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## Translators' Preface

Daniela Hurezanu & Stephen Kessler

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

*Translated by Daniela Hurezanu & Stephen Kessler*

## 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