

Tracing English

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Javant Biarujia

Calques

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THIS BOOK COLLECTS Javant Biarujia's 'calques', forty-four poems and prose pieces that copy, trace and otherwise interpret bits and pieces of Raymond Queneau's *L'Instant Fatal*, Paul Eluard's *Capitale de la Douleur* and Jacques Derrida's *Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*. Biarujia treats each in a separate section — 'Q.', 'E.' and 'D.' — and each section has a distinct ambience and focus. But the influences circulate: *Calques* is full of pataphysics, game-playing, surrealism, anti-colonialism, mimicry and collage. Quite a few of the poems offer alternative versions of the French, and all can be read as 'interpretations', but they also generate strange new worlds and exceptional lingos of their own.

In many of the poems in 'Q.', Biarujia's starting point is a technique used, as he points out, by Celia and Louis Zukofsky in *Catullus*, which 'literally' translates the sound, rhythm and syntax, rather than the meaning, of Catullus's Latin. Some would call this *mistranslation*: 'Zen Chevrolet', for example, is a calque of Queneau's 'Pauvre Type', which transforms 'Toto a un nez de chèvre et un pied de porc' ['Toto has a goat's nose and the foot of a pig'] into 'Toto has a zen Chevrolet and a deiparous Porsche'. Here, 'chèvre et' morphs into 'Chevrolet' via a logic similar to that in *Catullus*, but other considerations — you might call them rules — seem to be at work, too: 'zen' (literally) mirrors 'nez', and Toto's 'pied', upon reflection, is what makes the Porsche 'deiparous'. This kind of (Oulipian) manoeuvre is very much in the spirit of Queneau, as are Biarujia's exuberance, his serious love of nonsense and his warm, often earthy and provocative humour: 'when i dancee a juicy minuet / a friend say bum to the corner Muse / when i payee for a yeski / a friend suck up the cunt again / when i reclaimme Takahashi / a friend sound cool wiv a beer.'

The real metamorphic magic, however, lies less in Biarujia's 'mistranslation' of Queneau's French than in his transmutation of English. Non-English words and phrases seem entirely at home in these poems, as do neologisms, phoneticisms, 'improper' and idiomatic expressions, the flavours of various marginal dialects — and abstruse polysyllabic words like 'deiparous', which render the Queen's English momentarily as 'foreign' as the rest. All these are woven into a self-transforming tapestry of lingos not quite the same from one

poem to the next, but consistent (resonant) within each one: 'the psychagogue s the deuce of an executrix / she bedizens the trows off dandies and draisines / hopped up notorious and not half bad a fellatrix,' 'dem s de handds gone fateasy gogo / sure dis bull s dandy à gogo.'

In 'E.', the second section, other preoccupations emerge alongside that of linguistic transformation: dreams and the unconscious, Hindu mythology, the modernist masters portrayed by Eluard — '(for I think they're connected — a man don't go adreaming this queer all'othetime)'. Biarujia's alternative portraits (of Picasso, Masson, de Chirico etc.) seem less intent on morphing Eluard's text than on re-dreaming (or perhaps re-automating) his subjects.

Some pieces look at surrealist themes from unexpected angles: the (phallogocratic) unconscious is explored in 'Oneirodynia of the Masculine', for example, via some sharp, funny and, above all, surrealist responses to a questionnaire on masculinity published in *Good Weekend*. Others invoke Hindu figures (Shiva, Arjuna etc.), developing themes of destruction and renewal against a post-colonial backdrop littered, like the unconscious, with 'junk furniture', some of it linguistic. Praise for the 'aeons of wisdom' contained in Buddhist teachings hangs in the background, along with weeping at '*le tombeau de l'Inde*'.

'D.', the last and shortest section, is modelled partly on Derrida's *Glas*, partly on the English translation of *Éperons/Spurs*. It consists of two parallel prose pieces: 'Purges' (in English) and 'Baqain' (in Other). In 'Purges' — a lively, Dadaesque spoof on a passage from *Éperons* — 'the Idiot Seer of Algerium', having 'mislaidd [his] documentation', is treated to the consequences of the 'indivi[dual] (the indivisible duality) choice'. 'We do serve lobster Maldoror. May I suggest Nerval gas No. 5 for the accompaniment?' 'Purges' seems to be a translation of 'Baqain', which in turn seems to be written in Taneraic, Biarujia's 'hermetic' or private language, which you can find out about on the worldwide web. 'Purges' and 'Baqain' are jointly interrupted by smaller blocks of type in what may well be the ruins of Dante's Italian. The set-up is a statement in itself.

This is a compelling, stimulating, intricately wrought, sometimes hauntingly beautiful and often very funny book, written in styles at once globalised and hermetic, archaic and futuristic:

kiss thus the one mirliton
dig the retama
fucking the quiff of a runty cassock
khamsin the roomer
prove the rammer
hi! i don t blanket the blues of nothin moribund

Monogene are to be congratulated on a very handsome production.