



Elementary Morality in the post

It is 20 July 2012 and a package has arrived in the mail. Its wrapping is a stiff sheet of Fabriano and it bears a patina of grime accumulated as it made its progress from the Hôtel de Ville, Paris to my temporary desk in Marfa, Tx. The sender has written 'Arvo Leo, France' on the side in blue biro and the same hand, in a box marked 'Quantité et description détaillée du contenu (1)', promises 'un livre.'

An email sent some days earlier had explained something would be sent to aid me in producing a response to *This is the Cow* and, when I unwrapped it, the package contained an English Translation of *Elementary Morality* (1975) by Raymond Queneau. There wasn't anything else in the package, no letter or other instruction that would provide a clue as to how the book was going to be useful in informing the commentary I was invited to provide to a project ostensibly comprised of an experimental film and collection of complimentary artefacts - a project that constituted a record or a study of a particular experience in India prompted by a particular quote by Gabriel García Márquez. This book in the mail seemed to propose itself as tool and though I wasn't certain exactly how to deploy it I was excited by the prospect of doing so.

But I was also wary. Queneau, I half-remembered and was half-reminded by the book's introduction, is probably most famous as the co-founder of *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* or Oulipo, the research group (not a movement) known for exploring the interfacing of mathematics and literature in order to impose constraints on writing that produce new effects to test and tease the mechanics of language. Remembering also: Harry Matthews, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec are also notable Oulipians. Queneau's own book *Exercises in Style* (1947) (a copy of which I was also once gifted by A. Leo incidentally) neatly illustrates the group's approach by retelling the same story 99 times with each iteration fashioned in a different style of writing - 'casual,' 'biased,' 'sonnet,' 'olfactory,' 'gustatory,' 'tactile' and so on. One effect is of course that the same prosaic events take on new literary potential with each culturally specific mode of deploying language but there are other more wearisome effects of enterprises of this kind. Particularly in the case of some of the output from Oulipo where the exercises seem to less to illicit oblique and lateral writerly tactics than displays of the flexing of writerly muscles. This danger is reflected in the claim that the group's primary ambition is "the seeking of new structures and patterns which may be used by writers in any way they enjoy"¹ for surely we readers should be entitled to some enjoyment as well. By this I only point to the risk that imposing systems, parameters or instructions has the potential to either alleviate an artist's anxiety by temporarily absolving themselves of a certain degree of responsibility (in the sense that they just have to carry out a preordained action) or make the work simply a demonstration

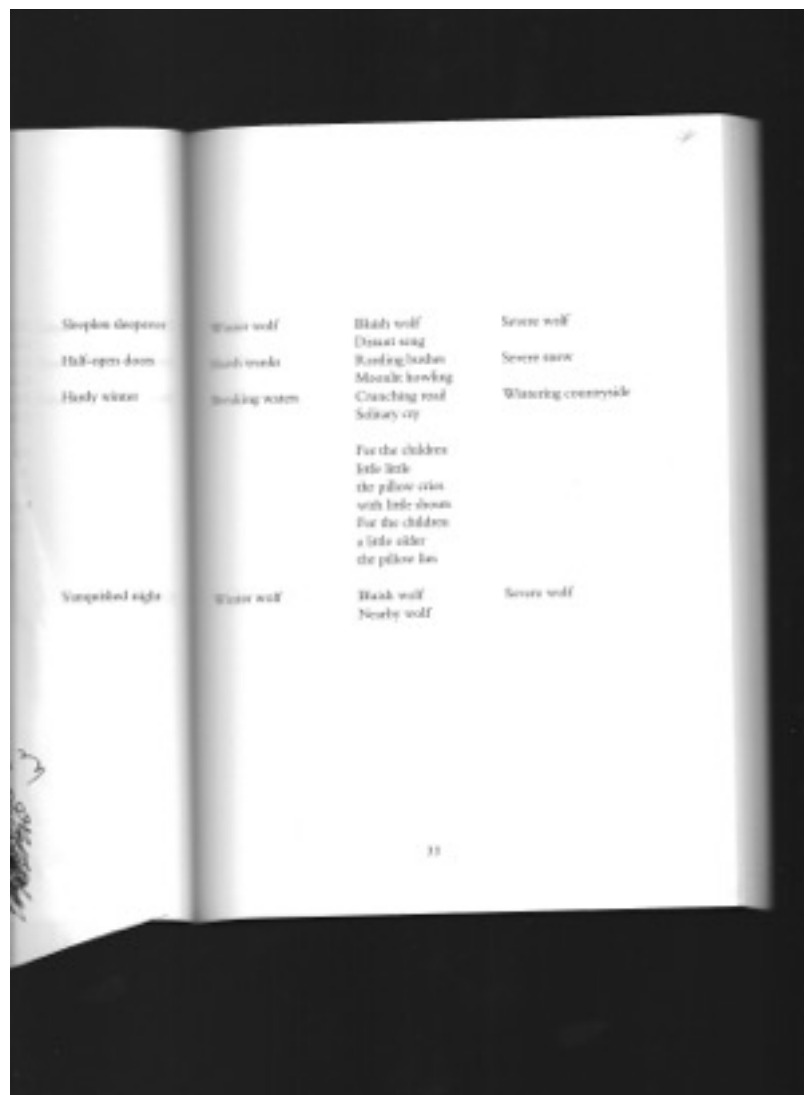
of how brilliant the artist remains in the face of said systems, parameters or instructions. In either case it seems there isn't much to do for the reader except sit back and admire, a sad state of affairs for the reader eager to participate in making meaning rather than having it thrust upon them.

Anyway I shouldn't have worried because as it turned out *Elementary Morality* is an astonishing, expansive masterwork that takes the constraining techniques of Oulipo and privately bends them to yield wild, arcane magic of the first order.

The book is organised in three sections, the first made up of poems, each structured in an identical form of Queneau's own invention retrospectively dubbed *quennets* by his admirers, and the latter two by paragraph-length prose poems. The content of the prose poems in sections II and III take their cue from the divining hexagrams of classic Chinese text the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*.

I have to say I liked the *quennets* best and here's my particular favourite:

It was this electric butting-up of the systematic against the intuitive that appeared to create the crackling productive space for meaning and association to do striking and dynamic things. Language did not perform as I expected and the products of Queneau's manipulation of it had an effect that was open and productive rather than illustrative or satirical. In particular it seemed utilisation of the *I Ching's* hexagrams and the vehement adherence to the formal constraints of the *quennet* carry with them an arcane or mystic component that appeared to sit a great distance from the verifiable, patterned logic of mathematics. Queneau himself confessed in a diary that the *quennets* were products of inspiration, the poetic source which David Bellos describes in his introduction to *Elemental Morality* as the 'least Oulipian.' The confluence of this doctrinal deviation with the divination and efforts at future sight apparently offered by the *I Ching* point to a move from reducible structures to patently irreducible ones that seem to have a power over the writer producing very satisfactory effects. Or at least as far as I was concerned.



Márquez seemed to have proposed a constraint to Arvo Leo as a starting point for his project but clearly not in a classic Oulipian sense. By working from the fragment he excised from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and initially proposing a filmic counterpart the camera studies cows as if to fix them for fear they might cease to remain coherent entities. Quickly contingency and context cause his camera to stray so the film records a spreading network of association, encounters and experience. As attention moves elsewhere cows reoccur in various incarnations, punctuating the work with an insistent, irreducible logic of their own.

I found I didn't want to think of *Elementary Morality* as simply an illustration of concerns shared by both the artists or as two ways to think through the same thing. Happily it was more complicated than this as the context in which I received it offered it up as a constraint of my own and it was clear that because of this the book had more agency than I had initially appreciated. I was starting to recognise the significant effects all this literature was having on its readers. Márquez's book had shaped the oblique tack Arvo Leo took through the experience and assimilation of encounters in his project and now in sending this book to me at this particular time, intentionally or not, he had charged or enchanted it enough that it would act upon me, steering my path through, round and across *This is the Cow*.

Newly enthused about the potential promise of Oulipo's lineage I was prompted to consider tendencies to unquestioningly venerate reducible structures elsewhere. The particularly orderly and systematic accumulation of knowledge that is largely the objective of the Sciences came to mind and I was reminded of how easy it is to unthinkingly accept an approach that imagines a dispassionate, neutral or even god-like perspective on the subject it scrutinises. Of course it's hardly a visionary act to eye certain conventions of science with suspicion but it was useful to be reminded of how easy it is to fall into a Cartesian muddle and believe oneself to not quite constitute a subject. That is to say in an effort to be thorough, precise and organised when engaged in an effort to study something and make sense of it an individual can forget how so extremely specific and culturally constituted she or he is. Often this involves an effort to step into some imaginary outside in order to look in with the belief that from this vantage point the all the cultural specificity that allows them to see the way they see or read the way they read will not impinge on the object of scrutiny. It's not hard to appreciate how these spurious ambitions could be made more persuasive via the lenses of microscopes and 8mm film cameras with their optical, yet artificial, promise of distance. There are certainly situations where this is more problematic than others particularly when there are ethical and political concerns for the rights of the studied object as in the case of the anthropologist. But anyway, all that thinking served to reinforce a recognition of just how complex, entangled and productive one is when engaged in an act of interpretation even when bound by or adhering to instructions, rules or systematic structures. Indeed the act of interpretation changes the studied object and the subject studying irrevocably and reciprocally.

Taking recourse to James Joyce as I am wont to do in moments of uncertainty, if only to be reminded of the validity of this state and the wonder attendant to it, I thought of the literary theorist Derek Attridge's account of discovering elements of his biography in *Finnegans Wake*. He describes in his book *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* the experience of rereading a section of the novel and, amidst its polyglottic linguistic collision and invention, coming upon the phrase 'bakereen's dusind.' The particular significance of these two words for him was that these words contained the abbreviated name of the Umsindusi, the river on the banks of which he grew up in South Africa. He writes, '...like the small boy Joyce imagined in just such a situation, I felt a momentary pleasure in this unlooked-for bond between the work and me – a pleasure in no way diminished by my

awareness that, if asked whether I was responding to an intended allusion or to a coincidence thrown up by the chapter's dense web of names, I would probably have to answer... 'coincidence'². In consideration of this he goes on to explain how if Joyce made a work or 'machine' so complex that when it is met by the reader's own particular complexity it causes personal connections of the kind he experienced then the 'intentional' and 'coincidental' can not easily be thought of in stark opposition. I was wholly won over by his implication is that literature has the capacity to be crafted in such a way that it is programmed to incorporate the singular biographies of its readers. In fact, if I am to be totally frank about the *quennet* printed above, one element of its appeal for me is that the cat I live with is called 'the Woolf' (named for another significant modernist) and, though this is a private and inconsequential 'unlooked-for bond' with the poem, I cannot shake it. I'm certainly not labouring under the misapprehension that Queneau's poem is about the Woolf but it resonates with my particular fondness for the animal. It allows me a proximity not anticipated by the author or the artist who has sent it to me but their creative act is such that it is programmed to allow connections of this kind to take place. They situate me as a reader who is able to allow my free and personal associations as a subject. A facile link to my singularity perhaps but one that indicates how reading and interpretation prompt autobiography.

In the face of all this I started to think of literature as the constraint and parameter that prompts activity. Books started to loom powerfully as things which did things to the reader that in turn made the reader do things and the things the reader did changed the contents of the book and *its* effect upon the reader and so on until I was dizzy. Though *Elementary Morality* wasn't quite twitching on the desk it was newly animated and I was feeling its effects on me. Clearly this was not the objective of Raymond Queneau but charged and, inflected by the particularity of my reception of it in this context, the book acquired a kind of animism where the contingent and dynamic language within suggested an object doing more than it should. Arvo Leo appeared to be proposing a reading experience that was radically performative and in the light of this I was empathising profoundly with his experience of reading Gabriel García Márquez - a reading so exploded that it involved travelling many thousands of miles and a period of fevered, discursive, exploratory creativity. Equally I was feeling as if I were now a participant much like those who contributed to the production of the artefacts that accompany his film - implicated and collaborating. The vantage point that my copy of *Elementary Morality* was allowing made it possible to view *This is the Cow* as a record of Arvo Leo's personal exploits - exploits that were a direct extension of his highly subjective reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This was a reading that gave him licence to plunder, contort and incorporate his own creative undertakings into its meaning incorporating other concerns. I had the impression it had provided a conceptual lens for Arvo Leo to begin his project but then continued as his copilot, shaping his activity, binding him into Márquez's text and closer to the people with whom he collaborated. It felt like another, yet more expanded, articulation of the river Derek Attridge found in *Finnegans Wake* and the cat I found in the *quennet*. His reading of Márquez that constituted *This is the Cow* had no ambitions for secure and artificial distance. He was in amongst it, as prominent a subject of the project as the things he filmed or work produced by people he met.

At this point another document was sent to me.

It began thus:

1. Another rubber stamp is made. Part of the rubber component of this stamp dangles slightly off of its solid wood support. While stamping, this section receives no direct

pressure therefore it is good to press down on this section with your finger to assure an even stamping.

and ended with:

...If we consider this momentous occasion in relation to our photograph of the man on his bicycle transporting a bag of water with a goldfish inside then we have an occasion to consider yet again our fellow man's indent on the natural state of things.

Other high points included:

13. Camille had a dire bout with diarrhoea while he tackled away at this. I think he tapped into almost every western-view cliché of India and entwined them into one potent collage.

17. Painting for a Pile of Hay. If you are using pomegranate juice to paint a painting it means that you do not need to purchase regular paint but you will need to purchase a pomegranate. Concurrently, in both situations, it will still be valuable to have a paint brush close at hand.

20. Newspaper: black and white.

21. Migrating pollen, traveling petals, nomadic natura morta, peripatetic portrait, diasporic bouquet, restless poste-restante.

25. Milky circles, molecules, sunset, sunrise, moon hollow, coffee stains, coffee veil, water, waves, whitecaps, exercise, just an exercise, eagerless, disinterested circles, indeterminate circles.

35. Nickey's dream job was to write screenplays for Bollywood films.

It was a list of 37 short texts each of which corresponded to the artworks and artefacts that accompany Arvo Leo's film - items I had not seen for over a year and whose enumeration here was now entirely abstract as a consequence. I was informed that these texts were composed for me as a guide through the project and it was implied that, if I saw fit, I should edit, reorganise and include sections of it here. Some explained intentions, others were simply records of materials, there were titles accompanied by short commentaries, references to theory and occasional beautiful strings of poetic association. There were also stories like this one:

5. I purchased two of the same Tyeb Mehta posters from the Museum of Modern Art in New Delhi. Some people then asked, "Why did you buy two posters that are exactly the same?" One night in Calcutta while I was looking for a sign painter I kept hearing about (yet no one so far had been able to confirm his exact whereabouts) I stopped at a stationary shop to see if they could help. The owner said that he in fact knew the man and remarked excitedly that he lived just around the corner. He took me over to the painter's home but the painter was not there. Once we arrived back at his store, and after hearing about my project, he asked if I would be interested in his eleven year-old nephew contributing. I said of course so he called his sister, spoke in Bengali for a few minutes, and then asked if I would like to go meet his nephew. Now? Yes, he is still awake doing his home work. So we took off together through numerous quiet and dark narrow streets, past many printing shops with their machines and masters working away under dimly lit bare

bulbs, and eventually we arrived at a townhouse where we were let in by his sister. He introduced us and we walked upstairs to the living room where his nephew, his niece, and their little dog were sitting on the carpet surrounded by sketchbooks. His nephew's name is Ayush, but his nickname is Lattu. We all sat down, Lattu's mother brought chai tea and biscuits and we spent the next hour looking at Lattu's drawings and talking about art. I eventually pulled out my Tyeb Mehta posters (which I happened to be walking around with) and suggested that Lattu, if he desired, could work directly on the posters. I left the cow-sign text and the posters with Lattu, and upon leaving his uncle, being the owner of the stationary shop, insisted that he would provide all of the necessary art supplies for Lattu to carry out his work. Five days later I returned to his uncle's shop to see how the project was coming along. He explained that the painting had just been finished yet Lattu was not around at the moment but we could go get the painting together later that afternoon. With time to kill, enshrine, live through, I went and bought a drawing tube and filled it up with art supplies, some chocolate bars, and tucked a few hundred rupees in the very bottom (rupees with Gandhi wearing sunglasses). His uncle and I walked back to the house. It was a short visit. His mother gave me Lattu's drawing rolled up in a tube and I gave her the drawing tube and thanked her and asked her to thank Lattu for me. Later, when I got back to my room I unraveled the tube and discovered the two Mehta posters exactly how I'd left them yet, there was now another white piece of paper rolled up inside of them. I unrolled this tube to discover a piece of paper about the same size and bulk of the Tyeb Mehta posters that had, upon its surface, a painted recreation of the Mehta painting, with the cow-text painted over top of it. Lattu had re-made Mehta! And to top it off, down in the bottom right-hand corner of the piece of paper Lattu signed his name, wrote his name, and provided his two phone numbers!

The magic in these texts articulated Arvo Leo's proximity to his project with its joy, ambivalence, surprise, frustrations, self-education and illumination. Equally they refused to spell anything out concretely or qualify actions and decisions exhaustively. The play, humour and emotional resonances were captured here and there was space left to fill with my own interpretive activity. Copying and pasting my favourite parts into this essay in order to best illustrate a set of ideas I suddenly realised I was equipped and entitled to do a private and playful violence to this further lyrical, writerly autobiographical byproduct of the artist's project. I had received a generous invitation to participate - much like Lattu, Camille, Nickey, Babu Dutta Chakraborty or Panama Dave - and was gratefully accepting the opportunity to read this project as an empowered and privileged subject. And despite all this I was thinking back to the question of how much of the project could be read as a portrait of the artist and wondering, with the gift of these texts, whether I was now too entangled to evaluate how prominent or visible he was to the cursory or uninitiated eyes of other possible audiences. They indirectly catalogued a chain of acts that told the story of an individual's path from Rotterdam across India via the world created in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and suddenly this individual was in the sharpest focus he had been. Like Lattu, Camille, Nickey et al I was an initiate due to particular circumstances and a particular exchange: Arvo Leo sent *Elementary Morality* and a bundle of writing to me and I used it the way I could.

It was clear that for each and every other potential audience member their perspective on *This is the Cow* would be singular and unique, shaped by particular vantage points and equipped with particular tools. I saw that in reading the highlights I edited from the explanatory notes sent by Arvo Leo here there was an opportunity to gain a clearer insight into the artist's intention and experience of making this work. As pleasant and entertaining as this could be I was confident that these potential audience members would agree that in

one way or another each of these accounts and fragments that made up the written bundle could be read amongst the palimpsest of images, performances, places and interactions that made up the project. Because of this we can appreciate how close Arvo Leo is to his project and conscious of it too. Though he studies and reports there are no efforts expended in establishing artificial distance and he appears to recognise, even embrace, how his presence as a subject shapes and is changed by what or who he experiences. In seeing this each reader or audience member is offered a model or cue to take a singular route through the layered traces and montaged images of *This is the Cow* taking a place in a chain of translated experience. For others, as it was for me, this whole exercise involved getting in close, seeing reflections of oneself and feeling guided by a blend of the systematic and the intuitive. In the light of this agreeable arrangement I saw a wholly new way to negotiate literature with an invitation to participate at its kernel.

While all this was happening

*12. I will briefly mention (as the sun begins to set into the ocean and a murder of crows flies east from Vancouver to Burnaby) that I made this painting for my friend Giles the poet because he is fond of the work of Harold the poet. I will also mention that I only kept the book cover - the contents are elsewhere, underground. This reminds me of the only pastime on Fire Island which is catching non-edible fish; 'at regular intervals along the beaches there are notices stating that the fish should not be left to rot but should be at once buried in the sand'.(From *Tristes Tropiques* by Claude Levi-Strauss.)*

Giles Bailey. Marfa, Texas. 2012.

¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oulipo>

² Attridge, D *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.121.