*Creative Writing*

# **Four Versions of Xanadu**

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# **Abstract**

The following four poems are Oulipian. Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentialle – roughly translated to Workshop of Potential Literature) was founded in Paris by Raymond Queneau and, since the 1960s, has evolved into a genre of writing based on what the founding members referred to as ‘constraints′.

I began with the intention of writing an Oulipian favourite: a tautogram. The *Oulipo Compendium* defines a tautogram as: “A text whose words, or at least the principle ones, all begin with the same letter.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The original ‘Xanadu’ is a tautogram, but an irregular one. There are twenty-six lines to the poem, each corresponding with a letter in the alphabet. A hard constraint would be, for example, the rule that every single word on the ‘Z’ line would have to begin with said letter. However, I chose to go for the softer constraint of making sure that each line had a sense of the letter it had adopted.

The idea of retelling things is central to Oulipo. Therefore, I translated my original poem antonymically and using N+7. The antonymic translation swaps almost every word for its antonym (a word opposite in meaning). N+7 is a method invented by Jean Lescure and its mathematical roots endear it to writers of Oulipo. Using it, I replaced each noun with the seventh following it in the dictionary.

**Keywords:** Poetry, creative writing, literature.

# **Xanadu**

The place of zinc-rich earth and zealous zephyrs,

where we yawped and swam alongside our yellow-bellied yawl

and played on xylophones with ex-witches,

weaving weird, waltzing tapestries of sound.

The place where violets engaged in violence

and unnamed urns smashed uselessly

against turning tides

and serious seas.

The place which rustled with rubies,

quietly quirky.

It pleased princesses, do you remember?

Women from Oslo, the Orient and Oz.

But there was no night sky; we never napped.

It might have driven most mad

but we loved it like we might lose it and

kept it, kept it.

The place of jingling jasmine trellises,

where I insisted on inking an idea

along the hollow, holy husk

of a gnarled gooseberry bush.

The place where food was forever fabulous

and the eve of ecstasy was ever near.

You ducked into a dancer’s dwelling

and came out on the cusp of the coast,

braced on the storm-breeze like a boat

that ached for ages passed.

# **Xanadu: antonymic translation**

The place of zinc-deficient skies and dispassionate zephyrs,

where they sighed and sank beneath their brave bomber

and cultured quiet without magic,

unravelling irreverent, still, blank pages of silence.

The place where oaks engaged in apathy

and baptised urns were effectively restored,

away from immutable tides

and carefree skies.

The place that lacked pebbles,

rambunctiously conventional.

It disturbed princes; he forgets

men from Tacoma, Quito and Cóbh.

But there was no daytime sea; they were perpetually napping.

It would’ve kept most sane,

but they hated it like they might find it and

lost it, lost it.

The place of crashing lichen trellises,

where you reluctantly erased an abstraction

along the infested, irreverent husk

of an unswerving gooseberry bush.

The place where food was forever underwhelming

and the end of pain was ever far.

I leapt out of a dancer’s wilderness

and landed in the heart of the plains,

unsupported by the calm like a boat

undesiring of the future.

# **Xanadu: antonymic translation, plus N+7**

The placement of zing-deficient skydiving and dispassionate zest,

where they sighed and sank beneath their brave bona fides

and cultured quillwort without a magic lantern,

unravelling irreverent, still, blank page-turners of silica.

The placement where oarsmen engaged in aperitifs

and baptised Ursulines were effectively restored,

away from immutable tideways

and carefree skydiving.

The placement that lacked pecks,

rambunctiously conventional.

It disturbed the Prince of Wales; he forgets

mangroves from Tacoma, Quito and Cóbh.

But there was no D-Day; they were perpetually napping.

It would’ve kept most sane,

but they hated it like they might find it and

lost it, lost it.

The placement of crashing lidocaine tremors,

where you reluctantly erased an abutter

along the infested, irreverent hustings

of an unswerving goosegrass bushfire.

The placement where a fool was forever underwhelming

and the ending was ever far.

I leapt out of a dandelion’s wilding

and landed in the hearth of a Plains Indian,

unsupported by the calorimeter like a boatie

undesiring of the futurity race.

# **Xanadu: original poem, plus N+7**

The placement of zing-rich earthquakes and zealous zest,

where we yawped and swam alongside our yellow-bellied yearling

and played on yachtsmen with ex-witchetties,

weaving weird, waltzing tapotements of soundchecks.

The placement where vipers engaged in vipassana

and unnamed Ursulines smashed uselessly

against turning tideways

and serious skydiving.

The placement which rustled with ruckles,

quietly quirky.

It pleased printers, do you remember?

Wombats from Oslo, the Orient and Oz.

But there was no nightdress skydiving; we never napped.

It might have driven most mad,

but we loved it like we might lose it and

kept it, kept it.

The placement of jingling jaunting-car tremors,

where I insisted on inking an idée fixe

along the hollow, holy hustings

of a gnarled goosegrass bushfire.

The placement where a fool was forever fabulous

and the evening star of ectotherm was ever near.

You ducked into a dandelion’s dyeline

and came out on the custodian of the coat dress,

braced on the brent goose like a boatie

that ached for agent generals passed.

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1. Harry Mathews & Alastair Brotchie, *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 2005), p. 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)