



The Run of the Streets

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I close the door of the apartment and duck through the corridors, under the low wooden beams, down the stairs past the post boxes on which the names of the inhabitants of the building are printed; one of them reads 'Bastard'.

I press the button to release the heavy front door and I'm out on the street. Suddenly, Parisian life teems around you, like the volume has just been turned up. Like you've just been underwater and have quickly surfaced.

I set off at pace along the street, dodging past the tables of the small cafés that adjoin our building. I pass the small community garden on the corner, cross the small side street and run in the direction of the traffic lights at the top of the street. Trousseau, Charles Delezcluse, Charonne: these are the three streets that I've so far intersected on my run from the apartment in the 11th Arrondissement.

On 3rd December 1851, at the southern end of rue Trousseau, Alphonse Baudin, a deputy in the French Assembly, was shot dead on a barricade that had been erected after the previous day's seizure of power by Louis Napoleon. On the wall of a building nearby, a plaque whose text is etched in gold paint commemorates his death.

Paris is a city upon which so many layers of history can be read that sometimes it can seem not a living and breathing city at all, but rather an archive of past events and people and ideas that have been lived out on such a grand scale that, for those who live there, it can surely appear difficult to do anything new or worthwhile.



It didn't seem that way to me, though—although the place I had just come from, Dublin, had begun to wrap itself around me like a shroud. For me, Paris was an escape—another way of seeing.

I needed to leave Dublin. But I knew I'd have to go back. In the time between leaving Dublin and returning to it I began, seriously, to work on a book about the Irish capital. Most of this work was done in Paris, and when I wasn't writing, or thinking about writing, I ran.

I cross the curving rue de Charonne, whose jagged building plots hint at its medieval origin and distract momentarily from the straight lines of Haussmann's boulevards.

When I begin my run I'm always aware of the awkwardness of my body—my legs don't move in the way that I'd like and my arms are held too high, or, when I realise my arms are too high, I overcompensate by holding them too low. Then some residual soreness from a past run reveals itself. I often use this soreness as first a bogeyman to scare me off completing my run, and then a straw man to be easily defeated—'see? I kept going, even though I felt awful when I started.'

So I'd run. And while I was running I would often think about Raymond Queneau.

Queneau was born in Le Havre in 1903. He arrived in Paris as a student and remained there for the rest of his life. When I picture Queneau, I see the multiple passport-sized prints of the young writer, hair long on top and short on the sides, caught in a variety of comic poses: one where his head is bent forward while he ruffles his hair, another where his



round glasses that sit askew are about to fall from the bridge of his nose. In others he adopts monstrous faces that barely mask his laughter.

Whereas Queneau's Paris—the area in which he lived and the place he wrote most about—was located to the west of the city, I was drawn to the east. That's where the apartment I shared with my girlfriend was, that's where the library I worked in stood. So when I ran out the door of my apartment building and thought about Queneau's Paris, I was translating it from west to east: to the storefront petrol stations and pizza joints of the area near place de la Nation. But, as I ran, I was also thinking about the way, in the early 1930s, when work was hard to come by for Queneau as for many others, he picked up a job writing a tiny column for a newspaper. Each day, three, often cryptic, questions about Paris would turn up in *L'Intransigent* under the heading 'Connaissez-vous Paris?' The following day, the answers would be printed below three more questions, and so on. Queneau wrote the column between November 1936 and October 1938, after which he got a job at the publisher Gallimard as a reader.

Here's an example of Queneau's style: on Christmas Day 1936, the following question was asked in the column:

'What is the deepest point in the Metro?'

(This question made me laugh when I first read it, because its phrasing—'the deepest' is 'le plus profonde'—seems to lend the underground spot an existentialist cool.)

The next day, the answer appeared:

'Between Abbesses and Lamarck, Metro line 12 passes 62 metres below the level of the rue Norvins.'



The more one reads of Queneau's Paris trivia, the more it exhibits a craftily ludic sensibility of the sort shown by the jigsaw-maker Gaspard Winckler in Georges Perec's *La vie mode d'emploi*. Queneau, who would later form the Oulipo group of which Perec would be a member, was playing games with the reader, and with the city.

Running to me has never been a natural thing. At school, I failed to take up any sports convincingly—I scored own goals when playing football, I never got to grips with the wholly alien sport of basketball and once, when learning how to swim, I jumped into a pool, hurt my back, thought I was drowning and never returned.

With sport I never saw the point. But while I pursued this querulous relationship with sporting endeavour my mother had become a runner and was beginning to take part in marathons. Once, just after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster had happened, my mother, my brother, my uncle Declan and I travelled from our home in Dublin to Belfast on the train. It was the day of the Belfast marathon and, while she ran the course, we—my brother, my uncle and I—wandered around the redbrick, rain-streaked city. We saw armoured vehicles, and a park. On the train home, which was smoky with strong tobacco and dank like an old pub, my uncle drank a dark pint of Guinness.

So I was always aware of running. It was always around me—familiar, even—but I had never really considered it as something to do for its own sake. I always thought it a by-product of other things. Walking was something you did when you had to get somewhere; running was something



you did when you had to get somewhere faster. You'd run if you were trying to get a bus, for example: you see the bus, you run.

You struggle. You miss the bus.

Maybe I should have started running much earlier: I missed a lot of buses.

So sometimes walking isn't enough. When I've walked around a city for some time, and I seem to have exhausted the possibilities of that place, I look for other approaches. I want to find an angle that will break open the city and reveal something else, something I haven't seen before.

That's how, when I came to write extensively about Dublin, I needed to hear other voices—people who would tell me things I didn't already know. But I also wanted to find other ways of getting around the city. As part of my research I had walked the twenty or so kilometres around what I somewhat arbitrarily decided were the boundaries of Tallaght, the oversized new town in south-west Dublin that had been my childhood home. While walking provided me with a speed and perspective that attuned me to the basic rhythms of the city, I also knew that walking was but one way of experiencing urban space.

I wanted to explore other ways of getting around. Around a year after my walk around Tallaght, I was living in Paris—travelling to the Bibliothèque Nationale, the French National library, to sit at my laptop computer on which I tried to write more about Dublin, in the hope that what I wrote would slot together to form a book about my home town, and that the emails I sent out to agents, editors and journalists would elicit



the kind of responses that would help convince me that what I was doing in writing about Dublin was achievable.

While sitting in the vast steel and glass subterranean reading rooms of the library, I thought of Joyce, certainly, and his time spent in Paris writing about Dublin, which became in his imagination a kind of mnemonic labyrinth through which the ghosts of his old acquaintances and enemies shuffled. But I also thought, again, of Raymond Queneau, who while writing his column for *L'Intransigeant* spent cold winter afternoons in the wood-lined reading rooms of the French capital's libraries, seeking arcane facts about Paris.

To get to the library from my home I would walk from the apartment to Ledru-Rollin Metro station, take a line 8 train to Daumesnil station, change for line 6 and clatter across the raised railway bridge that passes between the concrete promontory of the offices of the French Finance ministry and the pyramidal Bercy sports centre.

I bought a monthly ticket that allowed me to jump on and off buses and trains whenever I wanted. This was a freedom I didn't have in Dublin, and I investigated bus routes and railway lines around the city as much as I could: that year I bounced around the multi-coloured circuitry of the RATP Metro map.

The first time I got to Paris, I had booked tickets there on a whim. I was in my early twenties and had just left university. I had been in Belgium for a few days, but wanted to go somewhere else. For a small sum I was able to get a seat on a train from Brussels to Paris Gare du Nord, and from there



wandered to a moderately filthy hostel that had no vacancies, but whose staff were able to direct me to a completely filthy hostel on the other side of the city. The other hostel had a single space: a mattress thrown on the floor of a bare room. I didn't care. I spent a day walking all over the city, only able to judge distances between places once I had paced them. This was the way to see Paris, I thought, somewhat romantically. But the next day I couldn't walk—at least not very far. The soles of my feet had blistered, and my legs were sluggish from the previous day's efforts.

I bought a tourist pass for the Metro, and, rather than going back to my mattress in the hostel, spent the rest of my time in the city travelling on its trains.

Raymond Queneau loved the Parisian bus system, and would sketch in his journal the routes his journeys on public transport took. I flicked through the pages of the published journals in the Bibliothèque Nationale, looking at the reproduced diagrams tracing the trajectories Queneau had taken around the city's streets—a walk, then a bus journey, then another walk. His movement through the city wasn't merely a nostalgic exercise in *flâneurie*, nor a Situationist-style utopian critique of modern urban form—rather it was, on some level, his attempt to understand the rhythms of Paris, rhythms generated by bus, train, motor car and foot. Queneau's characters are constantly in motion, even when they should be sitting still—in a kind of modernist slapstick that often reminded me of the windmilling hyperactivity that takes place in the films of Preston Sturges or Howard Hawks.





Zazie longs for the Metro; the banal incident that's retold many times in *Exercises in Style* takes place on a Parisian bus. Car journeys, excursions in vans: everything moves in Queneau's kinetic fiction.

Queneau was not beyond his own spin on psychogeography: once, he walked with musician and novelist Boris Vian to an unfashionable industrial area on the left-bank—not far from the present site of the towering National Library—in order to look at a particularly weird street.

I run up avenue Ledru-Rollin, past an empty office block and a couple of bars: one a local *tabac*, the other a quasi-hipster establishment with an English name. My run brings me to place León Blum, where a statue of the Socialist leader and former Prime Minister regards the traffic on boulevard Voltaire through the non-existent lenses of his round glasses, his scarf permanently fixed at an angle as if blowing in the breeze.

I take a sharp right at McDonald's, past a casually-built fruit stall—merely a couple of crates on top of which the stall owner had arranged melons and bananas in order to snag hungry people emerging from the nearby Metro entrance. On occasion, when running past later in the evening, I would see the stall—well, the crates—left unmanned. Clearly no one touched them or moved them apart from the stall's owner.

The pavements of the boulevard Voltaire are broad—as broad as some streets—and a pleasure to run along. They're wide enough to have plenty of room to navigate around





people walking slowly, people running slowly, people pushing buggies, people walking dogs, people on skateboards, and moped-riding pizza-delivery drivers with their crash helmets tipped upwards to allow them unobscured vision as they seek an unfamiliar address.

I'm getting into some sort of stride now—the stretch of boulevard Voltaire I run along is just over a mile, and uninterrupted by any major intersection. I pass the hotel which was the first address the young Picasso lived at in Paris. Just after this hotel, I would often see a tiny child's tricycle locked to a street sign. It could have been easily picked up and carried into a building by a parent, but instead it was tethered on the side of the street as if it were a much larger bicycle. I chose to regard it as an example of the kind of informal surrealism often generated unintentionally by Parisian streets.

Around the corner from the tricycle is the gymnase Japy, where, in 1899, the first formal meeting of French socialist organisations took place. Later, during the Second World War, the building was used to hold Parisian Jews who had been rounded up by the police and were about to be sent to the camps.

Near the gymnase Japy, a little further along the boulevard Voltaire, an entrance leads down to the Charonne Metro station. On 8 February 1962, a demonstration against the Algerian War made its way along the boulevard. Police blocked the protest before charging at the crowd. Chased by police, some protestors took shelter in the stairwells of the Metro station, at which point police hurled the heavy iron plates from the bases of nearby trees down



the staircase. Nine people died as a result of the police's actions. Eight of them were Communist Party members or trade unionists.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Charonne incident, I walked to the station and looked at the plaque commemorating the people who died. It was surrounded by floral bouquets which had been laid at a ceremony earlier that day.

No city is neutral. Paris is charged up with a radical past that refuses to disappear.

I run further, faster—to get away from Charonne Metro station, past which I couldn't run, through which I couldn't travel, without thinking of the dead protestors, or of the event that preceded it, when, in October 1961 the Parisian police had killed as many as 200 Algerian demonstrators, leaving their bodies to float along the Seine past Notre Dame cathedral.

Running through Paris, or, at least, running through the 11th and 12th arrondissements—the historically working class and radical areas in the east of the city—these points of conflict and hatred are barely hidden behind the pristine stone facades of the buildings and below the tarmac covering the paving stones of the boulevard.

One of the things I realised as I ran along boulevard Voltaire was that Paris was not my city—nor would it ever be. It was a melancholy realisation.

Another of the things I realised: Dublin was my city, whether I lived there or not. No matter how many times I left Dublin, I would always be drawn back, even if only



through memories of the place. This also saddened me, but for different reasons: I was ambivalent about my home town. I loved and hated it in equal measure.

I knew that once I left Paris I'd return to Dublin. But once I returned to Dublin, I didn't know how long I'd remain there. As it happened, it wasn't very long.

In Dublin I continued to work on my book about the city. I wanted to write about Dublin's transportation system, which was routinely maligned. As it was mostly dependent on buses—its extensive tram system was torn up in the mid-twentieth century—and Dublin's traffic was often heavy, public transportation in the city had acquired a reputation as being slow and poorly integrated.

How to write about this unheroic, unprepossessing transport system? I thought about what Raymond Queneau might do, then tried to plan a system whereby I would jump on and off buses over a set period of time, then see where I would end up. In this way, the bus would help me to generate a non-fiction narrative about the city, and I would merely transcribe it. Except that it wasn't that simple: by defining constraints—how long I would spend on each bus, whether I would stay at the same stop or cross the road to get one travelling in the opposite direction—I had at least a degree of control over the system.

In the process, I discovered another way of writing about dear old overfamiliar Dublin—a method that, it now seems to me, wouldn't have been possible without the time spent running around Paris thinking about Queneau's work.



I was almost home—having left the apartment I had run in a triangular pattern across east Paris and was heading northwards below the old overhead tracks of the railway, recently transformed into a linear park.

Near the intersection of avenue Ledru-Rollin and rue du Faubourg St Antoine, I recalled the scene near the beginning of Jean-Luc Godard's 1964 film *Bande à Part*, where the actress Anna Karina, playing a character called Odile, cycled through this intersection, heading in the direction of Bastille. Passing the Monoprix supermarket, she hopped off her bike before turning down a nearby alleyway to a building where her character was about to attend a language class.

Godard's film captured some of the antic lunacy of Queneau's early fiction, and indeed a copy of his 1937 novel *Odile* makes an appearance at one point, thumbed by the kind of seedy gangsterish characters that could have walked out of the pages of his books.

Perhaps these scenes in this film, capturing as they did a place familiar to me, were what drew my thoughts towards Queneau and his work as I ran through the streets. When I think about the anticipation of crossing this intersection, of its associations with Godard's film and by extension Queneau's novel, it helps to remind me that a place can have all manner of strange resonances that continue to act on you long after you've moved on.

I went back to Dublin and got on the bus.