

Translators' Preface

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The poems here are selected from Raymond Queneau's book *Les Ziaux/Eyewaters*, 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 *alexandrin*, the twelve-syllable French classical line, with a very informal, often playful content.

Cygnés 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 *cygnés* (*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 *cygnés*, 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—

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 wrotten watercress broozes out of its eyebrawls." 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 "succelle" and "estanchelle," basing our choice of words on the hint given by his invented words and the possible associations they bring to mind: "suc," "succer," "elle," "étang," "étincelle," "elle." Thus, we came up with "juicesipping eyes" and "lakerippling 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.

Poésies / Poems

CYGNES

Quand Un fit l'amour avec Zéro
 Les sphères embrassèrent les tores
 Et les nombres premiers s'avancèrent
 Tendrant 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
 Tendrant leur cou par-dessus les ponts de fer
 Et l'alphabet blessé à mort
 S'évanouit dans les bras d'une interrogation muette

Selected Poems by Raymond Queneau

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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 embarbouillé de foie avec nulle nulle flamme

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

Proue du destin mauvais malheur infect qui s'apprête
 Prétendant dire les maux mais ignare 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 paraît 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 flavescent 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 flebile

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, pissat 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
 Déroute de la vue des cinq sens dérision

Dans la poche profonde se cache sa défense
 Travailleur syndiqué en frac Noël des jours d'étréne
 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 mélancolicoliquement
 le croupissant cresson qui sourd de ses orbites

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

Telle crevasse en la cronfusion 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 melancholyholycholy way
 that wrotten 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 cronfusion
 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
 silencient les mots, ouatent 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, nighten 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