

Four Versions of Xanadu

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Abstract

The following four poems are Oulipian. Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle – 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 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.

¹ Harry Mathews & Alastair Brotchie, *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 2005), p. 231

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

Four Versions of Xanadu

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

Four Versions of Xanadu

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 C6bh.

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

Four Versions of Xanadu

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

Four Versions of Xanadu

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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