Erratum... Errata... Erasum...: The Selection of Sources for Raymond Queneau’s *Le Chiendent*

There has been considerable debate over potential links between Queneau’s *Le Chiendent* and Descartes’s *Discours de la Méthode*, fueled primarily by Queneau’s own contradictory accounts. In 1937, he described how a translation of the *Discours* into modern French became his first novel. Then, his 1969 article, “Errata,” refuted this explanation. Although Queneau purports to be telling us the truth in “Errata,” if one examines the notes and drafts for the article, a different, less clear-cut answer arises. These manipulations reveal many important themes of Queneau’s *œuvre*: questions of literary heritage, potential literature, and the place of the author.

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I do not wish to ruin the ending of Agatha Christie’s *The A.B.C. Murders*, but the murderer is not Alexander Bonaparte Cust, as our ostensibly reliable narrator, Captain Arthur Hastings, O.B.E., has led us to believe throughout much of the novel. Similarly, Raymond Queneau’s explanation in his article, “Errata,” of the inspiration for his first novel, *Le Chiendent*, is also specious. In “Errata,” Queneau discusses the subjective nature of truth in testimony, quoting Christie’s famed detective, Hercule Poirot: “But telling everything you know always implies selection […]. [P]eople select what they think is important. But quite frequently they think wrong!” (Christie 147; Queneau, *Voyage* 221).

For decades, debate has burned regarding the possible links between *Le Chiendent* and René Descartes’s *Discours de la Méthode*, in
part because no single document completely delineates the novel’s origins, as Henri Godard observes (Œuvres complètes II 1442-43). The controversy is fueled primarily by Queneau’s own contradictory accounts, with some critics, such as Jean-Marie Catonné, questioning the importance of Descartes’s philosophical treatise in Queneau’s novel — “C’est un roman. Pas un momento universitaire,” he argues (151) — while I have shown important similarities between the two texts on the levels of both language and narrative structure (Hertich 72-79). Although Queneau purports to be telling us the entire truth in “Errata,” he, too, appears to be making a selection; for if one examines the evidence — in this case, the notes and drafts for the article — a different, less clear-cut answer emerges. In an attempt to better understand Le Chiendent and its genesis, I will examine Queneau’s own selections and obfuscations regarding his sources, inspirations, and intertexts, for, like the use of intertext in Queneau’s works in general, his manipulations reveal many important themes of his œuvre: questions of literary heritage, potential literature, and the place of the author.

In the article “Écrit en 1937,” Queneau recounts — four years after Le Chiendent was published — the various circumstances which ultimately led to his first novel. Unpublished until the appearance in 1950 of Bâtons, chiffres et lettres, this essay details Queneau’s interest in language and what he specifically labeled “le néo-français.” Eminently aware of the antiquated nature of “literary French,” which he considered to be a “véritable langue morte” (Debon 27), Queneau took a didactic tack:

Il me parut aussi que la première façon d’affirmer cette nouvelle langue serait non pas de romancer quelque événement populaire (car on pourrait se méprendre sur les intentions), mais bien, à l’exemple des hommes du XVI° qui utilisèrent les langues modernes au lieu du latin pour traiter de théologie ou de philosophie, de rédiger en français parlé quelque dissertation philosophique; et, comme j’avais emporté avec moi Le Discours de la Méthode, de le traduire dans ce français parlé. C’est avec cette idée en tête que je me mis à écrire “quelque chose” qui devint un roman devant plus tard s’intituler Le Chiendent [...]. (Bâtons, chiffres et lettres 18)

1 In “Conversation avec Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes,” a text in the same collection as “Écrit en 1937” and recorded in March of 1950, Queneau recounts a very similar version: “Et quand j’ai commencé à écrire ce qui devait devenir Le Chiendent,