallest number that is the sum of two cubes in two different ways ($3^3 + 4^3$ and $-5^3 + 6^3$) as well as the sum of $1^2 + 2^2 + 3^2 + 4^2 + 5^2 + 6^2$. James Joyce's fixation on numbers and dates is well known. For example, Bowker notes: 'Despite his hopes [for the eventual publication of *Ulysses*] in 1921, Joyce decided it was not a good year for him, adding up, as it did, to thirteen.' Perhaps he had some reason to be wary of 13; his dear, mistreated mother died on the August 13, 1903 ($1 + 9 + 3 = 13$) and he himself died on January 13, 1941. Bowker, pp. 286–87. 110, 531.

(1938) consists of 8 books each with 21 chapters, giving 168 sections. One hundred and sixty eight is the number of hours in a week and the number of dots on a set of dominos. It is also the sum of four consecutive prime numbers (37, 41, 43, 47) and there are 168 prime numbers between 1 and 1000. *Saint Glinglin* has seven chapters. Both *Le Dimanche de la vie* (1952) and *Les Fleurs blues* (1965) have 21 chapters. In Queneau's curious attempt to develop an exact science of history, *Une Histoire modèle* (1966), the last chapter (number XCVII, 97), consists of three lines in parentheses, and was added long after it was written, perhaps just before publication. Van der Starre noted:

[Chapitre XCVII] a quelque chose de surajouté; on dirait presque que l'auteur l'a rédigé pour arriver au total de 97. Pour ceux qui connaissent l'intérêt particulier que Raymond Queneau a toujours porté aux nombres premiers, je précise que 97 est le dernier nombre premier avant 100.³⁵

([Chapter XCVII] has the air of something superfluous about it, one could almost say that the author wrote it to arrive at the total of the prime number, 97. For those who are aware of the particular interest that Raymond Queneau always had in prime numbers, I underline that '97' is the last prime number before one hundred.)

The last published work of his lifetime, *Morale élémentaire* (1975), has 131 poems and short pieces. One hundred and thirty one is a palindromic prime (i.e. it is permutable with primes 113 and 311) and is the sum of the three consecutive primes, 41, 43 and 47. For a perceptive overview of how Queneau's fascination with numbers influenced his writing throughout most of his career, see Andrews (2004).³⁶

With respect to *On est toujours* and *Journal intime*, numbers that are of known interest to Queneau feature internally in the stories, such as seven insurgents in *On est toujours*, or the fact that, in *Journal intime*, entries start on the 13th of January for each of the two relevant years 1934 and 1935. However, there are no obviously 'interesting' numbers of chapters or entries in *On est toujours* (66 chapters) or *Journal intime* (75 entries for 1934 and 80 for 1935, or 155 overall).³⁷

³⁵ van der Starre (1984), p. 119.

³⁶ Chris Andrews, 'Numerology and mathematics in the writing of Raymond Queneau, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 40 (3) (2004) pp. 291–300.

³⁷ Nevertheless, it was not difficult to establish that additional sevens, multiples of seven, and thirteen recur within *Journal intime*, Sally's diary entries stretch over a period of 20 months and 13 days, or nearly 21 months. There are 13 entries for both February 1934 and February 1935. Fourteen months in all have entries, seven

As Queneau readied *On est toujours* and *Journal intime* for joint publication in 1961-62, he added two more components to make up the complete 'Œuvres de Sally Mara'. Inserted at the end, *Sally plus intime* has 102 'foutaises' (a term that is untranslatable but, seemingly derived from 'foutre', suggests rude jokes). The Preface, ostensibly written by a revived Sally, includes within it the Introduction 'by Michel Presle' to *On est toujours*; otherwise it has seven paragraphs. Counting and checking, I found that, in its entirety, the Preface consists of 49 sentences.

It should be noted that all five components of *Les Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara* include very short units (sentences, entries or chapters), for example the entire chapter LXII of *On est toujours* consists of: '– Bzzz, fait l'obus.' (– Bzzz, went the shell.). Therefore, Queneau could very easily have decreased or increased any of these totals. Accordingly, *Les Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara* may be represented by the numbers 49, 155 (or 75, 80), 66, 102. Just one of these might be deemed 'interesting', 49, or 7². (The initial plan for his early novel *Les derniers jours* envisaged 7 x 7 chapters but this had been cut to 38 by the time it was published.)

At this stage of my search for interesting numbers of units in the components of *Les Œuvres complètes de Sally Mara*, I felt a little underwhelmed by what had emerged. It would have been unusual for Queneau *not* to have taken these opportunities to indulge further his numberphilia, particularly as his mathematical interests evolved. Perhaps, he was just too rushed as he completed them, or, as he hinted in his poem 'Pour un Art poétique', he added a veil or two. To be continued.

Queneau's War and Afterwards

As is testified very well by Woody Allen's film *Midnight in Paris*, 'La Ville-Lumière' is a perennial object of nostalgia, mainly because of its consistent role over centuries as a centre for the arts and philosophy, literature and music. One period that attracts much interest is that during and immediately after the Second World War, when Picasso and Miró, Sartre and de Beauvoir, Cocteau and Camus were joined by Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow, Miles Davis and Duke Ellington; the list of still familiar names can go on, and on. This Paris was the café *Les Deux Magots* by day and *Le Club Tabou* by night. Juliette Gréco was singing poems by Queneau and making love with Miles Davis; Boris Vian was playing *trompette* and hosting Duke Ellington. There were few rules

governing love – only personal inhibitions – and no US-style racial discrimination.

Queneau had a reasonably good war.³⁸ Called up as a private at the end of August 1939, he had no interest in becoming an officer. However, the commander of his unit, cognisant of his then relatively minor literary status, was sympathetic to him. When based for five months at Fontenay-le-Comte in the Vendée just north east of La Rochelle, his Jewish wife Janine and their six-year-old son Jean-Marie were able to join him, and they all lived together at a local hotel. This was also a time when he was a pious and observant Catholic and, in the shadow of war, he and Janine were close and loving, although he was not beyond making amorous approaches to Zette Leiris, a friend of Janine.³⁹ When his unit was transferred a little further north to La-Roche-sur-Yon in March 1940, his family moved also. Prevented by his state of health (recurring asthma) from any prospect of being assigned to a front-line unit, and having lots of free time, he tried to write (starting on his much admired *faux* detective novel *Pierrot mon ami*), read a lot, and studied English in an effort, ultimately unsuccessful, to be appointed as a military interpreter.

Eventually, the *drôle-de-guerre* turned real; first the invasion of Norway and then, on May 10 1940, the large scale German attacks on the low-countries. Within days, France was invaded, Queneau was promoted to corporal, his family left, going further south to find refuge in a number of places, and he participated in an unsuccessful ambush of a German advance party, hearing the ‘whistling’ of bullets around him. On 16 May, he noted in his journal ‘Et les gens se lamentent sur le passé: on a été trop bon avec les Allemands...’⁴⁰ (And people bemoaned the past: we had been too good to the Germans...). After a succession of retreats, he was demobilised within the *Zone Libre* of central and eastern France and, after staying with friends near Limoges, applied for permission to move to the *Zone Occupée* of northern France and the Atlantic seaboard, reaching Paris and home in September, soon after his family. He had by then totally lost an earlier preoccupation with religious and metaphysical practices and ideas, references to which are completely absent from his letters to Janine during their wartime separations and in his renewed journals from 1944 to

³⁸ This summary relies on Queneau’s account of his military service in his diary (*Journaux*, pp. 370–487, and on his principal biography (Lécureur, pp. 227–37).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁴⁰ *Journaux*, p. 459.