



A NEWSLETTER FROM JENNY BHATT
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WE ARE ALL TRANSLATORS

FOCUSING ON THE ART & CRAFT OF LITERARY
TRANSLATION & THE TRANSLATING LIFE.

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Dear Reader,

One of my go-to craft books in my fiction workshops is Raymond Queneau's [*Exercises in Style*](#). It's an experimental classic in the Oulipo tradition. In this slim classic (first English translation by Barbara Wright in 1981 based on the original 1947 French edition), he takes a simple story plot—a man getting into an argument with another man on a bus—and writes it in 99 different voice and style combinations. Quite a feat and absolutely wonderful to read.

The idea came to him sometime in the 1930s when he was at a concert listening to Bach's 'The Art of the Fugue'. Given the infinite variations based on a simple, slight musical theme, he wondered if the same would be possible with literature. And, though this English version has his original 99 exercises, there is a larger volume in French with an additional 124 exercises suggested by Queneau to the reader.



The 99 voice+style exercises here vary between different forms of prose and poetry, formal versus casual tones, polite versus abusive language, literary versus pulp, and so on, along with many varying permutations of all of these too. Not only does Queneau show us the infinite possibilities of language, but he also shows us how much fun it can be to play with language.

I read [this book](#) before I dared to even call myself a writer or a translator. Even now, while I still marvel at Queneau's mastery, I am more in awe of Wright's translation feat. To me, she is a hero for taking this project on at all. Her introduction is a bit of a masterclass in translation and as valuable as the rest of the book.

Personal Note: My upcoming translation, [*The Shehnai Virtuoso*](#), was recently given a lovely thumbs-up by [Kirkus](#), a pre-pub trade review. If you're interested in interviewing me for a publication, please let me know? A fun, casual, two-way conversation about translation? Just hit reply to this newsletter.

At one point, she discusses how she made some substitutions (approved by Queneau). For example, she writes that it wouldn't have made any sense to English readers to read how Italians pronounce French. So, instead, she substituted that with a lively West Indian style using Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* as her inspiration.

Now, when we're translating a complete story, whether short fiction or a novel, we can't take a similar liberty because any substitutions we make in tone, accent, etc., have to be in keeping with the story and its characters. But I so enjoyed how Wright, in doing these substitutions, was creating her own English variations on Queneau's original theme. Not often we get to see the translator doing this quite so freely (with the author's permission, of course.)

Queneau's [*Exercises in Style*](#) is so popular that it still spawns entire book-length variations. And I give my workshop participants writing prompts that involve creating their own too. It's a good way to stretch those writing muscles.

Until next week.

Warmly,

[Jenny Bhatt](#)

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