Title
Translator’s Preface, by Daniela Hurezanu and Stephen Kessler. Selected Poems by Raymond Queneau

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4hn0t6sh

Journal
Translation Studies Journal, 1(1)

ISSN
1555-8614

Authors
Hurezanu, Daniela
Kessler, Stephen

Publication Date
2005

Peer reviewed
Translators' Preface

Daniela Hurezamu & Stephen Kessler

The poems here are selected from Raymond Queneau's book Les Zianax/Eyewouters, which includes poems written from 1920 to 1943 and is divided into four sections, each revealing a different side of his sensibility. More precisely, they are part of the fourth section, probably the most interesting stylistically because it combines very formal elements like the alexandrins, the twelve-syllable French classical line, with a very informal, often playful content.

Cygnes is somewhat unusual formally—written in two stanzas of six lines each, using a rather arbitrary end rhyme. Although we tried to honor end rhyme, we didn't make a fetish of it and focused on the spirit of the poem and the puns that it uses. The title itself is a play on the words signes (signs) and cygnes (swans), which are pronounced identically in French. The poem develops an "erotic" association between numbers and letters, and the last two lines associate the alphabet (made of signs) with a "question mark" (visually similar to a swan). Since English doesn't have the same phonetic identity as in signes and cygnes, we called the poem "Swan-Signs."

"Magie Noire"/"Black Magic" and "Magie Blanche"/"White Magic" present even more complex problems. Following a poetic intuition he would later develop in Oulipo, Queneau invented rules for himself that forced him to write a poem within a given framework. In "Magie Noire," each line starts with either f or p, and "Magie Blanche" has the following structure: in the first stanza, the lines start with either c or s, in the second stanza with t, in the third with d and in the fourth stanza, the first line with d, the second with t and the last with c. It was of course practically impossible to follow all these rules in the English translation and at the same time create something as linguistically convincing as the original. So we focused on creating a poem first of all, and secondly tried to respect the rules laid out by Queneau. Thus, we kept the structure of the sonnet and invented English words modeled on Queneau's neologisms, most of them based on phonetic associations, assonance, consonance or alliteration. But it was impossible to start each line with the same letter, as Queneau does—

Translation 1, 2005
as a matter of fact, Queneau himself is unable to create the “perfect poem,” there are always a few letters that keep “getting out of line.”

“Crevasse” may be the funniest poem of the entire volume because it is formally the most absurd. The only “message” of the poem is the construction of its own form, based on phonetic associations. The main rule imposed by Queneau here is the use of the letter c at the beginning of as many words as possible; when he cannot come up with a word starting with a c, he simply attaches it to the beginning of another word, like in “crugit”—thus the comical effect. Because of phonetic differences between the French and the English, we replaced the c with a w, and at times pushed the game even further than Queneau, as in the line: “that written watercress broozes out of its eyebwailds.” Or, in the last line, where “cré nom!” is obviously an abbreviation of “sacré nom,” dictated by the poem’s rule of starting the word with a c, we came up with “Wesus!” (where w stands for j).

“Les Ziaux”/“Eyewaters,” the last poem of the volume, is probably the most beautiful and the most interesting from a translator’s perspective. The technique used here is that of combining two words into one: les yeux and les eaux into les ziaux; eyes and waters into eyewaters. We recreated Queneau’s neologisms “succel” and “estanchelle,” basing our choice of words on the hint given by his invented words and the possible associations they bring to mind: “suc,” “sucor,” “elle,” “étang,” “étincelle,” “elle.” Thus, we came up with “juicesipping eyes” and “lakeripping eyes.” Of course, we weren’t able to reproduce the grammatical inversion, namely the fact that “les eaux” are in the masculine and “les yeux” in the feminine, as if Queneau wanted to grammatically inscribe the fusion of the two elements. But the loss of some things is to be expected in the process of trans-lating, of moving a text from one language into another. What we hope is that, through our translation, American language and literature manage also to gain something at the very instant this unavoidable loss has.
CYGNES

Quand Un fit l'amour avec Zéro
Les sphères embrassèrent les tores
Et les nombres premiers s'avancèrent
Tendant leurs mains vers les frais sycomores
Et les fractions continues blessées à mort
Dans le torrent des décimales muettes se couchèrent

Quand B fit l'amour avec A
Les paragraphes s'embrasèrent
Les virgules s'avancèrent
Tendant leur cou par-dessus les ponts de fer
Et l'alphabet blessé za mort
S'évanouit dans les bras d'une interrogation muette

SWAN-SIGNS

When One made love with Zero
Spheres embraced the torus
Prime numbers stepped forward
Their hands reaching for fresh sycamore
And simple fractions mortally wounded
Lay down in the torrent of mute decimals

When B made love with A
Paragraphs embraced blushing
Commas stepped forward
Stretching their necks over the iron bridges
And the alphabet mortally wounded
Collapsed in the arms of a mute question mark
MAGIE NOIRE

Profitant de la nuit voici le sale prophète
Empruntant un noir chemin où seul se promène
Fleuve embourbant les bois où nulle nulle fleur
Flamme embaraçouillé de foie avec nulle nulle flamme

Prétexte que le soir lisant texte après texte
S'apprêtait à la solitude où lui inverse prêtre
Flanait terrifiant les démons et narguant les effluves
Flavescences triviales en enfer où dénigrantes et flambantes

Proue du destin mauvais malheur infect qui s’apprête
Prétendant dire les maux mais ignore du présent
Pourpre banalité vers les mots qu’il prononce

Fluide phonétique faux sons du guignon l’oriflamme
Flattant qui sourd néfaste orgueilleux de son flegme
Flétrisseur bonhomme il parait à tout moment flébile

BLACK MAGIC

Exploiting the darkness the dirty prophet
Taking a black road walked by no one else
A river muddies woods where no no flower
Flickers muddily as liver with no no flame

The night’s pretext perusing text after text
The perverted priest prepares for loneliness
Where he struts scaring off demons and taunting fumes
Petty fluvescent hellbent spited flamed

Destiny’s prow lousy disgusting luck
Ready to fake badmouthing the absent present
Purple banalities toward the words he speaks

Fluid phonetic false notes luckless flag
Flattering flowing full of his own phlegm
Self-flaunting fellow forever so flébile
MAGIE BLANCHE

Ces serpents qui jaillissent hors de cette serviette
Ce sont quatre foulards que jeta ce sorcier
Si vous saviez amis ce que vaut sa
Science vous ririez abattus par trop de scepticisme

Tonnez canons de cuivre ! sur la corde tirez !
Tracez cercles de feu, fusées, pisset d'étoiles !
Travaillez par dur labeur douces colombes qui tombez
Tendres et blanches neiges hors du filet attrape

Dans tous les gobelets sont liquides ou dés
Dés mépris du calcul liqueur chimie des diables
Dérouté de la vue des cinq sens décision

Dans la poche profonde se cache sa défense
Travailleur syndiqué en frac Noël des jours d'éternelle
Ce savant qui déçoit artiste qui se sauve

WHITE MAGIC

These snakes springing from this handkerchief
Are four scarves this magician makes appear
If only you knew friends what his science is
Worth you would laugh struck dumb with disbelief

Blow copper cannons! Shoot straight ahead!
Blast off your fireworks, make the stars piss!
Work yourselves to death sweet falling doves
Gentle white snows the net can't even catch

Liquids and dice are dripping into goblets
Dice despite calculus booze devils’ chemistry
Vision derailed the five senses duped

In his deep pocket he stashes his defense
Tuxedoed union worker gifted Christmas
Deceitful scholar artist who flees the scene
CREVASSE

Du crâne qui crugit lorsque le vent souffle
suinte mélancoliqueoliquement
le croupissant cresson qui sourd de ses orbites

Crions ! crions ! toujours bêle l’os armature
et gémit mélodieulodieusement
le croisé des crocs qui sèment un peu d’espace

Telle crevasse en la cronzfusion quotidienne
Crecelle le sourire et creuse le bonheur
mais

qui tire la langue au crétin croquemitaine ?
cré nom ! crois-je bien que c’est moi

CREVASSE

Wind is blowing through the wroaring skull
in such a melancholychocholy way
that written watercress broozes out of its eyebrawls

Holy baloney! The retrofit bone’s still bleating
And moaning melodioulodiously
the crossed fangs sawing a little space

Such a crevasse in the quotidian cronzfusion
creaseals the smile and crashes happiness
but

who sticks his tongue out at the idiot ogre?
Wesus! I think it’s me
LES ZIAUX

les eaux bruns, les eaux noirs, les eaux de merveille
les eaux de mer, d'océan, les eaux d'étincelles
nuitent le jour, jurent la nuit
chants de dimanche à samedi

les yeux vertes, les yeux bleues, les yeux de succelle
les yeux de passante au cours de la vie
les yeux noires, yeux d'estanchelle
silencent les mots, ouaient le bruit

eau de ces yeux penché sure tout miroir
gouttes secrets au bord des veilles
tout miroir, toute veille en ces ziaux bleues ou vertes
les ziaux bruns, les ziaux noirs, les ziaux de merveille

1943

EYEWATERS

brownwaters, blackwaters, wonderwaters
seawaters, oceanwaters, flashingwaters
brighten the night, lighten the day
Sunday songs on Saturday

green eyes, blue eyes, juicesipping eyes
eyes of a woman glanced in passing
her black eyes, her lakerippling eyes
silence the words, muffle the noise

water of these eyes over every mirror
teardrops secrets at the edge of sleeplessness
all mirrors, all sleeplessness in these blue or green eyewaters
brown eyewaters, black eyewaters, wonder eyewaters

1943