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## ESSAYS

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### THE HAIKU OF JULIEN VOCANCE (PART II)

*Paul Miller; haiku translated by Paul Miller and Petra Jenkins*

After World War I, in 1919, Paul-Louis Couchoud, by then a physician, held a reunion with some of the earlier French haikuists, but also included René Maublanc, Jean Paulhan, and Paul Éluard. Through Paulhan, the group was introduced to Jacques Rivière, director of the journal *Nouvelle Revue Française*, who published haiku by the group in the September 1920 issue. The issue would come to be known as a landmark in French japonisme. Jan Hokenson goes so far as to say that “the *NRF* volume marks the passage of the haiku from a Japanese genre into sustained French literary practice and poetic tradition.”<sup>19</sup> However, with few exceptions, it was arguably the aesthetics behind Japanese haiku—rather than the form itself—that had any lasting impression upon French poetry.

An introduction to the genre was written by Jean Paulhan in the September issue. Vocance’s contribution was a sequence of eleven haiku titled “Au Cirque” (“A Circus”). Similar to the final poems in “Fantômes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” “Au Cirque” was different from Vocance’s previous haiku that focused on war. The poems narrate a family outing to the famous Cirque Medrano, where artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Cornelis Kees van Dongen were regulars, and it illustrated his desire to use the genre for more everyday subjects. Overall, it is a satisfying sequence; gone are the sentimental overtures that muddied the final poems of “Fantômes ...”

Two from “Au Cirque.”

The clown triggered frantic laughter:  
He sat down, sounding  
A light air of music.

After the glare  
 We bring back, in the dark night,  
 Our children's despair.

Both haiku contain nice comparisons. In the first: between the crowd's laughter and the orchestral accompaniment to the clown's pratfall. In the second: between the lights of the circus and the darkness of the evening as the family returns home. The second is especially nice in illustrating the children's deflated mood.

In 1921, Vocance put his thoughts on haiku into a thirty-four haiku sequence titled "Art Poétique" ("Poetic Art"), which was published in the June issue of *La Connaissance*. The sequence is a problematic one, however, for it is really a series of dramatized declarations. Rather than describe an experience through images or impressions, such as in "Cent Visions de Guerre" or "Au Cirque," he dramatically lectures the reader on the attributes of haiku. As mentioned in Part I of this essay, the success of "Cent Visions de Guerre" made Vocance a well-known name in poetic circles, and considering that he was one of the few—if only—French haikuists to stick with the form well into the 1930s, it is understandable that he would want to promote it.

The sequence begins with the battle cry:

The Japanese poet  
 Wipes his knife:  
 This time eloquence is dead.

While this haiku might be faulted for its cause and effect relationship, its larger problem is the metaphor in the last line. Unfortunately, the sequence makes heavy use of metaphors. Later haiku in the sequence include: "the dawn of the world and languages," "wailing syllables," and haiku itself is said to be "Hot as a quail," to mention a few.

Poetics and literary devices aside, the message of the opening haiku is a good and appropriate one. It is a call for straightforward language, something haiku aim at. Other poems explicate similarly appropriate qualities of haiku. However, in nearly all cases, the poems proselytize at the

expense of reader co-participation, and often veer into fanciful language. For example:

If you knew how words project streams of light.  
Poet we could really  
Call you the Rembrandt of the verb.

Oddly, the sequence also includes five poems that metaphorically describe the virtues or excesses of the major vowels. For example, the following haiku on the letter “O:”

O, good colossus, obese and jovial,  
O, commoners, all round, all big, all strong,  
O, Boubouroche.

Boubouroche is the name of the main character in a short story and two-act play, who “... is a naive colossus, a good obese boy who lets himself be exploited by his friends and duped by his mistress.”<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned in Part I of this essay, Vocance, like many of the early French haikuists, was working in poorly-charted territory. He didn’t have the benefit of predecessors well-educated in the genre or of an internally developed French tradition that selected desired attributes from the Japanese haiku tradition, so it is perhaps unfair to judge his haiku by today’s standards. That said, while the sequence was designed to persuade the reader of the virtues of haiku, it is hard to square the dramatic messages with what is in the Japanese and Western traditions a routinely co-participating medium. One has to wonder why Vocance chose this strategy. While he makes many good points in the sequence, a reader unaccustomed to haiku would think the poems *were* haiku. A better use of his talents would have been an essay with haiku imbedded as examples.

While the sequence was published in the journal *La Connaissance*, it had been turned down by *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*. The importance of the sequence to Vocance is made apparent in his 1939 essay, “Sur le Haikai francais,” in which he spends a fair amount of space name-dropping the various scholars who looked favorably upon it. For example: Stanford

University professor W.L. Schwartz in *Revue de Littérature Comparée*,<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Crémieux in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*,<sup>22</sup> and Daniel Essertier in *Foi et Vie*.<sup>23</sup> However, in all cases, the critics were responding to Vocance's message, not to the poems as artifacts themselves. Ultimately, the poems in "Art Poétique" cannot be considered haiku.

In May, 1923, René Maublanc published in the journal *Le Pampre* what he called a "Bibliography and Anthology" of French haiku.<sup>24</sup> Of the 280 haiku, Vocance was well represented with twenty-eight, including some additional war haiku, possibly left over from "Cent Visions de Guerre" or "Fantômes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui." While haiku for most French haikuists was a genre to experiment with and then drop, Vocance is the one poet who continued to write, submit, and publish haiku through the 1920s and 30s. However, it should be noted that he also wrote more conventional verse, often on the same subjects as his haiku. For example, in 1939, he published a longer free-verse version of "Au Cirque."

In Jean Paulhan's introduction to haiku in the September 1920 issue of *Nouvelle Revue Française*, he had noted that French haiku was still developing and that more decisive work was to come. More derisively, the critic and poet Jules Romains expressed reservations about haiku, writing a few months later in *l'Humanité* that the haiku was a "modest and subtle exercise" for amateurs. Adding, that it would be absurd to propose it as a choice for professional writers.<sup>25</sup>

In his essay "Sur le Haikai français," Vocance wrote that at the time he "had not given up his idea of composing in [haiku] a great poem conforming to his beliefs and representing the decisive work that Paulhan was waiting for."<sup>26</sup> Vocance believed that his seventy-haiku sequence "Protée: ou la Vie d'un Homme" ("Proteus: the Life of a Man"), published in *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1924, to be that poem. For him, it contained "his grudges, loves, ambitions, [and] hopes."

The sequence's title refers to the Greek god of seas and rivers whose main characteristic is his variability, a characteristic that is applied through the subtitle to Vocance's own life. Similar to many of his other sequences, the long work is broken into smaller suites of haiku separated by asterisms. The sequence begins:

Undulating, varying,  
 Between these movable forms:  
 A man, a heart.

Vocance noted in his essay that the sequence “Protée” was autobiographical. In the above haiku, the mention of “A man, a heart” describes two poles that he sees himself caught between. Here, Vocance’s use of “man” means an adult living in the world, in his case, Paris, with the responsibilities of a career and family—in addition to being a soldier in the war. “[H]eart,” represents the freedom of the countryside, of the dreamer, of the artist. These poles are referenced early in the sequence through mention of his grandfather, Marc Seguin, developer of Europe’s first suspension bridge as well as inventor of the multi-tubular steam-engine<sup>27</sup>; and his father, an engineer as well, but more importantly, an artist.

In summation: the sequence describes Vocance’s early literary influences as well as his maturation to better-regarded works. However his involvement in World War I disrupts his literary studies (interestingly, no mention is made of his actual career). After the war, his search for his place parallels the rebuilding of Europe. He finds his calling through haiku and hopes to enlist current poets to his cause, but after a tour of the rural mountains (similar to the scene in “Fantômes...”), they decline his invitation. One of the poets appealed to in the sequence is Jules Romains, the critic mentioned above, whose play *Cromedeyre-le-vieil* contains similar alpine imagery. The sequence ends as it began, with Vocance still conflicted; still torn between worlds.

Questions of haiku poetics aside, it is an ambitious sequence. Vocance introduces several thematic juxtapositions (familial responsibility vs. art, city vs. country, East vs. West, etc...) as well as weaves together an interesting variety of images and ideas. However, as might be expected in such fanciful mythmaking—especially one in which the poet aligns himself with a god—most of the haiku lack grounded and objective details; instead, the reader is treated to clever metaphors.

In his essay, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,”<sup>28</sup> Makoto Ueda could have been taking aim at works such as “Protée” when, writing on the haiku poet’s desired state of mind, he wrote:

This concept at once explains the extremely short form of haiku. The haiku form presupposes a complete purgation of the poet's egoism during his creative activity. But the poet will not stay in this state of mind for more than a few moments, because he, being a social and a biological existence also, cannot live without his egoism. The haiku crystallizes a glow coming out of this momentary self-denial; it must be short. Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare try to define human existence by setting it within a huge but coherent vision of the cosmos. The haiku poet does not do this; he does not try to do this.

Yet, the creation of a "coherent vision of the cosmos" is exactly what Vocance is trying to do in the sequence, which he considered his "great poem...." Such calculated, thematic mappings are a far cry from the "quick impressions" that made up "Cent Visions de Guerre."

"Protée" is also perhaps the first instance in Vocance's oeuvre in which individual haiku don't stand on their own. In the haiku sequences that came before, including "Art Poétique," the individual haiku could be understood individually. A single haiku didn't rely of the haiku before it. In this way, "Protée" is really a longer poem made up of haiku-like tercets.

As mentioned in Part I of this essay, the sequence includes a haiku censored by the wartime government.

"We will bury you, soldier,  
So that your corpse does not poison  
The living."

It is one of three haiku that are presented in the voice of a third person or persons, perhaps the mythological Fates that are mentioned in the early part of the sequence. What made this haiku worthy of censure as compared to other war-related haiku is unknown.

His next major sequence, "Espagnes" ("Spain"), published in 1925, describes a visit to that country through thirty-three haiku and includes poems on the cities of Burgos, Avila, Madrid, Seville, and others. Although enjoyable overall, the haiku themselves are a mixed bag. Some are scenes a

tourist would describe, pastoral and nicely devoid of commentary, while other haiku root into the history of the region. The following haiku describes Vocance's first view of Segovia:

On the horizon, barred by the Guadarrama:  
Ramming the mist with its castle,  
Segovia appeared.

While some readers might take exception to the verb “ramming,” with its un-haiku-like excess, there is a nice interplay between types of barriers: the Guadarrama mountain range, the mist, and the castle—all of which combine to create a tension appropriate to a historical fortress. Other haiku in the sequence provide too much authorial commentary, such as in the following haiku from a section on bullfighting (from Madrid).

Walls painted to hide the blood.  
A stinking slaughterhouse.  
The scoundrels.

This haiku contains too much of an author's presence for us to be comfortable. The image of a bullfighting ring contains enough emotional associations on its own that the author's explanatory intrusion isn't needed.

A similar sequence, “Paysages Parisiens” (“Parisian Landscapes”), published in 1928, contains thirty haiku on various streetscapes and landscapes of Paris. We find this title under Vocance's name in René Maublanc's “Bibliography and Anthology” in 1923, so it was known—and possibly published—earlier. However, given Vocance's penchant for altering sequences it may have been a different version with different haiku.

In the first haiku of the sequence, Vocance refers to himself as a “hai-kai fisherman.” There is nothing in the sequence to suggest that the poems are more than just disparate observations of the city. Some are humorous, including this one.

From his grizzled beard,  
 Good vermicelli, slip  
 To the blacktop.

The subject is an old man who has recently eaten pasta, some remaining in his beard. The comparison of the pasta and beard is enjoyable. The pasta gives a nice “flavor” to the man, softening his “grizzled” countenance. Another haiku from the sequence, presumably a market scene.

Girdled with canvases, turbans, on their robust shoulders,  
 Arabs bring  
 The bloody lambs.

“Espagnes” and “Paysages Parisiens” are a return to haiku that can in the main stand on their own.

Vocance next published the sequence “Magies: Suite a l’Art Poétique” (“Magic: Following the Poetic Art”) in *Contact* in June, 1930. It is similar in scope to “Art Poétique.” However, where “Art Poétique” details the virtues of the haiku form, “Magies ...” speaks to the role of the haiku poet. It is more of a linear narrative than its predecessor, and for a short sequence it includes a number of varying metaphors. The poet is described as a radio transmitter as well as a singer. Poems are described separately as sheep and monkeys which have had pests removed—similar to the way a typesetter prepares his press.

Poet-Proteus has been a typesetter:  
 "You will clean each letter  
 And my every word!"

Seeing the poet as a remover of pests or excess type is appropriate when discussing a haiku poet; however, metaphors are the antithesis of the haiku moment. Similar to the haiku in “Art Poétique,” the haiku in “Magies ...” are designed to persuade rather than involve the reader as a co-participant.

“Petits Métiers” (“Small Jobs”) was published in *La Grande Revue* in December 1931. In the short sequence, Vocance describes his role as a



poet to a hawker of shellfish. Its narrator accosts a prince, hoping to sell him some crabs, but all the same he expects to be rejected. This undoubtedly mirrors Vocance's feelings concerning the reception of his haiku and the lack of other poets to follow his lead. The reader will recall that a section on the same theme of rejection was included in the sequence "Pro-tée." Vocance says to the prince of his goods:

"But, bastard, if you step away,  
From my lot without worrying,  
May they populate your dreams."

In the middle of the sequence the narrator turns into a hawker of poems which he describes as "a bouquet of thoughts." He attributes his poor treatment to his decision to be true to his muse, and because of this concludes that he is considered less than a *maravédis*—a medieval copper coin.

In February of 1935, Vocance published "A la Manière de ..." ("In the Manner of ..."), a series of poetic reactions to famous ukiyo-e prints by Japanese printmakers Kiyonaga, Sharaku, Harunobu, Outamaro, and Hokusai. He was especially taken with portraits of women. In one instance, referring to a print by Torii Kiyonaga, Vocance nicely juxtaposes the women's draped kimono sleeves to the course of the Sumida River. We can be fairly confident that the Hokusai poems reference his famous series: "One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji;" one haiku in particular referencing the print "Fuji Behind a Net."

The fisherman thought to see, through his netting,  
The luminous specter of the holy mountain  
Who charmed in the mist a troop of birds.

Despite French haikuists' drift away from the genre, literary relations between France and Japan continued to grow as articles and books on Japanese and French poetry cross-seeded each other. One such journal was *La Revue Franco-Japanese*, started in 1926, as well as its successor *France-Japon*—both edited by Kuni Matsuo. One of the results of these

interactions was a 1936 meeting that took place in Paris between French and Japanese haikuists. Among the Japanese delegation was Kyoshi Takahama, editor of the influential Japanese journal *Hototogisu*. At the meeting, Kyoshi explained the importance of the seasonal element in Japanese haiku, something the French had been unaware of prior to the meeting (Couchoud hadn't emphasized the importance of the *kigo*). However, the French—especially Vocance—had already long-settled on their understanding. Vocance would entertain Kyoshi at his Paris home and correspond with him after the meeting. Readers may recall Vocance's letter to Kyoshi, reported in Part I, in which he acknowledged the Japanese tradition of seasonality, but noted that it wasn't important to him.

In their essay, "Historie du Haïku en France" ("History of Haiku in France"), by Dominique Chipot and Jean Antonini, the authors noted:

This stumbling block particularly disappointed Kyoshi Takahama who wrote, in January 1949, in a letter to Julien Vocance: "After the war there arose a movement of opposition that animates the atmosphere. It is very interesting. We can describe this opposing school that looks like yours in France. Humanism, an artificial tendency, breaks through these haiku. For my part, of course, I always hold the four seasons as primary and I sing life through them. This basis of the four seasons remains the unshakable foundation of the haiku, I am convinced."<sup>29</sup>

At this late date, we might consider this to be a missed opportunity. However, French haiku had at this point been up and running for twenty years, and with few exceptions—such as Vocance, and he was near the end of his haiku career—most French haikuists had lost interest.

Vocance's last major sequence, "Au Centre d'un Cœur Human" ("At the Center of a Human Heart"), unpublished as far as we are able to discern, was dedicated to Kyoshi. Through fifty-four haiku, Vocance explores mankind's inner turmoil. The sequence opens with the disarray of post-war Europe (made the more so by the political and economic chaos of the 1930s).

Through countries without roads,  
 Having sown many times  
 In rubble and ash,

The sequence describes an imaginary journey that descends and rises in the manner of Dante. Vocance revisits his theme of a mountain sanctuary, seen before in “Fantômes...” and “Protée,” in this instance as the location of a “hostel of God.” Vocance hopes to resolve his inner turmoil by bringing to God the “cry of the earth.” He will be disappointed and fall alone. Later he finds the “Path of the Sages”—the poets—and takes small comfort in the creation of “humble images.” The sequence ends with Vocance internalizing the suffering and the hope for redemption of the world into himself:

For having entered the Deep Forest,  
 For listening to the Heart of the vast World,  
 The Soul of the Universe overflows through his eyes.

As would be expected in such an imaginative journey, in a sequence designed to create a personal mythology through the investigation of an inner landscape, the haiku dip into the abstract—similar to the haiku in the sequence “Protée.” But as in that sequence, this isn’t to suggest that the metaphors aren’t successful as poetry (many are enjoyable), just that they tug the poems away from what is normally considered haiku.

For example, the following tercet would be an enjoyable verse in a poem that concerned itself—as “Au Centre d’un Cœur Human” seems to—with the notion of an uncaring god,

To God the cry of the earth  
 Ascends like a rocket.  
 You will descend alone, a spent flame!

However, the insistence of labeling the poem a “haiku” means that we approach it with certain assumptions related to the genre’s history; assumptions which are not met.

Prior to his retirement from the Ministry of Public Works in 1937, Vocance published his collected haiku that same year under the title *Le Livre des hai-kai* (*The Book of Hai-Kai*),<sup>31</sup> and a second volume of his more traditional poetry as *Le Héron Huppé* (*The Crested Heron*).<sup>32</sup> Vocance didn't write additional haiku or sequences after 1937, preferring instead to work in free verse.<sup>30</sup>

The first volume contains his major haiku sequences, although—as noted—some were edited from their originals. The volume was reissued by his family in 1983 with slightly different poems and the inclusion of some of his traditional verse. In 1996, Patrick Blanche selected a hundred of Vocance's haiku for his retrospective: *Clapotis d'étoiles: Cent Haikus* (*Rippling Stars: A Hundred Haiku*).<sup>33</sup> In 2013, Dominique Chipot edited *En Plein Figure: Haiku de la Guerre 14-18* (*In Your Face: Haiku of the War 1914-18*),<sup>34</sup> an anthology of haiku on the Great War, which included a good number of Vocance's haiku. And in 2017, Susana Benet translated Vocance's best known sequence into Spanish as *Cien Visiones de Guerra*.<sup>35</sup> Despite continued interest in his haiku on the European continent, substantive English translations remain missing in action until now.

When we look across Julien Vocance's corpus, it is easy to be cynical toward his understanding of haiku, especially in his mature period after the war. We can recall William J. Higginson's comment that "many of Vocance's 'visions' are rather grandiose and sentimental."<sup>36</sup> This author has pointed out his use of metaphorical and other poetic devices, as well as a lack of traditional haiku attributes, such as seasonal references and room for reader participation—qualities that today would exclude the poems from most genre publications. This is especially true of sequences such as "Art Poétique," "Protée," and "Au Centre d'un Cœur Human." However, we can't forget that Vocance took up haiku with minimal guidance—really only Chamberlain and Couchoud's essays—and yet he managed to write some powerful haiku, especially on his wartime experiences. In fact, upon examination, his strongest haiku are from that early period.

This may be because, as he said in the introduction to "Cent Visions de Guerre," the haiku were "... quick impressions of the campaign, written in the very moment they were lived." So they were written without interpretation, what Paul-Louis Couchoud would describe as "devoid of

reflection or comment.” Later, because of his success, Vocance felt the need to promote the form, and his haiku became more calculated... more over-thought.

When revisiting Vocance’s haiku output, his work can usually be put into two categories. The first is experiential, in which Vocance is reacting to an event. Sequences in this category would be “Cent Visions de Guerre,” the first half of “Fantômes...,” “Au Cirque,” “Espagnes,” “Paysages Parisiens,” and “A la Manière de...” Many of the haiku in these sequences are enjoyable because in the main Vocance doesn’t intrude upon the reader’s reaction to the moment with his own interpretations. There is an immediacy to the moments described. Many of these haiku can be named as such.

The second category would contain his call-to-arms or proselytizing sequences, such as “Art Poétique” and “Magies...,” as well as his mythologies, which would include “Protée” and “Au Centre d’un Cœur Human.” The individual poems in these sequences are harder to access as haiku. They are still enjoyable as poetry, and contain many imaginative images and poetic devices that we associate with poetic language, but not necessarily as haiku. This is a shame because Vocance in his experiential work is very accessible.

From our perspective in the twenty-first century, a hundred years after Vocance composed his poetry, it is possible to evaluate the poems against more thorough scholarship and to determine where there are gaps. Despite our criticisms of abstraction and sentimentality, many of the sequences are enjoyable—“Cent Visions de Guerre” especially—and unlike other early French haiku, Vocance’s poems aren’t derivative or guilty of Japonisme. Regardless of the quality of his complete output, or adherence to traditional Japanese haiku norms, he was the one steadfast champion of the genre, without whom the French “Mouvement Hai-Kai” probably wouldn’t have happened.

## Notes

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- <sup>19</sup> Hokenson, Jan. *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics*. Vancouver, B.C. Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press, 2004.
- <sup>20</sup> <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boubouroche>. Accessed January 28, 2019
- <sup>21</sup> Schwartz, W.L. "L'influence de la Poésie Japonaise" in *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, January 1, 1926.
- <sup>22</sup> Crémieux, Benjamin. "Les Lettres Francaises" in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, March 29, 1924.
- <sup>23</sup> Essertier, Daniel. "Réflexions sur la Pensée Contemporaine" in *Foi et Vie*, October 1, 1921.
- <sup>24</sup> Maublanc, René. "Le Haikai Français" in *Le Pampre*, 1923. Available on Terebess Asia Online. <https://terebess.hu/english/haiku/lepampre.html> Accessed February 14, 2019.
- <sup>25</sup> Romains, Jules. "Chronique, Poésie" in *l'Humanité*, November 16, 1920.
- <sup>26</sup> Vocance, Julien. "Sur le Haikai français."
- <sup>27</sup> Seguin, Marc. From [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc\\_Seguin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Seguin). Accessed October 31, 2018.
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- <sup>29</sup> Chipot, Dominique and Jean Antonini. *History of Haiku in France*. <http://www.association-francophone-de-haiku.com/haiku/HistoireduHaikuenFrance.pdf>. Accessed October 31, 2018.
- <sup>30</sup> Viart, Chantal. *Julien Vocance: ou L'oiseau de la mélancolie*. Paris. Accent Tonic, 1995.
- <sup>31</sup> Vocance, Julien. *Le Livre des hai-kai*. Paris. Bibliothèque du hérisson, 1937
- <sup>32</sup> Vocance, Julien. *Le Héron Huppé*. Paris. Bibliothèque du hérisson, 1937
- <sup>33</sup> Blanche, Patrick, ed. *Clapotis d'étoiles: Cent Haikus*. France. Voix d'encre, 1996.
- <sup>34</sup> Chipot, Dominique, ed. *En Plein Figure: Haiku de la Guerre 14-18*. France. Bruno Doucey, 2016.
- <sup>35</sup> Benet, Susana, ed. *Cien Visiones de Guerra*. Spain. Renacimiento, 2017.
- <sup>36</sup> Higginson, William J. with Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook*.

Selected haiku from *Au Cirque* (1920)

1. *Matinée à Médrano :*  
*Dans une attente joyeuse*  
*L'immense cirque pépie.*  
  
Morning in Medrano:  
During a joyful wait  
The immense circus chirps.
  
2. *Dans des satins, des lumières,*  
*Et des bouffées de crottin,*  
*Voici venir l'écuyère :*  
  
In satins, lights,  
And puffs of dung,  
Here comes the rider:
  
6. *Le clown a déclanché des rires frénétiques :*  
*Il fit, en s'asseyant, fuser*  
*Un air léger de musique.*  
  
The clown triggered frantic laughter:  
He sat down, sounding  
A light air of music.
  
11. *Après ces éblouissements*  
*Nous ramenons, dans la nuit noire,*  
*Le désespoir de nos enfants.*  
  
After the glare  
We bring back, in the dark night,  
Our children's despair.

from *Art Poétique* (1921)

1. *Le poète japonais*  
*Essuie son couteau :*  
*Cette fois l'éloquence est morte.*

The Japanese poet  
 Wipes his knife:  
 This time eloquence is dead.

2. *Chaud comme une caille*  
*Qu'on tient dans le creux de la main*  
*Naissance du haï-kai.*

Hot as a quail  
 Held in the palm of the hand  
 Birth of the haikai.

5. *Tu me demandes une règle :*  
*Que le mot colle à ta pensée*  
*Comme au cou du buffle le jaguar.*

You ask me for a rule:  
 That the word stick to your thought  
 Like a jaguar at the neck of a buffalo.

12. *O, bon colosse, obèse et jovial,*  
*O, populo, tout rond, tout gros, lout fort,*  
*O, Boubouroche.*

O, good colossus, obese and jovial,  
 O, commoners, all round, all big, all strong,  
 O, Boubouroche.



17. *Sous ma caresse brutale qui les fait sourdement gémir  
Plient les reins, craquent les os  
Des mots.*

My brutal caress makes them moan loudly  
Damages the kidneys, breaks the bones  
Of words.

24. *Si tu savais sur les mots projeter des flots de lumière.  
Poète on pourrait vraiment  
T'appeler le Rembrandt du verbe.*

If you knew how words project streams of light.  
Poet we could really  
Call you the Rembrandt of the verb.

27. *Evoque, suggère. En trois lignes  
Montre-moi ce masque impassible,  
Mais toute la douleur par-dessous.*

Evoke, suggest. In three lines  
Show me this impassive mask,  
But all the pain from below.

33. *Voici sortir du sanctuaire empli de myrrhe et de santal,  
Le doux poète oriental  
Qui l'a cousue dans son suaire.*

Here out of the sanctuary with myrrh and sandalwood,  
The sweet oriental poet  
Who sewed it in his shroud.

from *Protée* (1924)

1.        *Ondoyant, divers,  
Etre cette forme mobile :  
Un homme, un coeur.*  
  
Undulating, varying,  
Between these movable forms:  
A man, a heart.
  
9.        « *Dans le calme du soir il repartait, farouche.  
« En ses yeux tournoyaient des flammes, des fumées,  
« Parmi les corps qui s'amoncellent. »*  
  
"In the calm of the evening he left, distant.  
In his eyes were circling flames, smoke,  
Among the bodies that piled up."
  
11.       « *On ne t'entertera, combattant,  
« Que pour que ta charogne n'empoisonne pas  
« Les vivants. »*  
  
"We will bury you, soldier,  
So that your corpse does not poison  
The living."
  
13.       *Entrevu, dans le ciel de l' Art :  
A gauche les jongleurs, à droite les stylites ;  
Une place vide au milieu.*  
  
Glimpsed, in the sky of Art:  
On the left the jugglers, on the right the stylites;  
An empty place in the middle.

22. *O Juste, dans la vie au gibet condamné !  
Car ce que tu voulais c'est un bel équilibre,  
Et c'est le crime impardonné.*
- O' Justice, a life sentenced to the gallows!  
Because what you wanted is a nice balance,  
And that's the unforgiveable crime.
28. *Cependant, par les nuits d'étoiles,  
Elle rendait un son si pur  
Que des loups pour l'entendre étaient sortis des bois...*
- However, by the nights of stars,  
He made such a pure sound  
That wolves hearing him came out of the woods ...
40. *Ingrats, qui n'avez pas, sous la voix qui défaille,  
Reconnu le chant de l'oiseau,  
Parce que j'avais mis quelque manteau de paille,  
Quelque coiffure de roseau !*
- Ingrates, who have not, under a failing voice,  
Recognized the song of the bird,  
Because I had put on some straw coat,  
Some reed hairstyle!
70. *Nom vivant qui me rappelez  
Qu'un peu de vous coule en mes veines,  
O tumultueuses Cévennes.*
- Living name that reminds me  
That a little of you flows in my veins,  
O' tumultous Cevennes.

from *Espagnes* (1925)

5. *A l'horizon, barré par la Guadarrama : (Segovia)*  
*Eperonnant la brume avec son château fort,*  
*Segovie apparue.*

On the horizon, barred by the Guadarrama:  
 Ramming the mist with its castle,  
 Segovia appeared.

7. *Partaient pour la Sierra — ciel de tôle surchauffée —*  
*Lustrés, astiqués, leurs chapeaux cirés,*  
*En baudriers jaunes, deux carabibiers du roi.*

Leaving for the Sierra—the sky overheated metal—  
 Lustrous, polished, their waxed hats,  
 In yellow harnesses, two soldiers of the king.

18. *Palissade peinte pour cacher le sang. (Madrid)*  
*Relents d'abattoir.*  
*Toute la crapule.*

Walls painted to hide the blood.  
 Stinking slaughterhouse.  
 The scoundrels.

29. *Rose tendre et vert pistache (Seville)*  
*Ruelles pour petits ânes*  
*Chargés de paniers de fruits.*

Soft pink and pistachio green  
 Alleyways for little donkeys  
 Loaded with fruit baskets.

from *Paysages Parisiens* (1928)

2. *Bien assise sur son pliant,  
La marchande des quat'saisons  
Regarde sans se gêner defiler un cinema vivant.*

Comfortably sitting on folded legs,  
The merchant of the quarters  
Looks without moving at a living cinema.

4. *Ceints de toiles, de turbans, sur leurs robustes épaules,  
Les gens du douar apportent  
Les agneaux sanglants.*

Girdled with canvases, turbans, on their robust shoulders,  
The arabs bring  
The bloody lambs.

5. *En trois bonds la laitier a regagné son siege  
Et, dans un geste olympien,  
Il rassemble ses attelages.*

In three leaps the milkman regains his seat  
And, in an Olympian gesture,  
He gathers his team.

12. *De sa barbe grisonnante,  
Bons vermicelles, glissez  
Vers le noirâtre pave.*

From his grizzled beard,  
Good vermicelli, slip  
To the blacktop.

from *Magies: Suite a l'Art Poétique* (1930)

1. *Poete plongeant dans la Pensée,  
Récepteur d'ondes,  
Émetteur d'ondes.*

Poet dipping into Thought,  
Wave receiver,  
Wave transmitter.

7. *Retirer, Goton, ces limaces.  
Rassembler, barbet, ses moutons.  
Arracher ces tiques tenaces.*

Remove, Wench, these slugs.  
Gather, dog, his sheep.  
Remove these stubborn ticks.

9. *Poète-Protée s'est fait prote :  
« Tu vas nettoyer chaque lettre  
« Et me décrasser chaque mot ! »*

Poet-Proteus has been a typesetter:  
"You will clean each letter  
And my every word!"

10. *Chaque soir quitter ce cilice,  
Chaque nuit coucher sur ces clous.  
Après tout, pourquoi s'étonner qu'un miracle s'accomplisse.*

Every evening take off this hair shirt,  
Every night sleep on these nails.  
After all, why wonder why a miracle is accomplished?

from *Petits Métiers* (1931)

3.       « *Un panier de crabs, mon prince ?*  
           « *Du bronze, vous dis-je; voyez*  
           « *Comme se démènent ces pinces... »*

"A basket of crabs, my prince?  
 Bronze, I tell you; see  
 How these pincers struggle?"

4.       « *Mais, fumier, si ton pas s'allonge,*  
           « *De mon sort sans te soucier,*  
           « *Puissent-ils peupler tes songes, »*

"But, bastard, if you step away,  
 From my lot without worrying,  
 May they populate your dreams,"

6.       *Lecteur trop pressé,*  
           *Je t'offre en courant, je te jette*  
           *Mes bouquets de pensées.*

Busy reader,  
 Running, I throw to you  
 My bouquets of thoughts.

9.       *Ci-git, tombé du Paradis,*  
           *Un collectionneur de proverbes*  
           *Cotés moins d'un maravédis.*

Here, fallen from Paradise,  
 A collector of proverbs  
 Worth less than a maravédis

from *A la Manière de ...* (1935)

1. *Leurs ceintures réséda* (Kiyonaga)  
*Enserrant leurs hautes hanches,*  
*Partaient pour le mont Ida,*

Their yellow belts  
 Encircling their high hips,  
 Leaving for Mount Ida,

2. *Dans leurs coques de dimanche,*  
*Trois belles à longues manches,*  
*Le long de la Sumida.*

In their Sunday shifts,  
 Three beautiful long sleeves,  
 Along the Sumida.

9. *Billet doux que tend la servante,* (Outamaro)  
*Rendez-vous glissant dans la manche.*  
*Acquiescement du sourcil.*

A love note handed by the maid,  
 An appointment slipped into the sleeve.  
 Eyebrow's acquiescence.

3. *Le pêcheur a cru voir, à travers son réseau,* (Hokusai)  
*Le spectre lumineux de la montagne sainte*  
*Qui charmait dans la brume une troupe d'oiseaux.*

The fisherman thought to see, through his netting,  
 The luminous specter of the holy mountain  
 Which charmed in the mist a troop of birds.



from *Au Centre d'un Cœur Human* (Unpublished)

1. *Par les pays sans chemins,  
Ayant semé mainte et maint  
Dans les gravats et les cendres,*

Through countries without roads,  
Having sown many times  
In rubble and ash,

2. *En me tenant par la main,  
Au centre d'un cœur humain,  
Lecteur, il te faut descendre.*

Holding hands,  
In the center of a human heart,  
Reader, you have to descend.

25. *Jusqu'à Dieu le cri de la terre  
Est monté comme une fusée.  
Tu redescendras solitaire, flamme usée !*

To God the cry of the earth  
Ascends like a rocket.  
You descend alone, a spent flame!

27. *Je m'enlise. Au secours, au secours, au secours !  
A mi-corps aujourd'hui cette chair délectable  
Baigne dans la saison qui n'a pas de printemps.*

I'm bogged down. Help, help, help!  
At mid-day this delectable flesh  
Bathes in the season that has no spring.

31. *Sur son trapèze il se balance.  
On ne sait plus, quand il s'élance,  
S'il est la boule ou le jongleur.*

On his trapeze he balances.  
We do not know anymore when he starts,  
If he is the ball or the juggler.

41. *Dans le vide  
Lancer ses nasses  
Sans en ramener aucun dieu.*

Into the void  
Throwing his nets  
Without bringing back any god.

51. *« Mes humbles images,  
« Les voici ! » lui dis-je,  
Disais-je au Nuage.*

"My humble images,  
Here they are!" I tell him,  
I said to the Cloud.

53. *Pour avoir pénétré dans la Forêt profonde,  
Pour avoir écouté le Cœur du vaste Monde,  
L'Ame de l'Univers déborde de ses yeux.*

For having entered the Deep Forest,  
For listening to the Heart of the vast World,  
The Soul of the Universe overflows through his eyes.