

Looney Tunes and Unheard Melodies: ☺ -) An Oulipian Colonescapade,
with a Critique of 'The Great-Ape Love Song Corpus' and its Lexicon

It is not sufficient to be elsewhere in order not to be here.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*

Abstract: The ultimate aim of this paper is to raise the consciousness of colonized scholars -- to free us from the colonic obstructions that have become a rampant academic disease. This is a colonescapade and not a colonoscopy for two reasons: first, we are investigating the waste regions of the linguistic and not the biological body; second, our "escapade" is not an "oscopy" because it seeks to go beyond diagnosis and operate on the disease directly. The procedure is radical, arguing by example, not precept. It operates under the eleventh thesis of Feuerbach: "Intellectuals have only tried to understand the world in various ways; the point is to change it". May there be no more colonic obstructions in our lives! This is my hope and fervent wish.

Some 15 years ago an essay appeared in Paris in a marginal publishing venue that altered for ever the practice of trans-phylogenetic linguistics. Jacques Jouet's paper did more than translate an Obliterature¹ that had been to that point complete *terra incognita*. His modest -- traditionalists call it his *bestial* -- essay shook the foundations of language study in the west. So radical were its implications that it remains either ignored or treated as a kind of looney tune by academicians; and beyond that tight little professorial island, the essay is unheard. To specialists the essay appears even more suspect than Saussure's early researches into the anagrammatics he discovered in Silver Age Latin poetry.² Saussure, as we know, turned his back on his own disturbing discoveries and

proceeded to his fame and glory. Jouet, by contrast, has stood game and steadfast.

Now, 15 years later, the situation has changed, in no small part because of what Jouet's work accomplished for the study of language, especially poetical language. All humanists owe an unpayable debt to his little paper on Great-Ape love songs, and in particular to the example his practice set for those of us who came after him. So in this examination of Jouet's work I come like Marc Antony to the corpse of Caesar -- I come to bury Jouet, not to praise him. He more than most would appreciate this precisely because he is still living near Paris.

I shall spend much of my time recapitulating Jouet's original work. Its deficiencies are inseparable from its virtues, so that we cannot examine the former without first being clear about the latter. Besides, if his paper falls short of the definitive, as we shall see it does, it remains, like Newton's *Principia* and Ptolemy's *Almagest*, a perpetual source of inspiration to creative intelligence.

We must begin a little before the beginning marked by Jouet's essay, however, with a man who was Jouet's most formative influence, Raymond Queneau.³ I confine myself to one small but crucial section of Queneau's seminal 1976 *Foundations of Literature*, an axiomatic treatise on poetical forms drawn out of David Hilbert's equally seminal mathematical treatise of 1899, *The Fundamentals of Geometry*. The relevant passage is theorem 3 and its natural consequent theorem 7, both of which Queneau derives from the third of the second group of his foundational axioms, the so-called "Axioms of Order".

According to Theorem 3, "Where two words are present, the sentence in which they appear includes at least one word between these two words". Consequently, theorem 7: "Between two words of a sentence there exists an infinity of other words". Anticipating

the “surprise” that these two theorems can occasion, Queneau adds the following comment: “To overcome his astonishment and understand these theorems [the reader] need only admit the existence of what we shall call. . . ‘imaginary words’ and ‘infinitesimal words’. Every sentence contains an infinity of words; only an extremely limited number of them is perceptible; the rest are infinitesimal or imaginary”. Or, we must further add, “transcendental”.

Queneau went on to say, in the same commentary, that this theorem would prove a great boon to students of rhetoric and linguistics. In fact, however, the treatise itself remains almost as little known as Jouet’s essay or Aristotle’s treatise on comedy. Jouet is one of a small band of angels who would grasp its import and build upon it.

How he did this is best told by himself. In what follows I quote *in extenso* from his remarkable work *The Great-Ape Love-Song. An Unappreciated Lyric Corpus, collected, translated, and annotated by Jacques Jouet*. As will be very clear, where Queneau is a theoretician and philosopher, Jouet is an empiricist and field worker. (Note: In these translations, the Great Ape poetical texts come as Jouet’s phonetic transcriptions from the oral originals, and the scholar’s explanatory prose comes in its English semantic equivalent. The form of the former – the prosodic and auditory form – is of course crucial to preserve, as much as we can, whereas the latter is simply informational academic prose and presents no particular aesthetic difficulties.)

Zor boden tanda

Kagoda bolgani

Rak gom tand panda Yato

kalan mangani Kreegh-ah yel

greeh-ah Kreegh-ah zu-vo

bolgani Greek-ah tand pogo

Ubor zee kalan mangani

The preceding poem is written in great-ape language. And here is a translation:

Where are you going, gorilla,

In the dark forest?

You run without a sound

Seeking the female ape.

Beware of love

Watch out, gorilla

A lover dies of hunger

Of thirst, of hoping for the leg of the female great-ape.

The great-ape language has the peculiarity of being composed of a lexicon of less than 300 words. In the absence of any information, it must be deemed that the syntax is according to the user's preference, as are the pronunciation and the prosody.

The French-Ape and Ape-French lexicon is to be found in Tarzan, by Francis Lacassin, Collection 10-18, Paris, 1971. In it, Francis Lacassin clarifies as follows: "This lexicon, drawn up by Edgar Rice Burroughs himself after the compilation of his own works, was

published under his own auspices in 1939 in the now unobtainable booklet The Tarzan Clans of America.

"Since then it has become the guide of the well-informed amateur and the official style-manual of successive artists and authors of strip-cartoons.

"It is published here for the first time in French, by special permission. Copyright, Edgar Rice Burroughs Inc., 1971."

According to Edgar Rice Burroughs the great apes are comparable to the gorilla in terms of strength, but far more developed on the level of intelligence.

It is at the breast of a great-ape (a great-ape with a great-ape's great heart) that little Lord Greystoke, orphaned of his father and mother, humans come to grief somewhere in equatorial Africa, acquired the strength of his species of adoption, while his British and innate intelligence was to sprout within him like an indestructible reed. That, at least, is more or less what Burroughs says.

Tarzan, born in the jungle, lived for a year with his human mother, whom he heard speaking to him in English, no doubt telling him English stories. He lived for a year with his English mother and father, and when his English mother died of boredom and unfamiliarity, he lived for a night and half a morning with his father, still English but completely desperate. Adopted by Kala (in great-ape language, she who has kal, milk), Lord Greystoke became Tarzan, Tar-zan, which signifies, precisely, "white skin" - but I

have no intention here of retelling the hackneyed story of that equatorial baron-in-the-trees.

Here, rather, is another love-song. I begin with the translation. It will be seen that, this time, the poem is addressed to the human, thus, unless I am mistaken, to the reader himself.

Black cousin of the great-ape, my friend,

Halt under the tree to be wed.

Your heart is in tatters for having killed too much,

Steep it again in the forest's black nest. The river is wet,

The river that devours truncheon,

Wet too the tongue in its hut.

Come now, abandon your dryness and abandon your gun.

Gomangani yo

Dan do par kalan den

Thub tul bundolo Vo

wala go vo hoden

Gom-lul eho-lul

Gom-lul popo balu-

den Eho-l'l lus wala

Aro tand-lul pand-balu-den

As the title of this paper, The Great-Ape Love-Song an Unappreciated Lyric Corpus, indicates in a very insistent way, the essential themes of great-ape poetry are amorous. But we also find an appreciable number of songs of food-gathering, the great-ape being, by nature, somewhat pacific and a vegetarian. Nor will I conceal the fact that certain of these love-songs are concerned with various carnivore perversions, trans-specific zoophilias, and are indeed sadly xenophobic and exterminatory. Let no one expect that I should paint an unduly idyllic picture of the great-apes. If they are not, on the whole, either cannibals or Calibans, either good angels or nasty brutes, let us never forget that they are capable of everything, since they are capable of poems. But let us return to love-poems and, by way of example, to the following:

Voo-voo to

Voo-dum red tand Zee

Yo kalan sheeta

Zu-kut koho gu zu zee

Bzan for tand-utor

Bzan for to pal rand-ramba

Tand-utor gugu zut

Eho-nala to tand amba

I sing at the top of my voice

Because I am not really sure of myself.

I love the female leopard

Her warm grotto, and her belly, and her leg.

A hair of the beast makes one brave

The hair of my beast I pluck from her mons.

I take my courage from within and without

And from the highest summits I shall never again return.

It is clear that this is a very beautiful love-poem which sets nothing higher than love. It is also a poem which is fairly forthright in its approach to the sexual relationship between species that are generally ill-assorted; something of value, above all if we consider that the literary text is a mirror, albeit a distorting one, carried along the road of languages and of passions, basic or marginal. With the next poem, which is a poem of food-gathering, one will readily be drawn to conclude that the great-ape food-gathering poems are not very different from great-ape love-poems, to the degree that it is perhaps pointless to have created this sub-category in the general typology of great-ape poetry. The food-gathering songs are also songs of a quite different quest.

I draw attention to the composite word bale-den greeh-ah, which I have translated, word for word, as "love-truncheon."

Gu pan-vo manu

Yar vo-o-vo rea

Tand kree-gor sopu

Iro balu-den greeh-ah

Pan-lul tand cho-lul

Pan-lul galul she-eta?

Gu tand-vulp dum dum

At dan-sopu tand tand-ramba

Weak stomach of the little small ape,

Listen to this poem, which is made only of words.

What use is there in crying for the fruit?

Rather rear up your love-truncheon.

You weep like a madeleine...

Does she weep, the bleeding panther?

Your stomach will sound hollower than the drum

If your stick does not rise up to the nuts.

*Quite obviously the great-ape lyric has no great cause to be jealous of the highest topics of reference in the history of the literatures which have existed from the very beginnings of time and the first morning. If the poem sings only of love, it sings of it to some extent by more often - but without underrating, in its turn, the spiritual dimension - putting in the foreground its formidable physical vigour. Thus it is true that the "raw" of instinct will always, tragically (at all events among the great-apes), precede the "cooked" - or the rehashed - of sentiment. Franz Kafka has already said it: "Apes think with their bellies."
(A Report to an Academy)*

We cannot therefore completely rule it out that, in great-ape poetry, the recourse to a vocabulary as rich in vitamins as the leaves of the wild celery they greedily devour, does not come close, with the hearer of the poem, to the expectation, indeed the near reflex quest of a Pavlovian erection (or Pavlova-style juiciness, as we may certainly evaluate in the next example, which is a ritual nursery-rhyme of copulation, moreover incestuous, which I prefer not to translate, especially as, with the aid of Burroughs' lexicon (op. cit.), the curious reader will be able to attempt his own translation:

Kut za-balu

At zot at gugu

Kut za balu

At zot at gugu

Sord b'wang kali

At zot at gugu

Kut sato kali

At zot at gogo

It must be said that, among the great-apes, there is a great deal of loving going on, time and time again, left, right and centre, and non-stop, without for all that misjudging the anarchic power of that particularly widespread activity, without ignoring its fundamentally tragic character which on occasion renders the matter as daunting as the filling of the barrel by the Danaids.

But since I fear I am being wearisome with these very abstract considerations, and certainly to provide the reader with a little amusement, I shall now speak of poetic technique.

All the poems I have quoted, with the exception of the last, are written in accordance with a great-ape fixed form, the bzee-bur, which means, word for word, "cold foot."

It will have been observed that each poem is an octave with a metric schema 5 6 5 7 5 7 5 8. The very movement of the syllabic count (or, if you prefer, the count of feet) presents a picture of a body making ready for a bath. When you venture your feet in cold water, you do it one at a time. It's cold; you withdraw the first, but if you try again, you try both.

The bzee-bur is a poem rhymed a b a b a b c b, or sometimes a b a b c b d b, or sometimes differently. The fifth line is characteristic, since it must be formed around two words in rime riche, or near paronyms, possibly around a pivot - "Kreegh-ah yelgreegh-ah," in the first poem quoted. These two words of line 5, taken up again at the beginning of lines 6 and 7, constitute the semantic core of the bzee-bur. In this instance, "love," and "watch out."

It will have been observed that the food-gathering song is a sort of slovenly bzee-bur since, at the beginning of the 7th line the repetition of "cho-lul," "wet," is lacking.

The following bzee-bur is entitled "Love-song of the great powerful knee." The poem is addressed to the great-ape lambda. It is a poem which expresses the violent rivalry between the drive towards love and the drive towards feeding.

Where are you projecting your desire?

Here, or there? the leg, or the courgette-flower?

The leaves, or the buttocks?

Under the warm rain

Are you going to get something good, or something brilliant?

Are you going to get the muscle, or the forest-larder? Is all that universe in a celery-stick Better than a lusty thigh?

Yel? yeland? aro

Po-ubor? zee rota?

Wa-ussha?goro?

Eta-koho meeta

Gando vando tu?

Gando vo popo hoden?

Vando ben abu

Hohotan popo-baluden?

Why knee?... It must not be expected that I, at the expense of the great-apes, should involve myself in the slightest ethnographic type investigation. That I became acquainted with the great-ape language in a book - which I readily agree is as unbelievable and inadequate as the way in which the little Lord Greystoke learned to read English in a spelling-book, and all on his own, without ever being able to speak it, to the point that, in a few years he was perfectly capable of reading, for example, a letter addressed to him, but did not recognise the same words read out loud, so much so that a certain character in the novel thought him deaf and dumb - is rather comical when, page after page, one has heard Tarzan's famous cry of victory echoing throughout the deep and generally terrified forest.

And the extraordinary character of that learning-process does not end there, for when his new friend, the naval lieutenant D'Arnot, who is French, realises that Tarzan can read (English), and not speak it, he decides - an initiative of inspired stupidity - to teach him to speak... French, better still to have him pronounce a unique species of Franglais which raises to its highest point the arbitrary nature of the sign, seeing that if Tarzan sees the written English word MAN, D'Arnot teaches him to pronounce the word HOMME, if he sees the word APE, he reads it SINGE, and the word TREE, ARBRE!

It appears that, using the great-ape language from the age of a year and a day (can we go so far as to say that it is a question of his mother-tongue?), Tarzan has, as it were, no particular attitude towards the plurality of languages and the arbitrariness of the sign,

not the faintest pre-babelian and inveterate nostalgia for THE unitary language - which, for my part, I find rather attractive.

All of this is of course quite unexceptionable, at once thorough, meticulous, and imaginative. But consider the following. After a critical digression on Mary's Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the linguistic proficiency of Frankenstein's monster, Jouet returns, as he says, "to the Great-Ape poems, and to a few thoughts about the lexicon":

Less than three hundred words, I said... One might suppose that there are grave deficiencies. Thus, in the great-ape language, you appear not to have the word "categorilla," you lack the word "allegorilla," you do not have the word "fantasmagorilla" (or, what is more, the utterance "ha-ha")... and many others are equally lacking. But, in the long run, you can always manage with a paraphrase. My own conviction is that, from the point of view of poetry, languages are equal among themselves (at all events virtually equal), just as the words of a language are equal among themselves (at all events potentially equal in so far, that is, that, in that language, poets have a feel for those words.

When I first read this passage I scarcely noticed the *aporia* concealed within. Jouet's rhetoric is after all very persuasive. But recently, on re-visiting the essay, the deficiency appeared with the force of a revelation.

Jouet missed his error, I believe, because of his empirical turn of mind. Had he more of Queneau's theoretical rigor, he would have grasped the problem. Of course it is perfectly true, in an empirical view of the matter, that the words "categorilla", "allegorilla", and "fantasmagorilla" do not appear in the Great-Ape lexicon. They do not appear because they cannot appear. They are among the lexicon's "infinitesimal" words theoretically determined – indeed, theoretically *forecast* – by Queneau's theorems 3 and 7. Only Jouet's 300 words are perceptible. The rest are infinitely distributed.

I have not the occasion here, nor perhaps you the patience, to pursue all of the deficiencies in Jouet's work. Let me cite just a few telling examples.

First of all, consider another imperceptible word of the same class as those cited by Jouet as non-existent: Godzilla. Apparently far removed – at least in a field-worker's purview – from the world of Great-Ape Love Songs, nonetheless it is clear, on Jouet's own showing, that this word must be another infinitesimal linguistic presence secretly inhabiting, like Keats's unheard melodies, those distichs recovered for us by Jouet:

Atan kalan yat yato yat

Kudu yat yut yato tand tand

How many godzillas, categorillas, allegorillas, and fantasmagorillas live and move and have their being – how many are propagating to this day – between the eleven words of that incomparable Great-Ape distich. The hills are alive with the sound of logorillas, the prancing and pawing of all their little cold feet.

Jouet also says, in that misbegotten paragraph, that the expression "ha-ha" is also absent from the Great-Ape lexicon. We know, of course, that he calls attention to this particular supposed absence in order to make an amusing reference to Queneau's master,

Alfred Jarry, and in particular to the Great-Ape who is the side-kick of Dr. Faustroll, the hero of Jarry's visionary fictional narrative *The Life and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*. But in this case Queneau and Jarry have the laugh on Jouet, for it is clearly the case that "ha-ha" is part of the Great-Ape lexicon -- even though the expression is not entered in the lexicon drawn up by Edgar Rice Burroughs and published in Francis Lacassin's *Tarzan*. And so we stand in wonder that this great empirical scientist could have been so naïve as to assume the positive accuracy of a document forged at two removes from the living language of Tarzan and his animal friends,

Let me add that Jouet's mistake here is in many respects a kind of *felix culpa*. Not only does that error lead us back to re-found our thinking in core first principles, it has stimulated the discovery -- the empirical discovery -- of some of the heretofore unknown words concealed in the interstices of the Great-Ape lexicon. Working from the newly exposed "Godzilla" and "ha-ha", for example, one can see what is involved in the two-word lexicon that underpins the whole series of *Road Runner* cartoons that Chuck Jones created between 1948 and 1964. Wile E. Coyote never speaks, and Road Runner's only utterance, like Bosse de Nage's "ha-ha", is "Beep, Beep". But metastasizing between those two words is a nano-order of imaginary and infinite words that would crash the capacities of a quantum computer. The cartoons themselves are merely the hem of that transcendental garment known to the ancients as the Veil of Maya, and in our own day named with a name we no longer find odd or mysterious: Mozilla.

I must not close in a way that could be thought disrespectful of Jouet and his breakthrough scholarly work. Indeed, one of the most important parts of his essay is the

translation he makes of the Great-Ape creation myth. As Jouet observes, this mythopoeic document gives us “a great-ape version of the evolution of species”.

A grotto on a mountain. The grotto is inhabited by a strange creature; it is a chimera with the head of a zebra, the forefeet of a crocodile, the back wheels of a Land Rover, and the splendid breasts of a great-ape. It is a female chimera.

Outside the grotto, a queue.

In the queue there are any number of people: Den, Tongani, Balu, Gorgo, Skree, Tanbalu, Gimla, Tantor, Kando, Omtag, Bolgani, Tarmangani, Gormangani, Duro, Dango, Nene, Sheeta, Numa, Sabor, Kali, Pizza, Klu, Buto, Horta, Za-balu, Kalo, Ska, Pacco... and, of course, Mangani.

One must absolutely, on pain of death, answer a question. A particularly unexpected question. It is a riddle: "Which animal is it that walks in the morning on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening on three?"

Mangani gives his answer. He doesn't want to get himself eaten up. Mangani gives his answer "That animal is Mangani," (i.e. the great-ape answers: "That animal is the great-ape". "Why is that?" the Chimera says, turning pale. "Because, in the morning of the world, the great-ape was the white-man: Tar-man ga-ni (four feet). By the midday of the

world, he had become an ordinary ape: Man-nu (two feet). In the evening of the world, finally, he has become great-ape: Man ga-ni (three feet).

And the Chimera rushes off, hotfoot, to throw herself into the abyss.

To humanists like ourselves, that narrative must come as a sobering revelation. The riddle of the sphinx, a foundational myth of enlightenment, here comes in a version that questions the very ground of western enlightenment. And so we begin to wonder: what if the riddle had another answer – an answer like the Great-Ape answer? What if it had an infinitude of other answers?

The following curious fact, which shall close my presentation, suggests the riddle in fact did, or rather *does*, have an infinitude of answers. As we all know, the first of the *Road Runner* cartoons to appear was “Fast and Furry-ous”. The title is allegorillical, for all of these cartoons are about “us”: “fast” us (Road Runner) and “furry” us (Coyote). But we now also know that a (so-to-speak) pre-historigirillical cartoon antedated that famous work. It was called “Uns-table” and it involved, as the prefix of its title indicates, an inquiry into “our” general human(?) condition.

Posing as the sphinx, Road Runner sets up a portable bridge table on a plateau in very high desert tableland. Road Runner’s pose is a device to lure Coyote to his everlasting and ever-recurring doom (the myth of the eternal return). Seeing the large sign ACME COMPANY behind the disguised Road Runner and the bridge table, Coyote goes up and hopes to purchase an infallible death and destruction machine. *Vanitas vanitatis.*

At Coyote's approach Road Runner poses the Sphinx's first question: "Beep Beep", and Coyote responds with the word: "Coyote". Appearing satisfied, Road Runner then asks: "Beep, Beep" and Coyote again responds, this time with the answer: "Road Runner". Unflustered by that second, clearly correct answer, Road Runner finally demands: "Beep Beep" and Coyote makes his last astonishing reply: "Coyote". The riddle being solved in this truly unheard of fashion, a great sucking sound takes away the entire illusion of desert table plateau and sphinx and ACME COMPANY, with Road Runner racing into a vanishing point in the cartoon and drawing from the visual field everything but Coyote. For Coyote, the infallible death and destruction machine *is* the answer to the sphinx's riddle – an answer he never should have given in the first place since one of the infallible rules of the Chuck Jones universe is that Coyote must never speak. In that universe are only two words, Beep Beep, and they belong to Road Runner.

Consequently, having given the correct but literally *unheard of* answer, Coyote must be left– as ever – hanging in an empty space where once there had been solid bridge table and tableland. He hovers for a brief but touching moment and then plunges away, like the Monk at the end of Lewis's immortal story. And the cartoon closes with a tight shot of Coyote limping across the desert on three legs, his front right being broken and useless. And we hear off screen, simply: "Beep Beep".

Beep Beep. Two little words with infinity between – and, I strongly suspect, not only between. Beep Beep.

All together now, Beep Beep.

And not only between or around *words*. Think of the infinitudes belonging to the characters!

M, N, O, P –

I could go on all day.

Q, R, S, T –

Alphabetically speaking,

We're OK.

Coda. Since completing my investigations, I have to report a certain uncertainty I have begun to entertain about the reliability of my primary documentary evidence. I am troubled by the odd coincidence in orthography of the French words *signe* and *singe*. Phonetically one would never confuse those words, but orthographically they have a troubling likeness. It then occurred to me that “Jacques Jouet” may be a name to conjure with, so to speak. *Faire le Jacques* in French slang means to “try to be funny”, and of course *jouet* in French means “toy” or “trick”. None of this would count for anything were it not for the fact that I have never actually *met* Jacques Jouet except in his bibliographical body. That is, thank Somebody, a material existence, so we know at any rate that human purpose and intention have brought that body into being. Still, it is not exactly flesh and blood. DOES M. Jouet live today in the suburbs of Paris? It is an important question. So I close this paper today by pointing out this slightly disturbing situation, in case some scholar might help to throw light on the matter. Perhaps one of you has been to Paris lately?

Thank you for your attention.

Page 14: The hills are alive with the sound: *The Sound of Music*.

Page 14: the prancing and pawing: “’Twas the Night Before Christmas”.

Page 17: a great sucking sound: Cf. Ross Perot.

Page 19: thank Somebody: This was the prayer of thanks that Swinburne liked to intone.

¹ This term (and the genre it names) is the invention of Randall McLeod. See his essay “Where Angels Fear to Tread,” in *Marking the Text. The Representation of Meaning on the Literary Page*, ed. Joe Bray, Miriam Hadley, and Anne C. Henry (Ashgate: Aldeshot, 2000), 144-192.

² See Jean Starobinski, *Words Upon Words. The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure* (Yale UP: New Haven, 1979).

³ Jouet’s work was originally published as No. 62 in the *Bibliothèque Oulipienne*. Queneau’s work, cited above, appeared as No. 3 in the same series. My quotations from both works are taken from the reprint in the *Oulipo Laboratory*, trans. Harry Mathews and Iain White (Atlas Press: London, 1995).