

WRITING IN TONGUES: MULTILINGUAL POETRY AND SELF-
TRANSLATION IN FRANCE FROM DADA TO THE PRESENT
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During a recent visit to the Arp archives situated in the poet's former home in Locarno, the random opening of a cabinet drawer revealed a scrap of paper on which three lines were written in the poet's hand. The first two, in German, consisted of single words denoting everyday items that revealed the identity of this piece of paper to be a cursory shopping list: the words were 'Nagelfeile' (nail files) and 'Hosenklammern' (trouser clips). The third line, also in the poet's hand, was in French, and had a quite different effect on the reader: 'Les étoiles les larmes de l'infini'.

The sudden emergence of this poetic image is all the more destabilizing for its sheer unexpectedness in such a quotidian context. Curiously, the third line, 'les étoiles les larmes de l'infini', has a retroactive effect on the preceding two, which, on re-reading, begin to exhibit poetic qualities: the reader becomes aware of their syllabic neatness, compounds consisting of two units of two syllables each. The unexpected appearance of a poetic image destabilizes the first two words and gives them a new identity after the event: we begin to consider them not merely as referents, but as utterances that lie on the very edge of the poetic. In rereading them, we note, for example, that both words consist of two elements of two syllables, which gives them a steady rhythm and a phonetic symmetry. A superficial lexical similarity even connects the two languages and the two types of statement: the French word 'larmes' seems to arise from the German word 'klammern' from which it borrows almost all of its letters. It is tempting to conclude that Arp's highly poetic image may have been

inspired by his own German words detached from their semantic content. Banal as it seems, this chance occurrence can tell us much about the evocative power of words, the experience of the interlingual, the porosity of notions such as ‘everyday’ and ‘poetic’, and the unexpected spark that the rubbing together of different languages can generate. This essay will attempt to relate these questions to the work of a small number of poets from the past century who have experimented with French by probing its points of contact with other languages.

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In the preface to his book, *L'Art du roman*, the novelist Milan Kundera relates how his novel *Žert (La Plaisanterie)* had been translated from its original Czech into all the major western languages at the end of the 1960s. And, in each and every case, the translation had corrupted, betrayed and twisted his work almost beyond recognition.

This is how he describes the experience:

En France, le traducteur a récrit le roman en ornementant mon style. En Angleterre, l'éditeur a coupé tous les passages réflexifs, éliminé les chapitres musicologiques, changé l'ordre des parties, recomposé le roman. Un autre pays. Je rencontre mon traducteur: il ne connaît pas un seul mot de tchèque. « Comment avez-vous traduit? » Il répond: « Avec mon cœur », et me montre ma photo qu'il sort de son portefeuille. Il était si sympathique que j'ai failli croire qu'on pouvait vraiment traduire grâce à une télépathie du cœur. Bien sûr, c'était plus simple: il avait traduit à partir du rewriting français, de même que le traducteur en Argentine. [...] Le choc causé par les traductions de *La Plaisanterie* m'a marqué à jamais. Heureusement, j'ai rencontré plus tard des traducteurs fidèles. Mais aussi, hélas, de moins fidèles...¹

Kundera's traumatic experience of being confronted with a virtually unrecognizable version of his own novel prompted him to take control over the translation of all of his previous and subsequent work – and to learn ‘trois ou quatre langues’ in the process.

His insistence on fidelity is entirely understandable, since, as we are often reminded, faithfulness is the *raison d'être* of all translation, and the gold standard sought by translators, be they *sourciers* defending the source language or *ciblistes* privileging the target language.

Kundera's experience finds a parallel in an anecdote recounted by the Franco-American writer Julien Green: having read the King James Bible as a child, his encounter with the Vulgate version at the age of sixteen triggered a shock: 'Ce n'était pas, dans mon esprit, le même livre que la version du roi Jacques; il appartenait à un tout autre monde imprégné d'un esprit différent.'ⁱⁱ Green's disbelief stemmed from the realization that the unique, auratic identity of a work he had taken to be an original transpired to be just one of many versions. The sense of betrayal that this discovery inflicted illustrates very literally the *traduttore-traditore*, translator-as-traitor paradigm. And for Green, as a writer and self-translator, it was a valuable revelation of the merits, as well as the inherent risks, of translation: 'Nos livres sacrés (la Bible est un livre au pluriel) sont des livres d'emprunt, mais ils sont devenus nôtres à travers ce procédé délicat et compliqué qu'on appelle traduction.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Kundera's and Green's experiences were the result of a confrontation between their desire for transparency and the translation's staunch refusal to grant it. According to some literary theorists, transparency is the ultimate state, not only of translation, but of all writing: we are supposed to read through the words and letters, which have become invisible, at least from an aesthetic point of view. For Richard Lanham, 'the best style is the style which is never noticed as a style.'^{iv}

But where does poetry stand in this discussion of transparency? According to Henri Meschonnic, poetry should not be distinguished from spoken language. 'La littérature', he tells us, 'est la réalisation maximale de l'oralité.'^v According to Walter

Benjamin, the experience of poetry transcends mere signification; indeed, poetry is precisely that part of language that cannot be reduced to the mere transmission of a given meaning.^{vi} For Yves Bonnefoy, the sound of words is fundamental to the definition of poetry, but rather than working in tandem with the generation of meaning, it works against it:

La poésie, c'est ce recours au son pour retrouver sa mémoire de la présence, comme son histoire le montre bien, qui se confond avec celle des mètres, des vers, des rimes, de tout ce qui fait valoir, par rythmes, par musique, *le déploiement du son contre celui de la signification.*^{vii}

For Bonnefoy, then, poetry is that point at which a given word, or a given sound, communicates at a level other than straightforward transparency. It is a concretion of language, the point at which the transparency of conveying signification is thickened by other associations and resonances.

Such an intensely subjective experience makes the act of translation highly problematic. If the experience of poetry slows our engagement with language sufficiently for us to become aware of its material presence, then the very difficulty of translation can feed into this process: 'La traduction [...] est l'occasion de penser à la poésie, d'en comprendre les voies, d'en indiquer la nécessité, d'aider à son recommencement là où cette nécessité était en risque d'être oubliée.'^{viii} Marjorie Perloff, focusing on experimental poetry of the last century, sees opacity as one of the defining traits of a poetics defined by what she terms 'radical artifice'.^{ix} This is evident, for example, in the subversion of syntax and the use of language detached from any identifiable context. The kind of experimental poetic discourse that intrigues her is difficult to access, deliberately puzzling, and resists transparency – and transcendence – in order to involve the reader in the creation of possible new meanings. Heralded by the historical avant-garde of a century ago, this trend

continued in Brazilian concrete poetry, Language Poetry of the post-war period, and in the poems of Jacques Roubaud and others.

In translation theory, too, we can observe the emergence of a trend that goes against the supposed transparency of the translation and promotes instead the unique identity – the radical artifice, if you will – of the translated text. Lawrence Venuti, for his part, agrees with Antoine Berman that it is the translator's responsibility 'to signal the foreignness of the foreign text', a view that Schleiermacher already expressed in 1813.^x Indeed, Venuti goes so far as to argue that 'eliminating the foreignness of the foreign text is unethical, especially when the process of domestication is mystified by the illusion of transparency.'^{xi}

What is the place in this discussion of the bilingual poet who translates his or her own work? Given that the biggest challenge for the translator is to inhabit the mind of the poet, one would imagine that the task of the translator is surely made easier by the fact that the poet and the translator cohabit the same mental space. In other words, we might expect the greatest degree of overlap, of elision, between original and translation. The aims of this essay are far more modest than the title might suggest: I shall consider a few isolated examples from the early twentieth and early twenty-first century of poems written by bilingual or multilingual poets, and consider what they might contribute to this long-running debate over faithfulness and transparency.

Of one thing we can be certain: multilingual writing is not new. It is already nearly a century since James Joyce began work on the iconically polyglot and defiantly unreadable *Work in Progress* that would become *Finnegans Wake*, and over a century since the German poet Stefan George set about producing a rarefied form of multilingual verse that would be inaccessible to 'the profane multitude'.^{xii} In fact,

poetry written in more than one language dates at least as far back as the Middle Ages, when it was not uncommon for lines of verse to alternate between Latin and the vernacular. In the twelfth century, the Provençal troubadour poet Raimbaut de Vaqueiras produced a multilingual poem, ‘Eras quan vey verdeyar’, which remains an outstanding example of its sort. In order to maximize its lipogrammatic potential and create maximum phonetic contrast, this poem incorporates no fewer than five Romance languages, Provençal, Italian, French, Gascon and Galician:

Belhs Cavaliers, tant es car
Lo vostr’ onratz senhoratges
Que cada jorno m'esglaio.
Oi me lasso que farò
Si sele que j'ai plus chiere
Me tue, ne sai por quoi?
Ma dauna, he que dey bos
Ni peu cap santa Quitera,
Mon corasso m'avetz treito
E mot gen favlan furtado. ^{xiii}

[Fair Knight, so precious is
your honoured thrall
that every day I despair.
Alas, what shall I do
if she whom I call my dearest
kills me, I know not why?
My lady, by my faith in you
and by the head of Saint Quiteria,
you have taken away my heart,
and stolen it by most sweet talk.]

This poem derives its polyglot character from the desire to increase its communicative potential by incorporating the wide phonetic range inherent in its five languages. At other historical moments, by contrast, poets were driven to reach for unfamiliar languages whose very foreignness they welcomed and celebrated: in 1969, for instance, Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti and Charles Tomlinson met in Paris to produce *Renga*, a quadrilingual poem based on the

Japanese renga or chain-poem.^{xiv} If the purpose of this was to experiment within certain predefined parameters, other instances of multilingual poetry had more political causes. Such is the case of Dada, the motley group of poets and artists who gathered in Zurich in 1915 out of a shared revulsion towards the so-called Great War and the systematic abuse of rational language in the name of imperialism that had led to it.

And so the collaborative Dada poem ‘L’Amiral cherche une maison à louer’, performed at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 and published in the eponymous magazine, enacts a simultaneous performance in French, German and English, the languages of the warring powers, to generate noise that cancels out the transmission of signification.^{xv} And on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich’s Spiegelgasse, Hugo Ball, clad in a now-famous futuristic clown’s outfit-cum-cannon shell, stood awkwardly and began to recite his sound poems in a voice that had taken on ‘the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation’:^{xvi}

Jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla
Grossiga m’pfa habla horem
Égiga goramen
[...]^{xvii}

A poem of this sort implies that if its contents are nonsense, then they are meaningful nonsense, no more and no less so than the acts of empire builders who had sent men to war to kill in myriad new, mechanized, dehumanized ways. As Ball put it:

in these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing poetry secondhand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use.^{xviii}

Ball's fellow Dadaist Hans Jean Arp, the son of a German-speaking father and a French mother, had grown up bilingual in the border territory of Alsace. Arp's response to the impossible dilemma posed by the war – a dilemma that was linguistic as well as moral – was to denounce the war while asserting both of his languages and translating between them in both directions. Given Dada's reputation for iconoclasm, Arp's contribution to the group was surprisingly restrained; his is a protest delivered in hushed tones rather than shouted from the rooftops. The complex workings of language are powerfully present in his translations of his own poems between French and German. His volume of poems *die wolkenpumpe* [*the cloud pump*] is a revealing case in point. The book was published in German in 1920, and in the same year extracts appeared in French translation in the Dada journals *Littérature* and *391*, including the following lines:

an allen enden stehen jetzt dadaisten auf
aber es sind im grunde nur vermummte defregger
sie ahmen den zungenschlag und das zungenzucken der wolkenpumpe nach

de tous les coins du monde se lèvent maintenant des dadaïstes mais au fond ce
ne sont que des moissonniers masqués ils imitent le coup de la langue et la
convulsion de la langue de la pompe des nuages^{xix}

Some of the lexical variants here reflect the desire to adapt culturally specific references to the reader's sphere of familiarity. In so doing, they cheerfully break one of the cardinal rules of translation of which Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida remind us: 'Un nom propre ne se laisse pas traduire dans une autre langue – on ne dira pas que "James" traduit "Jacques", ni que "Paris" prononcé à l'anglaise traduit "Paris" prononcé à la française.'^{xx}

As the author of both original and translation, it was Arp's prerogative to not only translate a name, but to replace one identity with another: the allusion in the

German text to the nineteenth-century academic painter Franz von Defregger, creator of works such as *Grace before Meal* (1875), would be lost on many French readers, who would be more at home with Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier's depictions of battle scenes and his historical portraits such as *Napoléon I in 1814* (1862). Meissonier's name, moreover, offered the translator the alliterative appeal of 'meissoniers masqués', an effect not dissimilar to the phonetic repetitions of 'vermummte defregger'. The removal of capital letters in both texts has subversive implications, especially in German, where not only proper nouns but all substantives require upper-case initial letters.

In terms of the syntactic and phonetic character of the two versions, the salient distinctions between them can be attributed to the inherent characteristics of the two languages in which Arp excelled as a poet: the guttural dissonance of the words 'zungenschlag' and 'zungenzucken' not only conveys the violent physicality of the phenomena evoked, but also anticipates the hard consonants of 'wolkenpumpe'. In semantic terms, the two versions differ in discreet yet revealing ways: the German word 'Zunge' (tongue) refers primarily to the organ of speech, while the system of language and the communicative phenomenon of speech share the word 'Sprache'. In French, the word 'langue' contains all of these meanings, and so the phrase 'le coup de la langue et la convulsion de la langue' has an inherent ambiguity not present in the German text. (Joachim Neugroschel's published English translation interprets each occurrence of 'langue' differently: 'the clicking of the tongue and the convulsion of language'.) Moreover, while the German and French versions express broadly similar ideas, their contrasting syntactic structures give them radically divergent characteristics: by contrast with the compact syntax and compound nouns that German allows, the looser French possessive constructions employing 'de la' and

‘des’ endow the translation with a fluidity and a pronounced rhythm quite different to the German line. The decision to avoid line breaks in the French text accentuates this difference on a visual level.

It is already clear that Arp was not overly concerned with creating two quasi-identical versions of the same poem; indeed, he had a healthy disrespect for the primacy of the original, and, even when working in just one language, he often saw a re-edition as an opportunity to rework an earlier poem into a new version. If we consult the bibliographical information at the end of Arp’s collected writings in French, we discover that some of the French translations of *die wolkenpumpe* are free adaptations, written not by Arp himself, but by André Breton and Tristan Tzara.^{xxi} It is tempting to speculate whether Arp helped them to translate his poem; Breton for one did not speak German. Whatever the case, the ease with which Arp accepts the co-existence of two substantially different versions of his poem points towards an unusually relaxed attitude to the normally hierarchical relationship of the original to its translation.

In choosing titles for his sculptures, reliefs and other artworks, Arp moved as freely between German and French as he did in writing poetry. And as one might expect, significant gaps can emerge as a result of the translation of titles of works between his two languages. An exemplary instance of the shifts in meaning that can accompany the transit between languages is his bronze sculpture *Schalenbaum/Coupes superposées* of 1947. The German title, *Schalenbaum*, is a compound noun of Arp’s invention. Its literal meaning, ‘Bowl-Tree’, is a characteristic Arpian conflation of manufactured and natural elements, ‘Schale’ (bowl) and ‘Baum’ (tree), a hybrid concoction that harks all the way back to his ‘cloud pump’ poems of the Dada era. The title is, on first reading, a perfectly

functional description of the sculpture, which consists of a somewhat lop-sided pile of three broadly similar, cuplike forms standing in precarious balance. But the relationship between the work and its title is intriguingly complex, and all the more so in view of the title's double existence in French and German versions.

For instance, we cannot help but notice that the word 'Schalenbaum' has a strong phonetic and orthographic resemblance to 'Schellenbaum' ('bell tree'), a decorative percussive instrument used by German military marching bands; the example in the photograph is from the Bundeswehr (figure 1) <insert fig. 1 here>. The phonetic similarity suggests that ethical as well as aesthetic reasons may have played a part in the choice of title: when he made this sculpture, Arp had recently witnessed the devastating impact of a second world war on his border homeland. He may, then, have consciously chosen to call this sculpture *Schalenbaum* as an anti-Schellenbaum, as a way of subverting the bell tree's military associations.

The French title *Coupes superposées* (*Stacked Goblets*) differs from its German counterpart in certain significant respects. *Schalenbaum* possesses an array of organic resonances that are absent from the French title; in addition to the obvious natural associations of 'Baum', 'Schale' can variously denote the skin or peel of a fruit, a crustacean's shell or the hull or husk of a grain or seed, as well as a bowl or platter. Moreover, the adjective 'superposées' is a much more perfunctory, and less evocative, means to express the idea of elevation that the sculpture articulates, and it lacks the natural, organic connotations of the German title.

The preceding discussion has implied that the French title lacks some of the associations and reverberations that are present in its German counterpart. But *coupe*, for instance, as opposed to the more literal *bol*, has an array of different meanings, most of which derive from the act of cutting ('couper'). Perhaps the most intriguing

definition – particularly in view of the German title of the sculpture – is one relating to forestry, where ‘coupe’ designates the felling of trees to create a clearing in woods. If we choose to interpret Arp’s *Coupes superposées* in this way, then the three stacked forms cast in bronze become the tangible markers of an absence, a hollowed-out space. The bronze surfaces piled on top of one another cease to be the defining focus of the work and become instead the outer limits of an invisible inner space.

In addition to this, ‘Coupe’ has many other meanings that link it to a variety of semantic fields: in science, for instance, ‘une coupe’ designates a section of an object to be scrutinized in detail; and in the context of poetry, it can signify a typographical or rhythmic break. Consciously or not, then, the French title points towards the acts of looking and writing, both of which were intimately connected to Arp’s creative work in its different expressive forms.

As I have suggested elsewhere, Arp’s bilingual poetry engages us in an ongoing negotiation between words as signifiers and as pure sound that holds signification at bay. Far from creating an exact match between his two languages, his self-translations may be more accurately defined as a *va-et-vient* whereby the text, in passing successively from one language to another, is renewed, displaced, and reshaped. His translations could be defined more precisely as concretions, the term he gave to his sculptures of the 1930s, since the successive renderings of his texts allow new layers of meaning to accrue while simultaneously modifying the implications of the original source text.

Concretions are triggered by a foreign body. There is a certain connection with the workings of a virus, which can fuse with a host cell and thrive even when the host cell is dead. Arp welcomed the random intervention of chance, other poets, and even the printer’s typographic errors that he sometimes incorporated into his translations.

Arp frequently seized the opportunity that translation offered him to revise and sometimes even rewrite an existing poem. And just as a geological concretion can form around a stone such as limestone, the surface of the concretion sometimes survives and bears a trace of the original formation inside it, even when that original has deteriorated or disintegrated.

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Ryoko Sekiguchi's book titled *Calque* could be defined as a form of concretion. Published in 2001, this text consists of myriad thin overlapping layers, and plays on the multiple connotations of its title. This book is primarily a transposition from one language to another: as the cover blurb makes clear, this is the French version of a book – or, more precisely, elements of two books – that Sekiguchi published in Japanese. The more important of the two has a bilingual title, 'Hakkōsei diapositive', so the titles of the Japanese and French versions play, though differently, on the same ideas of transparency, luminescence, and the transition from one language to another. According to the author,

Ces textes en deux langues nouent une relation dont la nature, bien que conforme au travail de traduction sur certains points, diffère de la simple traduction. La version française est, dans une certaine mesure, indépendante de l'autre version, et ne soumet pas les 'textes de la langue originale'.^{xxii}

Calque, then, is not a mere imitation of the Japanese version, but should be considered as a work in its own right. This book speaks repeatedly of the author's fascination for the texture of words, for their opacity, transparency or translucency: one line seems to sum up the entire book in referring to 'rumeurs ultraminces qui n'ont aucun objet'.^{xxiii} The idea of transparency is in constant tension here with that of

opacity, which is both a physical sensation and a state of mind; language also appears as a physical barrier that is difficult to cross. At such times the poet reminds us that French is, for her, a foreign language:

Enfin venue la possibilité de balbutier; je parle d'un intervalle, pliable comme du loukoum.

[...]

'tu ne dois pas comprendre leur langue', à peine commencée cette phrase j'ai dû m'interrompre. Parce qu'une chose, source de lumière, y montait subitement.

[...]

On bute sur l'impossibilité de prononcer le mot *croire*. A mesure qu'on la mâche, cette prononciation elle-même devient objet d'admiration: solution oblique.

[...]

Ferme ta bouche pour prononcer *m*.^{xxiv}

How, then, do these poems reflect the workings of translation? While the original Japanese version is missing from this book, it is vestigially suggested by the layout that resembles a series of ideograms. Successive pages create a subtle interaction of alternating printed and white space, and emphasize a reading process that is both sequential and transversal, both semantically charged and concerned with the visual properties of type when detached from the process of signifying.

Absence and silence prevail in Sekiguchi's work; and while these features may be particularly characteristic of a speaker's encounter with a foreign language, even the native speaker is not immune to such an experience. Following Jacques Derrida, who declares in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, 'je n'ai qu'une langue, ce n'est pas la mienne',^{xxv} Sekiguchi defines the experience of language – and not only the foreign language – in terms of hermeticism and aphasia:

Du secret de Word of Silence, même la langue maternelle ne nous laisse parler qu'en nous détournant. Nos véritables mots. Les mots jamais prononcés sont ici. Les mots qui n'habitent pas de voix qui bruit dans l'air sont ici. Lus comme s'ils n'étaient susceptibles d'aucune prononciation, transmis muets.^{xxvi}

Avoiding a sequential narrative, this book instead proposes a distribution of the text that does not specify any single reading order. As suggested by the author: ‘Ces mots peuvent s’éparpiller en cercles concentriques, qu’au moins ils ne tombent pas dans la boîte linéaire.’ The page layout uses the central fold in some instances as a pivot around which the text flows, and at other moments as a pillar to unite the text that crosses from left to right. Echoing Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, the unit value here is not the word or verse, but the open double page, which carries aesthetic as well as semantic meanings.^{xxvii}

The alternation between transparency and opacity can also be seen throughout the entire volume: on reading a page, we are invited to take in the previous and following ones which show through the paper, in much the same way as we would do with tracing paper (*papier calque* in French). This play of presence and absence endows the text with a three-dimensional character, asserting its status as a material presence rather than as a linguistic signifier. The opacity of the blocks of words, visible through the paper, but not legible, reminds us of the capacity of any language to become indecipherable.

A form of prior translatability may appear even in poems written in one language. This is the case of a small collection by Anne Portugal published in 2001 under the title *voyer en l’air*. The poems in this volume consist of fragments of French words; their incompleteness gives them an elliptical character that leaves holes in the speech, so that other languages can creep into the gap. Thus in her poem ‘biller dans la chambre,’ we find the words ‘end’, ‘cutter’, and ‘rap’ – words, then, that float between French and English:

biller dans la chambre

end arrivait *

itamment
cuter
gieusement fort
kini
nty
gée sur
napé
rap de lit
* un train de provenance de
le train la provenance
ne prouve rien

If such lines refer to other languages such as English, it seems to happen by chance, unbeknown to the author. These poems beckon forth the underlying strangeness of a familiar language. Removed from any clear context and denied their habitual syntax, they invite us to complete them piecemeal in French and sometimes in English. Here are some examples:

louses impeccables
tiful
nnut
crate
ree -lance
sister est très difficile
vescence
card et le mur
ail de dissimulation
dendrons
plication
chrone
hodes
cipes stricts
gine pas tout
glée
mascope
tacle
rras

It is clear, then, that we are dealing with a kind of translation by subtraction; this process calls to mind an observation that Charles Bernstein makes about the

‘Transcreations’ of the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos: in translating, the poet creates a new original work that is not beholden to any source.

In *Des Tours de Babel*, Jacques Derrida asks the question ‘Comment traduire un texte écrit en plusieurs langues à la fois? Comment “rendre” l’effet de pluralité? Et si l’on traduit par plusieurs langues à la fois, appellera-t-on cela traduire?’^{xxviii}

Caroline Bergvall’s poems conjure up all sorts of crossovers and language interference that combine familiarity and otherness. Of Franco-Norwegian nationality, resident in Britain for twenty-five years, Bergvall writes mainly in English, while inserting French and sometimes Norwegian words. This fusion of languages seems to enjoy an opacity that makes no concessions to the reader.

Ceci n’est pas une fesse
Settee nest past urn face
Sees inhere your passing
[...]
Ceci net pass une bride
a face not asa horse
yet horselike fits describd^{xxix}

In her 1996 book *Éclat*, snatches of French surreptitiously infiltrate the middle of sentences like a virus:

Andbreakingwateràreculons & asthoughwewerent^{xxx}

At times Bergvall transposes entire figurative French expressions literally into English while preserving the morphology and even the pronunciation of the source language:

‘Ze cloth does make ze monk.’^{xxxi}

In her poem ‘More pets’, published in *Fig*, a fast flow of English words is contaminated with French elements, starting with the title itself. Like mathematical

symbols, the hyphens in the body of the text indicate the relations of kinship or opposition that connect lexemes. The first stanza begins with a repetitive list:

a more – cat
a more – dog dog
a more – horse
a more – rat
a more – canary
a more – snake
a more – hair
a more – rabbit
a more – turtle^{xxxii}

With a mechanical logic, the three stanzas that follow gradually introduce oppositions: more, less, most, least, ni, ni. These culminate in the final stanza:

a rabbitnot – catnot chatchat
a catnot – ni – more – ni – dogless dog
a ni-morecat – horsecheval – ni – dogless horse
a lessplus – notrat – monlapin – dogless – horsecheval not
a plusnot – notnot – notrat – goldfish – cancan canary
a notplus – snakesnot – moinsplus – cancan snake
a snakesnot – notair – lesscanned doghair
a nonnot – notair – plus – rab rabbit
a no – tair – plus – rab – more – turtle trtl^{xxxiii}

The use of French words is manifold: we find nouns, ‘chatchat’, ‘monlapin’, French constructions (ni... ni...) and translingual compound names such as ‘horsecheval’ or ‘nonnot’. The ‘chatchat’ of the first line could be read in English, French, or in both languages; indeed, Bergvall speaks elsewhere of the proximity of the word ‘crachat’ and the expression ‘avoir un chat dans la gorge’.^{xxxiv} The function of the word *plus* is particularly flexible in that it appears initially in English in the constructions ‘lessplus’, ‘plusnot’ and ‘notplus’, after which it seems to pass in French in the word ‘moinsplus’. Similarly, the English word ‘hair’ (homophone of hare) that we find in the compound word ‘doghair’ is trimmed down to become ‘air’ without an ‘h’. In the

last verse it becomes ‘tair’ suggesting both the earth, and ‘(se) taire’. The latter meaning is even more valuable in the sense that the noun ‘rabbit’ also serves as a verb in colloquial English, where it means ‘to chat’ (as if to remind us of the ‘chatchat’ in the first verse). The apparent negation ‘no – tair’ in the last verse perhaps expresses the wish to prolong this chat before it stops, an invitation to the reader to return to the beginning and start again.

The loss of the ‘h’ could also communicate metonymically the transition from English to French, that is to say, the transition from the ‘h’ as pronounced in English to the French silent ‘h’. In English, correct pronunciation forbids us to drop the ‘h’ at the beginning of words. However, the transformation of ‘hair’ to ‘air’ has semantic as well as social consequences for the English reader.

For Bergvall, the attraction of English as a language of poetry is due in large part to its strangeness, which prevents it from becoming too straightforward:

English is my third language. But it’s my main language as an artist, and I think this is very important because I place myself in the politics and in the history of this language as someone who had to learn. I do not approach it in an intuitive way, I approach it as someone who has learnt it. I have an accent when I speak English. [...] This concern for the different languages, knowing/not knowing the language, and the kind of communication that transcends languages and cultures - this interest has helped me to develop a number ways to write, that’s what led me to become a writer.^{xxxv}

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As Laura Pfeffer observes, ‘[t]he friction, fluidity, cacophony, and subversive impulse of bilingual poetry embodies the convergence of enmity and rapport experienced by the very real speech communities that give them context.’^{xxxvi} What, then, are we to make of poetry that engages with not two, but several languages at once? Born in France, but forced by historical circumstance to live a nomadic existence, Anne Tardos writes in the four languages with which she grew up: French, German, English

and Hungarian. She additionally creates performance texts that incorporate visual images as well as noise and found words. Her volume *Uxudo* acquired its title from a computer error, a modern-day equivalent of Arp's Dada-era practice of allowing the printer to misinterpret his poor handwriting.^{xxxvii} Tardos's book *Cat licked the Garlic* is typical in its incorporation of all four languages without hierarchical distinctions or breaks between them.^{xxxviii} The act of reading a Tardos poem is challenging, even for readers acquainted with more than one of her languages. As Karl Young observes, 'the four languages act as difficulty levels between which the reader switches while reading. Passages in unintelligible languages act as a sort of sound poetry, and the text as a whole moves from clarity to complete abstraction at varying speeds.'^{xxxix}

As Tardos herself writes,

Some of them restent en anglais. Some of them, then die wenigen petit pois go jouer. Them then die vielen grossen állati nagy Imre. Sway this way, petit pois des bois. Then, je partition my own (mon) petit cheval, c'est égal, go. Play go. Go and play noh. Playdough. Whoa. This way and ainsi our ancestors formed ce qu'on appelle die Sprache.^{xl}

Tardos further compounds the bewildering effect of combining many languages by appropriating the paratextual elements of language into her poetry. Her poem 'Cage at Carnegie' from the 1995 volume *Mayg-shem Fish* exemplifies this: the poem allows numerous words in French and German to infiltrate the English elements.^{xli} In order to go some way towards alleviating the reader's task, Tardos takes the step, highly unconventional in a poetic context, of providing footnotes within the body of the poem itself, which point the reader towards explanations and even guides to pronunciation:

Order disorder seek noncrowds. Wie die Ameisen.1 Spaeter2 plus tard3 it's not there anymore.

1 vee dee AHmeyzen [Ger: 'like ants']

2 SHPAYter [G: 'later']

3 plue TAR [Fr: 'later']

As Tardos explains, 'Using footnotes, I offer pronunciation and meaning, trying to avoid what might seem obscure and opaque, even though I believe that partial comprehension is like life itself; not everything is understood.'^{xlii} Indeed, to an extent, the mixture of languages is a red herring that could easily lead us to overlook the fact that there is much in the poem besides its multilingual character that is far from clear.

'Ami Minden' is a quasi-Joycean Babel of languages, some reassuringly familiar, others resolutely, uncompromisingly foreign to all but a few polyglot readers.^{xliii}

Ami minden quand un yes or no je le said viens am liebsten hätte ich dich du
süsses de ez nem baj das weisst du me a favor hogy innen^{xliv} se faire croire
tous less birds from the forest who fly here by mistake als die Wälder
langsam verschwinden. Minden^{xlv} verschwinden, mind your step and woof.
Verschwinden de nem innen^{xlvi} – je vois the void in front of mich, je sens als
ich érzem^{xlvii} qu'on aille, aille de vágy a fejem,^{xlviii} cask éppen^{xlix} (eben sagte
ich wie die Wälder verschwinden) I can repeat it as a credo so it sinks into
our cerveaux und wird embedded there mint egy teória¹ mathématique
'd'enchassement' die Verankerungstheorie in der Mathematik, hogy
legalább^{li}

In an essay titled 'Multilingualistic Existence', Tardos comments on the writing process and the relationship between the written text and its performance:

I wrote this, as I often write, in a quasi-liminal state of mind. I continued writing this way, exploring the true language that lived inside my linguistically unattached mind. I superimposed the text, as I have done with

other poems, over digitized video images, to create performance scores by the interaction of text and image.^{lii}

This multimedia approach reminds us that language is an experience that goes far beyond its primary function as a communicative vehicle. For Tardos, it seems, poetry is as much a matter of creating an atmosphere, a virtually abstract soundscape in which the reader/listener's comprehension is at best sporadic and partial. A danger inherent in such 'linguistically unattached' poetic practices is that they run the risk of alienating all but the most tenacious and linguistically versatile reader. At times the poems of Bergvall and Tardos resemble strings of words cascading from a malfunctioning computer that has evaded its user's attempts to control it. In this sense, their work seems to have partially abandoned the agency of the author to the vagaries and chance encounters of the interlingual realm, in which respect a parallel with Dada practices may be observed.

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By way of a conclusion, I would like to briefly mention another form of self-translation that captures this digital aesthetic very literally by employing computer technology. For his experimental poetic project 'Overboard', North American poet John Cayley took excerpts from Proust and Walter Benjamin and applied algorithms in order to create what he called 'transliteratal transformations'. According to Cayley,

Overboard is an example of literal art in digital media that demonstrates an 'ambient' time-based poetics. There is a stable text underlying its continuously changing display and this text may occasionally rise to the surface of normal legibility in its entirety. However, overboard is installed as a dynamic linguistic 'wall-hanging,' an ever-moving 'language painting.' As time passes, the text drifts continually in and out of familiar legibility – sinking, rising, and sometimes in part, 'going under' or drowning, then rising to the surface once

again. It does this by running a program of simple but carefully designed algorithms which allow letters to be replaced by other letters that are in some way similar to those of the original text. Word shapes, for example, are largely preserved. In fact, except when ‘drowning,’ the text is always legible to a reader who is prepared to take time and recover its principles. A willing reader is able to preserve or ‘save’ the text’s legibility.^{liii}

In the era of digital translation in which computers have come close to making convincing translations, it is significant that Cayley’s project is not striving towards the equivalence of languages, nor to some notional transparency of translation. It seems he is most interested in the intrinsic strangeness of words, the interference of languages and their ability to deceive and confuse the reader. As the title suggests, ‘Overboard’ explores the amorphous space where words exceed their ascribed semantic function and start to spill over into other words, other languages, or plunge into the open waters of nonsense.

Of course there is no question here of a real translation, but rather we are dealing with a transliteration, that is to say, a transition from one language into a simulacrum. The computer-generated pseudo-languages have the same superficial features as real communicative languages, but do not share their semantic function. The moments when the words ‘fall beneath the surface’ of legibility are particularly interesting in that they suggest the ability to evoke unknown or non-existent languages. This project comes close to the poetry of Bergvall, since both use real language to make us think about possible future languages that do not yet exist.

In the examples cited above, bilingual or interlingual experimental poetry, far from seeking to neutralize the presence of the source language in the target text, receives and accepts the language whose alterity it maintains and even accentuates. The absorption of the foreign language into the target text is not without friction or tension, but this is hardly surprising: as Derrida reminds us, the word ‘hospitality’

houses the word ‘hostility’.^{liv} The friction or floating of languages can frustrate our need for clarity, of course, but at times it makes us sensitive to the ability of words to amaze. In their playful exploration of the outermost edges of poetic language and the sometimes porous boundaries between languages, the poems discussed here exalt the alchemy of words; in so doing, they assert their capacity to transform a simple *crachat* into a *chatchat*, and to make the stars shine like the tears of infinity.

ⁱ Milan Kundera, *L’Art du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 149–50.

ⁱⁱ Julien Green, *Le Langage et son double* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 185.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

^{iv} Richard A. Lanham, *Style: an Anti-Textbook* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007), p. 100.

^v Henri Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Paris: Verdier, 1999), p. 117.

^{vi} Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator,’ in *Illuminations*, transl. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 69–82.

^{vii} Yves Bonnefoy, ‘La Traduction de la poésie’, in *Semicerchio: Rivista di Poesia Comparata* 30–1 (2004), pp. 62-80; p. 68.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 75.

^{ix} Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

^x Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995, 2008), p. 87. Venuti follows a line of argumentation advanced in Antoine Berman, *L’Epreuve de l’étranger: culture et traduction dans l’Allemagne romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). Friedrich Schleiermacher, ‘Über die

verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens' (1813), in *Das Problem des Übersetzens*, edited by Hans Joachim Störig (Darmstadt, 1963), pp. 38-70.

^{xi} Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, p. 19.

^{xii} Stefan George, cited in George Steiner, *A Reader* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 391–2.

^{xiii} Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, 'Eras quan vey verdeyar,' cited in Leonardo Malcovati, *Prosody in England and Elsewhere: A Comparative Approach* (Arlington: Gival Press, 2006). Also available online:

<http://www.trobar.org/troubadours/raimbaut_de_vaqueiras/raimbaut_de_vaqueiras_16.php>[accessed 18 July 2016].

^{xiv} Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti and Charles Tomlinson, *Renga: poème* (Gallimard: Paris, 1971).

^{xv} Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara, 'L'Amiral cherche une maison à louer', in *Cabaret Voltaire* (Zurich: May, 1916), pp. 6–7.

^{xvi} Hugo Ball, diary entry of 23 June 1916, in Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. by John Elderfield, transl. by Ann Raimés (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 71.

^{xvii} Hugo Ball, *Gedichte*, ed. by Eckhard Faul (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008), p. 68.

^{xviii} Hugo Ball, diary entry of 24 June 1916, in Ball, *Flight out of Time*, p. 71.

^{xix} The poem appeared in German as 'Aus dem "cacadou supérieur"', in *Dadameter–Die Schammade*, Cologne, undated [1920] and in *die wolkenpumpe* (Hannover: Paul Steegemann, 1920). Reprinted in Arp, *Gesammelte Gedichte, I: Gedichte 1903–1939* (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1963), p. 57. An extract in French appeared under the title 'Extrait de "la couille d'hirondelle"' in *391*, 14 (November 1920), p. 7. Reprinted in Jean Arp, *Jours effeuillés: poèmes, essais, souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 32–

3. English translation in Arp, *Collected French Writings: Poems, Essays, Memories*, transl. by Joachim Neugroschel (London: John Calder, 2001), pp. 6–7.

^{xx} Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p. 159.

^{xxi} Arp, *Jours effeuillés*, p. 631.

^{xxii} Ryoko Sekiguchi, *Calque* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001), n. p.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*

^{xxv} Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse d'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 13.

^{xxvi} Sekiguchi, *Calque*.

^{xxvii} Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, texte établi et annoté par Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1945), pp. 453-477.

^{xxviii} Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', *Semeia*, 54 (1991), pp. 207-8.

^{xxix} Caroline Bergvall, *Fig* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), p. 35.

^{xxx} Caroline Bergvall, *Éclat* (London: Sound & Language, 1996), p. 10.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, p. 24.

^{xxxii} Bergvall, 'More Pets', in *Fig*, p. 86.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 89.

^{xxxiv} Caroline Bergvall, 'Seeing Through Languages', interview with Alexander Vesterlund at Godsbanen in Aarhus, March 2013. Video available on Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark:

<<http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/caroline-bergvall-seeing-through-languages>>

[accessed 18 July 2016].

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*

^{xxxvi} Laura Pfeffer, ‘Challenging Tongues: The “Irreducible Hybridity” of Language in Contemporary Bilingual Poetry’, in *Translation and Authenticity in a Global Setting*, ed. by Dionysios Kapsaskis (*Synthesis*, 4 (2012)), pp. 149–67 (p. 150). Pfeffer’s illuminating article deals engagingly too with the work of Caroline Bergvall and John Cayley.

<<http://synthesis.enl.uoa.gr/translation-and-authenticity-in-a-global-setting-4-2012/laura-pfeffer.html>> [accessed 18 April 2016].

^{xxxvii} Anne Tardos, *Uxudo* (O Books, 1999). On Arp’s welcoming of printers’ errors, see Arp, ‘Wegweiser’, in Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Hans Arp, *Zweiklang* (Zurich, Arche, 1960), pp. 78–82.

^{xxxviii} Anne Tardos, *Cat Licked the Garlic* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1992).

^{xxxix} Karl Young, Review of Anne Tardos, *Cat Licked the Garlic*, in *Witz* magazine, 1:2 (Autumn 1992), <<http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/le-ky-at.htm>> [Accessed 18 July 2016]

^{xl} Anne Tardos, *Cat Licked the Garlic*.

^{xli} Anne Tardos, *Mayg-shem Fish* (Buffalo: Potes & Poets Press Inc., 1995).

^{xlii} Anne Tardos, ‘Multilingualistic Existence’, in *nY: website en tijdschrift voor literatuur, kritiek & amusement, voorheen*, <<http://www.ny-web.be/transitzone/multilingualistic-existence.html>> [accessed 18 July 2016].

^{xliii} Tardos, ‘Ami Minden’, in *Cat Licked the Garlic*.

^{xliv} Hogy = that, if. Innen = hence, thence

^{xliv} Minden = all, every(thing)

^{xlvi} de nem innen = but not here

^{xlvi} érze = sensory

^{xlvi} de væagy a fejem = but the desire of my head

^{xlix} éppen - just

^l mint egy teória = as a theory

^{li} hogy legalább = at least

^{lii} Tardos, 'Multilingualistic Existence'.

^{liii} John Cayley, 'Overboard: An Example of Ambient Time-Based Poetics in Digital Art', in *Dichtung Digital*, 2004, <<http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2004/2/Cayley/index.htm>> [accessed 18 July 2016].

^{liv} Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, p. 32.