
ARTICLES – FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE

No Mother Tongue? Translingual Poetry In and After Dada

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When Voltaire wrote ‘Il n’y a point de langue mère’ (*Dictionnaire philosophique*, 1764), he was reflecting on the gap between the complexity of human experience and the relative incapacity of language to express it. Yet he hints that this inadequacy can nevertheless form the basis of creativity. His thinking finds an echo in the work of more recent poets, themselves shaped by migration and cultural plurality, who have in different ways sought to express the materiality of words, the opacity that Giorgio Agamben defines as the ‘pure exteriority’ of language (1993: 67).

This article explores some ways in which modern poets working in more than one language have uncovered language’s inherent strangeness, the alterity that, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, resides within the iterable (1990: 27). The key points of focus are the multilingual and glossolalic poems of the historical avant-garde and Dada, the postwar experimentation of Lettrisme and Concrete Poetry, and the work of contemporary translingual poets. Far from seeing the inadequacy of language as a cause for despair, the poets in question relish it and seek to expose its gaps and interstices, just as they undermine any stable, singular notion of what might constitute poetry.

The poets under scrutiny are multilingual to radically varying degrees, and they explore the borders of language(s) in highly disparate ways too. But some common ground emerges, and this enables us to draw some necessarily tentative conclusions. The co-presence of more than one language in a poem does not enable a greater understanding, but instead draws attention to the sheer difficulty of making sense in any idiom. It also exposes language as a fluid, complex and necessarily multiple phenomenon, and suggests that this plurality could offer us a means to better understand what makes us human.

‘There is no mother tongue’. These words come from a writer who relates well to the conjunction of poetry and statelessness. The individual in question was sharply critical of his state and was forced into exile, becoming an exophonic or translingual writer, that is, active in more than one language. I am referring to François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique* of 1764, he writes: ‘Il n’y a point de langue mère’. Moreover, he continues, every language is inadequate in a significant respect:

Il n'est aucune langue complète, aucune qui puisse exprimer toutes nos idées et toutes nos sensations; leurs nuances sont trop imperceptibles et trop nombreuses. [...] Ainsi toutes les langues sont imparfaites comme nous. (1334)

Voltaire goes on to make revealing links between language and space, which is to be understood both literally, as a physical locus, and figuratively, as a way of understanding the world. One particular theme that emerges in his writings, and that this essay will explore through more recent instances, concerns insufficiency, absence or loss. These tropes are prevalent in theorisations of language, and particularly those that discuss the transfer between languages, but they also pervade discussions of the condition of statelessness, as the introduction to this volume argues.

In a series of architectural allusions, Voltaire suggests that the incompleteness of language, its flaws, voids and inconsistencies, make of it an unstable edifice; yet, crucially, this very instability can become the basis of creativity:

Nous avons des architraves et point de traves, des architectes et point de tectes, des soubassements et point de basements: il y a des choses ineffables et point d'effables. [...] Toutes les langues tiennent plus ou moins de ces défauts; ce sont des terrains tous irréguliers, dont la main d'un habile artiste sait tirer avantage. (1337)

For Voltaire, then, language is fundamentally flawed; but it is precisely these gaps that make it human ('comme nous') and offer a space in which we can explore the relationship between the word and the world. In tandem with this suspicion towards language is Voltaire's sense that societies, in organising themselves into nation-states, have lost sight of their own humanity: 'Il est clair qu'un pays ne peut gagner sans qu'un autre perde, et qu'il ne peut vaincre sans faire des malheureux. Telle est donc la condition humaine, que souhaiter la grandeur de son pays c'est souhaiter du mal à ses voisins' (1511). Thus, Voltaire seems a singularly apt figure to preside over an exploration of multilingual poetry and statelessness. His acute awareness of the insufficiency of language, but also his deep distrust of nationalism and empire building, and his own personal experience of exile, all make him a surprisingly modern commentator.

His words find an echo in the work of more recent poets, themselves shaped by migration and cultural plurality, who have in different ways sought to express the materiality of words, the opacity that Giorgio Agamben defines as the 'pure exteriority' of language (1993: 67). I wish to explore three instances of modern poets working in more than one language and in the process uncovering language's inherent strangeness, the alterity that, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, resides within the iterable (1990: 27). These are, firstly, the multilingual and glosolalic poems of the historical avant-garde and Dada; secondly, the postwar experimentation of Lettrisme and Concrete Poetry; and thirdly, the work of contemporary translingual poets.¹ Far from seeing the inadequacy of language as a cause for despair, the poets in question relish it and seek to expose its gaps and interstices. Moreover, they seem to suggest that language as a specifically multiple phenomenon – not language, then, but languages – could offer us a means to better understand, and perhaps overcome, the inadequacies that both frustrated and fascinated Voltaire.

¹ The term 'translingual' encompasses both multilingual and exophonic monolingual writers, i.e. those active in one language that is not their first. Translingual also emphasises the fluidity of code-switching, even within a single poem. For definitions of translingualism, see Kellman (2000) and Canagarajah (2012).

'Iwan Goll has no homeland'

Our story will start in Lorraine. Yvan Goll, who also wrote his name Iwan and Ivan, was born in 1891 of Jewish parents in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges. His first language was French but he was schooled in German in the town of Metz, and German became his first *literary* language. From an early age, his experience of language and national identity were problematically multiple: in the Expressionist anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung* (Twilight of Humanity), his biographical entry tells us: 'Iwan Goll hat keine Heimat. Durch Schicksal Jude, durch Zufall in Frankreich geboren, durch ein Stempelpapier als Deutscher bezeichnet' ('Iwan Goll has no homeland. By fate a Jew, by chance born in France, by a stamped paper labelled a German') (1993: 341). As the First World War broke out, he published a German poem, 'Der Panama-Kanal', and translated it into French as 'Le Canal de Panama'. After the war, he wrote an important avant-garde poem that marks his growing engagement with language as a phenomenon that is provisional, unstable and plural. Published in German as 'Paris brennt' and in French as 'Paris brûle', the first edition appeared in 1921 under the imprint of the journal *Zenit* in Zagreb, a city whose own national identity has shifted significantly over time. Its multilingual character is clear from the cover page onwards: with its title and the poet's name in their German versions, the cover includes a photograph of the Eiffel Tower with a caption in French and English. The publisher's details are in Serbian. This announces what we will find in the poem itself: the lines of German are interspersed with more photographs of Parisian scenes, again accompanied by French captions, and with quotations in French.

Most radically, the poem incorporates lengthy sections of poems by Goll's contemporaries, the French-Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars, the Russian Futurist Valentin Parnakh and the Chilean Vicente Huidobro; these appear in their original languages, French, Russian Cyrillic and Spanish. Goll's multilingual montage is a vehicle for a utopian internationalism remarkable in the aftermath of a devastating war. It narrates a scene in which the poems of his peers are presented in an imaginary public recital that takes place in the Eiffel Tower, hosted by Monsieur Eiffel himself. This international gathering of poets is all the more symbolic thanks to the tower's function as a radio transmitter capable of sending messages around the world.

Dada glossolalia

The outbreak of the First World War had confronted Goll with an impossible dilemma, to which the only adequate response was to flee to neutral Switzerland. In Zurich he joined an international community of writers and thinkers that included James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* he would later translate into German.

He also encountered, but did not join, the emerging artistic group that adopted the name of Dada. Its aims were perhaps too iconoclastic for Goll, but its internationalism must have appealed to him. Its members included his fellow border-dweller Hans or Jean Arp, the Germans Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber and the Romanians Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara. Early advertisements for Dada events mention the 'Künstlerkneipe Voltaire'; its renaming as a 'Cabaret' marks a subtle yet significant shift from the indigenous to the international, but one borne of extreme circumstances in which it was still legitimate to take sides. Hugo Ball's editorial in the eponymous Dada journal states the group's intention to appeal to those few 'über den Krieg und die Vaterländer hinweg' (beyond the war and fatherlands) who aspire to other ideals, and announces a new 'international journal' to be called *Dada* (Ball 1916: 5). The number ends with an editorial note which states, in French and German: 'Pour éviter une interprétation nationaliste l'éditeur de ce recueil déclare qu'il n'a aucune relation avec la mentalité allemande.'² Beneath this statement is a list

² [Hugo Ball], 'Notes rédactionnelles'/'Rédactionelle Notizen' [sic], *Cabaret Voltaire*, 32.

of all those who had contributed to the journal, followed by their nationalities. The list ends with the German writer and dancer Emmy Hennings, labelled 'sans patrie', an attribution whose political significance at a time of international conflict would not be lost on the reader.

The Dadaists used a range of linguistic strategies to undermine and destabilise identities: theirs, first and foremost, but also that of poetry itself. In the simultaneous poem 'L'Amiral cherche une maison à louer', Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara mobilise French, German and English, the languages of the warring powers, to stage a multi-voiced text.³ This has a curious double identity: perfectly readable in its printed state, in performance it becomes a self-cancelling cacophony, redundant as a communicative exercise, since it becomes inaudible apart from its final negation, 'l'amiral n'a rien trouvé'. Under attack, it seems, is the myth that language can reflect, far less construct, a meaningful and rational world.

Hugo Ball's sound poem 'Karawane', written in 1916, is a defining instance of Zurich Dada that crystallises the power of the group's experimentation with glossolalia – writing or speaking in tongues, and with poetry as performance. As Ball explains (2003: 155–6), 'Diese Verse haben die Möglichkeit, allen Schmutz abzutun, der an dieser vermaledeiten Sprache klebt wie von Maklerhänden, die die Münzen abgegriffen haben' ('These poems have the potential to cleanse the accursed language of all the filth that clings to it, as to the hands of brokers worn smooth by coins'). Ball's response was to produce an approximation of a primal language that falls short of conveying meaning yet has an overwhelming, almost physical presence. Its striking strangeness on the page is intensified when performed aloud (2007: 68):

jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla
 grossiga m'pfa habla horem
 égiga goramen
 higo bloiko russula huju
 hollaka hollala
 anlogo bung
 blago bung blago bung
 bosso fataka
 ü üü ü
 schampa wulla wussa ólobo
 hej tatta gôrem
 eschige zunbada
 wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu
 tumba ba – umf
 kusagauma
 ba – umf

Paradoxically, Ball's invented words draw on the lexis and morphology of many real languages, in which respect his poem presents a certain parallel with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In spite of these recognisable elements, the poem as a whole falls far outside of making sense. At certain moments, we seem to witness the collapse of language as words crumble and disintegrate into fragmented, isolated lexemes: 'Ü ü'.

As T. J. Demos observes (2003: 154), 'while Ball's language performs multinational difference, it nevertheless resists the subsumption of speech into a transparent, universal melting pot language, or a utopian Esperanto'. Michel de Certeau makes an intriguing connection

³ Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara, 'L'Amiral cherche une maison à louer', *Cabaret Voltaire*, 6–7.

between language and social space, seeing glossolalia as a kind of utopia, but one that relates to language from a position of otherness and exile:

Il faut un semblant qui échappe à la localisation, pour poser une question universelle (qu'est-ce que « dire » sans dire quelque chose) et par définition privée de lieu propre. [...] ce que l'utopie est à l'espace sociale, la glossolalie l'est à la communication orale, en circonscrivant dans un simulacre linguistique tout ce que la voix réalise d'autre que la langue lorsqu'elle la parle. (28)

Glossolalia, then, is 'un semblant', 'un simulacre linguistique', yet it is a device that perfectly embodies language as dislocated from any specific place – an atopia, then, rather than a utopia. Extending the spatial analogy, in *The Coming Community* (1993) Agamben finds promise in the 'taking-place' of language, in our experience of language (*experimentum linguae*) in infancy, when language is still 'other', when gesture is a forceful presence and when words are no longer just noise, but not yet sound imbued with meaning.

If Ball's glossolalia explores the limits of language as a communicative medium, it also threatens to dislocate conventional notions of poetry. Other lesser-known Dada texts do so in a subtler but equally subversive way. The *Anthologie Dada* that constituted the fourth and fifth number of the group's eponymous journal published a curiously hybrid text by Hans Arp, Walter Serner and Tristan Tzara. Ostensibly an advertisement for Richard Huelsenbeck's book *Verwandlungen* (Transformations), it is something of a Trojan hobby horse, *un dada de Troie*, since it resembles a Dada poem in its syntactic contortions and non-sequiturs (Tzara 1919: 10). Not only does it flow inconspicuously from German into French, but from the first two six-syllable words, 'cacadoufarbige Butzenscheibenohren', it announces an interlingual poetic quality: 'cacadou' is a Gallicised version of the German word Kakadu, which is also the name of one of the main characters in the story. The text includes the names of other characters, Jamaika, Butterweg, Otero, as well but detaches them from any clear context. 'Butzenscheibenohren' is a phonetically satisfying compound noun that brings together *Ohren*, meaning ears, and *Butzenscheiben*, bull's eye glass panes, into a strangely compelling visual analogy. As an introduction to Huelsenbeck's *Verwandlungen*, this is highly unconventional, but it is a brilliant illustration of Dada's subversive textual tactics. Such astonishing linguistic and cultural fluidity is an original and surprisingly apt way to express the nature of Huelsenbeck's novella, which revolves around extraordinary character transformations and takes the reader from Germany to Paris and from there to New York.

Arp's monolingual glossolalia

Other Dada poems use multiple discourses in ways that are less radically disruptive but just as subversive. Arp, who grew up in Alsace with three languages – his mother's French, his father's German and the local Alsatian dialect – switched between the former two in his poetry. On occasion, he introduced imaginary languages too, as in his 1924 poem 'firi' (1966: 47), which anticipates Henri Michaux's 'glu et gli' (1998: 110–12) and Antonin Artaud's poems that he himself dubbed 'crottes glossolaliantes' (1981: 32). As distinct from Tzara and Ball, Arp mostly avoided invented languages, but derived powerfully subversive effects from standard German or French lexis, as here in his 1920 'manifeste du crocodarium dada' (1966: 29):

Les lampes statues sortent du fond de la mer et crient vive DADA pour saluer les transatlantiques qui passent et les présidents dada le dada la dada les dadas une dada un dada et trois lapins à l'encre de Chine par arp dadaïste en porcelaine de bicyclette striée nous partirons à Londres dans l'aquarium royal demandez dans toutes les pharmacies les dadaïstes de raspoutine du tsar et du pape qui ne sont valables que pour deux heures et demie.

Arp is, as it were, speaking in tongues, but unlike Ball, he leaves the word intact, along with some of the outer manifestations of grammatical constructions, such as clearly identifiable substantives, prepositions, conjunctions and so on. His text blurs generic borders: it is no more a manifesto than it is a poem or an advertising slogan, but has elements of all three. The pseudo-grammatical declensions of the word 'dada' multiply its identity: it simultaneously occupies opposite poles of the semantic spectrum, being both a proper noun and an empty signifier.

What I will call Arp's monolingual glossolalia, akin to the phenomenon that Michael Riffaterre termed 'scrambling', can be understood in the context of what Arp defined as 'le sans-sens' (1966: 75). As opposed to le *non-sens*, le *sans sens* denotes an absence that is neither positive nor negative. By situating Dada on the side of this absence, Arp posits it as an alternative to the rationalist order that had corrupted humankind, and as a means of returning to a pre-logocentric elemental order. To read Arp's text is to witness language shedding the transparent skin of communication and acquiring a virtually tactile presence that obscures semantic clarity and defers, without entirely denying, comprehension. Lacking any identifiable source, possessing the elements that constitute meaningful communication but in a dislocated form that eludes our efforts to apprehend it, this text gives us a glimpse of what happens when language cuts itself free of the constraints imposed by the need to make sense.

Arp's citizenship changed from German to French after the First World War, and he applied unsuccessfully for Swiss citizenship in the 1920s. Much of his poetry and visual art seems to float above the political turbulence of his homeland, but on occasion it reminds us of the impact of world events on a native of 'ce pays tourmenté' as he describes Alsace in Jean-Marie Drot's 1959 film *A la recherche de Jean Arp, l'Alsacien*. In 1936, Arp submitted a frankly odd artwork made of papier mâché to the International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Intended to be displayed on a wall, it straddled different artistic genres such as sculpture, relief and the Surrealist object. Its perfunctory title, in English, offered no insights: *Object in Newspaper*.⁴ A year later, while the Nazis were displaying so-called degenerate art in Munich, Arp's object was exhibited in Paris, and on this occasion he gave it a new title that reflected his response to the political instability of those times: *Mutilé et apatride*. Close inspection reveals the place name 'Paris' displayed prominently but upside down in newsprint on its uppermost surface. On the outbreak of the First World War, Arp had taken the last train from Strasbourg to Paris before the borders were closed. It seems fitting that its name should reappear as Europe's borders were again under threat.

Form and its other

What, then, of Dada's children? To what extent can we trace a genealogy of multilingual poetry that leads us from Zurich in 1916 to the present day? I would suggest that two quite contrasting postwar tendencies pave the way: on the one hand Lettrisme and on the other poésie concrète. Polar opposites in terms of form, both movements rely heavily on foreignness, alterity and the 'visibility' of language as a medium. I will deal with them in turn.

The glossolalic incantatory poems that Antonin Artaud produced during his incarceration in Rodez seem to belong to obscure languages, and occasionally invoke Dada as if by accident:

o dedi
a dada orzoura
o dou zoura
a dada skizi⁵

⁴ See *The International Surrealist Exhibition*, 14.

⁵ Antonin Artaud, 'Artaud le Momo' (1974: 13).

Language in this form still gives value to the word as a unit of meaning, even if the words in question are mostly stripped of any obvious semantic function. What seems to be on display here is language as corporeal attack, as an exercise in ballistics; it communicates not so much verbally as viscerally. This underpins Derrida's observation that 'La pensée du *jet* est la pensée de la pulsion même, de la *force* pulsive, de la compulsion et de l'expulsion. De la force avant la forme' (1986: 63). Derrida wrote this in response to the obscure word 'subjectile' that Artaud uses in referring to his own drawings. It denotes a sort of graphic, semiotic and ontological *non-lieu*, characterised above all by a series of absences: neither figure nor ground, neither subject nor object, neither solid nor void, it has elements of all these. Derrida's text, itself originally intended to be published in German translation, muses on the impossibility of defining the subjectile and the untranslatability of the word itself: it aligns itself with the notion of the *entre-deux*, yet the term 'subjectile' resists translation, and this very paradox seems to define it as much as its physical presence that is also an absence – like the holes burnt into the paper on which Artaud's notes were written. 'En vérité son secret doit se partager avec le seul traducteur. Un subjectile paraît intraduisible, voilà l'axiome, il organise le corps-à-corps avec Artaud' (1986: 56–7).

Lettrisme and the 'texte discrèpant'

After Artaud, what Certeau defines as the 'voices of otherness' reappear in the work of Isidore Isou. Born in northern Moldavia in 1925, Isou was twenty years old when he came to Paris upon its liberation at the end of the Second World War. Only a few months after arriving there, he founded the Lettriste movement. In his 'textes discrèpants' and other Lettriste works, Isou sought to dislocate language from its conventional communicative function and social role; by using a combination of phonetic and graphic signs, he created what Hannah Freeman (2014: 78) terms 'a differently "spatialized" language, one that did not correspond to the strict parameters of national boundaries and was neither exclusively visual nor textual'. Isou's language leaves the printed page and takes on other material forms such as vinyl discs and tape reels. By recording sound at the moment of articulation, these experiments bring us closer to the body; yet at the same time, they expropriate language, alert us to the sheer otherness of pure sound detached from meaning: Isou refers to Lettrisme as a "langue étrangère" par excellence' (2003: 14). In this regard, his use of recording technology is a disruptive material in its own right, intensifying the de-semanticised projectile power of language by distorting it further.

In his film-manifesto from 1951, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, the celluloid is bleached and scored, and the soundtrack, detached from the visual frames, amplifies noise and visual distortion, drawing attention to the voice in all its pre-verbal materiality. Isou's debt to the sound experiments of the Futurists and Dada is clear.⁶ Transferring the scratchy, crackly soundtrack from vinyl onto film, Isou accentuates by mechanical means the somatic quality of sound.⁷ The film incorporates François Dufrêne's sound poem of 1949, 'J'interroge et j'investive: poème à hurler', dedicated to Artaud.⁸

Dufrêne's use of language combines neologistic 'pure' sound with a surprisingly high number of pre-existing words. Did he know that 'botra' is Slovenian for godmother, that 'botre' is the plural form of the same word and that 'boudre' is a type of sailing boat? Was he aware that *Khimya* is a proper name, or that *Khola* is a mountain village in Bolivia? We cannot say, and it is tempting to dismiss these instances of signification as accidents. But another line, spat out repeatedly, is unequivocally meaningful to French ears: 'Piètre

⁶ Ubuweb's sound archives are instructive – (<http://www.ubu.com/sound/dada.html>; accessed 20 March 2018).

⁷ Pavle Levi terms this practice 'retrograde remediation' (42).

⁸ See the discussion of Dufrêne's vocal performance in Cabañas (27).

PIKK', despite the unusual and very un-Gallic spelling, consists of sounds that convey an array of possible meanings in French. In Isou's film, the words are shouted by Dufrêne; they are intended to be heard, not read. These spellings appear as subtitles in the version of *Traité de bave et d'éternité* distributed in English-speaking countries. It seems significant that the subtitles do not offer a translation or explanation, but merely present a phonetic transcription of the sounds uttered, thereby accentuating their non-semantic quality. Yet it remains that the sounds of these words do convey meanings understandable to a French speaker. The word 'piètre' is a standard French adjective meaning mediocre, weak, derisory. 'Pikk' is not a French word, but its homophone 'pique' is a feminine noun that can be used to describe variously a toothpick, the weapon known as a pike, a spade in playing cards or a barbed comment. The phonetically identical masculine noun 'pic', on the other hand, refers to a woodpecker, the peak or crest of a mountain, or a pickaxe. Isou's word 'pikk' hints at all these definitions, but is not reducible to any of them, since its truest meaning seems to reside in the sheer power of its articulation. Curiously, the four letters P, I, K, K, if pronounced in French, read 'pays caca', which brings new associations that relate well to Isou's disdain for national boundaries.⁹

A similar polysemia occurs in another line, which is also repeated: 'ectre vectre plectre jectre'. Three of these words, 'Ectre', 'vectre' and 'jectre', are neologisms, but are suggestive in different ways. As a whole, the line has the semblance of logic associated with grammatical declensions or rhymes. And individually, the words contain quite diverse associations: 'ectre' hints at 'être', to be or being; 'vectre' sounds similar to 'vecteur', meaning a vector or line of force, but also an agent that transmits a parasite – this second meaning is apposite in view of the impression generated by Lettrist poetry that language is forever capable of spreading before our eyes and ears in an almost viral way. 'Jectre' conveys the sense of the verb 'jeter', meaning to throw, but also 'rejeter', to reject, and 'spectre' or ghost. By contrast, the word 'plectre' is a familiar word denoting the object used for plucking the strings of a lyre or oud.¹⁰ Its meaning relates well to the articulation of language as a weapon, of sounds endowed with the ballistic quality that Walter Benjamin associated with Dada (502).

Dufrêne and Isou inherited not only Dada's multilingualism and its experimentation with sound detached from its communicative function, but also what Arp called 'les lois du hasard'. This discovery was primarily aesthetic, as it entailed the artist's acceptance of chance as a participant in the creative process; yet it was also a direct response to the profound moral shock that humanity sustained in the First World War. As Arp later put it: 'Brusquement, "selon les lois du hasard", vers l'année 1914, l'esprit humain a subi une transformation: un problème éthique s'est posé à lui' (184).

In different historical circumstances, Isou's Lettrist poetry too came into being by chance, spurred on by the wholly unintentional but creative interference of languages: reading a sentence in French translated from the German philosopher Hermann Graf Keyserling, 'le poète dilate les vocables', Isou misunderstood this last word because of its similarity to the Romanian word for 'vowels'. As Isou noted, 'le malentendu a mené à la découverte' (2003: 30), since this triggered his own investigation of the particular expressivity of vowel sounds. Isou's insistence on vowels takes us back to Voltaire, who, in the article 'A, B, C ou Alphabet', stressed the special status of vowels as being closer to the pre-semantic language of shouts and exclamations:

⁹ I am grateful to MLO's external readers for this and other insights, which I have tried to incorporate into this essay.

¹⁰ *Trésor de la langue française* – (<http://www.le-tresor-de-la-langue.fr/definition/plectre>; accessed 15 March 2017).

Ne peut-on pas, sans offenser personne, supposer que l'alphabet a commencé par des cris et des exclamations? Les petits enfants disent d'eux-mêmes, *ha he* quand ils voient un objet qui les frappe; *hi hi* quand ils pleurent; *hu hu, hou hou*, quand ils se moquent; *aïe* quand on les frappe; et il ne faut pas les frapper. (94)

Isou does not explicitly acknowledge Voltaire, but does make a similar observation in referring to the nineteenth-century writer la comtesse de Ségur who, he observes, 'à déjà eu l'intuition du lettrisme en écrivant: "Les enfants rirent gaiement: Haha-hi-hahééé"' (2003: 32).

Writing in a different cultural and linguistic context, Ruth Spack has argued that translingualism entails not only the use of different languages but also 'the transformation of [writers'] linguistic and cultural identities' (112). This is an apt way to think about the Zurich Dada group and the Lettrists alike, since they seem intent on rejecting any single given national identity and instead subscribing to a world-view that sees not only language but identity too, as hybrid, provisional and multiple.

This is true also of concrete poetry, which inhabits a diametrically opposed stylistic realm but shares some of the linguistic traits we have observed. One of these is multilingualism. As Francis Edeline remarks, 'la poésie concrète allait d'emblée être internationale et, par voie de conséquence, polyglotte' (12). He cites the fact that Eugen Gomringer, its founding member, is a German speaker born in Bolivia who knows four languages. Alluding to the bilingual or multilingual character of much concrete poetry, Edeline notes the curious paradox that the multilingual poem is untranslatable, since to translate it into a single language would be to deny it the very heteroglossia that is its *raison d'être* (13). In *Des Tours de Babel*, Derrida poses 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?' (1991: 207–8).

Contemporary multilingual poets

Derrida's question seems to inhabit the work of a number of contemporary poets who embody what Marjorie Perloff, in homage to Khlebnikov's notion of the 'transrational', has defined as a 'translational poetics' (16). Anne Tardos, Caroline Bergvall and Cia Rinne are bilingual or multilingual to radically different degrees, but all have harnessed code-switching to express language's materiality, its strangeness and excess. As Steven Kellman observes: 'To translingual authors, no utterance can be automatic' (30). These poets write from a position of detachment from their mother tongue – from any mother tongue – which allows a certain distrust of the familiar to inhabit their writing. It is no coincidence that all three poets have harnessed digital media in their work, since the incorporation of different languages and their intersections is just one of the ways in which contemporary poetry expresses its multi-modal character; it thus has recourse to an array of linguistic, visual, auditory and performative channels (see, e.g., Tidigs and Huss 2017).

Anne Tardos is a poet whose linguistic identity embodies statelessness and a nomadism born of political upheaval. As a young girl, she fled with her family from Nazi-occupied Paris to Hungary where they lived until the 1956 revolution forced them to Vienna; in 1966 she settled in the United States. Tardos's poetry blends with insouciance the four languages with which she grew up, French, German, Hungarian and English; her performance texts incorporate visual images as well as noise and found words. Her collection *Uxudo* (1999) acquired its title from a computer error, a modern-day equivalent of Arp's Dada practice of allowing the typesetter to misinterpret his poor handwriting and thereby participate unwittingly in a new aleatory composition.

By way of an explanation of her methods, Tardos immerses her reader in a sensation of multilingualism that makes no concessions to the monoglot: '*Ami minden quand un yes or no je le said viens am liebsten hätte ich dich du süssee de ez nem baj das weisst du me a favor hogy innen se faire croire tous less birds from the forest who fly here by mistake als die Wälder langsam verschwinden*' (2011). At other moments, she more explicitly addresses the question of language and its multiplicity: 'then die vielen grossen állati nagy Imre. [...] This way and ainski our ancestors formed ce qu'on appelle die Sprache' (2011). The name Imre in this quotation probably relates to the eponymous Hungarian saint, also known as Emmerich – a name that etymologically as well as anagrammatically contains the element 'Heim', meaning home or homeland. Tardos's poetry is *unheimisch* and even *unheimlich* precisely because it lacks the stability that a single linguistic home would provide.

Caroline Bergvall's poems conjure up an array of crossovers and language interference that combine familiarity and otherness. Of Franco-Norwegian nationality, Bergvall has lived in Britain for many years; she writes mainly in English, but French and Norwegian words infiltrate her texts with unsettling results for the monoglot reader. At a time when Europe's once-free borders are being undermined by claims for national and regional independence and fears around immigration, the empowering translingualism of Bergvall's work has acquired a renewed relevance and urgency.

In *Eclat* (1996), snatches of French surreptitiously infiltrate and add further layers of complexity to a typographically arresting stream of words: 'Andbreakingwateràreculons & asthoughwewerent' (1996: 10). The volume *Fig* (2005) brings together various projects that reflect on language as fragmentary, incomplete and hybrid, and on the interferences and impediments that often conspire to undermine the spoken word as a vehicle for communication. Bergvall's 'Say: Parsley' derives its title from the notorious 'Parsley Massacre' that took place in the Dominican Republic in 1937: the soldiers of the dictatorial president, Rafael Trujillo, used the pronunciation of the Spanish word 'perejil' as a shibboleth to distinguish between Spanish-speaking Dominicans and francophone Haitians, and proceeded to kill several thousand of the latter (2005: 49–60). A contrasting note is struck by '16 Flowers', also reproduced in *Fig*. It derives from a project with poet John Cayley in which flower motifs in Proust and Genet were excerpted and used as the basis of computer-generated 'transliterated morphs' that fluctuate between the original French and their English translations. Bergvall wrote sixteen lines, each built around an italicised nodal word. The resultant text flits between the two languages, settling in neither, creating an intriguing but impenetrable hybrid that beckons us to add interpretations of our own: 'hover matin l'aRose in-Mers' (2005: 14).

For Bergvall, the attraction of English as a language of poetry is due in large part to the fact that it is not her mother tongue. This enables it to retain an element of distance and prevents it from becoming a straightforwardly transparent medium of communication: '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.'¹¹ Her performances, such as those charted in *Fig*, evoke powerfully the intransigence of language and the difficulty of communicating with others in a multilingual, multicultural world.

Bergvall's *Drift* (2014) is a meditation on the evolution of languages and cultures, but also on the very current and deeply problematic phenomenon of migration and statelessness. The book connects Viking legends and the anonymous tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Seafarer' with contemporary texts, including a report on the tragic – and entirely avoidable – deaths of sixty-two migrants from five African countries on a small inflatable boat between

¹¹ Caroline Bergvall, interviewed by Alexander Vesterlund at Godsbanen in Aarhus during an 'Art Writing' seminar held by Aarhus Litteraturcenter, March 2013.

Tripoli and the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2011. The boat was spotted by vessels from different nations and photographed by military aircraft, but was left adrift and unaided until all but ten of its occupants had died of thirst or drowned in the waves. The book's presentation of Nordic runes and isolated letters lost in the fog on the page comes to stand for the way in which international bureaucracy can cause nations to lose their moral compass.

The concrete poems of Swedish-born German poet Cia Rinne engage by turns playfully and soberly with language as multiple and provisional. Incorporating German, French and English, her visual poems rely on interlingual wordplay to explore the overlaps, false friends and multiple meanings that can emerge from the collision of different languages. Her collection entitled *zaroum* plays on Khlebnikov's transrational language 'zaum', but also hints at the German words *warum* (why) and *darum* (that is why) (2009). In exploring the interstices between languages, she also reflects on different societies and the troubled hegemonic relations that underpin the treatment of ethnic groupings. *The Roma Journeys* (2007), a book and exhibition project created in collaboration with photographer Joakim Eskildsen, stemmed from their stays in seven countries over a period of six years. The book's photographs and texts focus on contemporary Romani communities and their relationship to the dominant cultures on whose margins they live. Rinne's essay incorporates quotations from Paul Celan's Holocaust poem 'Todesfuge' (Death Fugue) and in so doing draws out connections to historical tragedies of mass deportation and genocide.

Other examples of Rinne's work allude more obliquely to nation-states by means of wordplay and typography. One poem from her first collection, *L'Usage du mot*, uses a central dividing blank space to split French and German words, not to mark their difference, but to suggest their lexical proximity (2007). The poem alternates the closely related French words 'vieux' and 'vieille' with the ostensibly similar German words 'viel', meaning much or a lot, and 'vielleicht', meaning perhaps. The act of splitting the words reveals their shared stem, 'vie', as if to suggest that these words all have the same underlying élan vital. But the association of the male form 'vieux' with abundance, and the female form 'vieille' with doubt, adds a subtle layer of gendered social criticism.

In a brilliantly simple concrete poem, Rinne takes issue with our world governed by borders. As she seems to imply, the very idea of a 'border' connotes order both empirically and orthographically. Rinne proposes instead an act of undoing that summons forth a subversive but life-affirming state of provisionality and flux:

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This essay began by alluding to Voltaire's reflections on the inadequacies of language and their relationship to other kinds of absence and instability. The more recent writers discussed reveal how poetry that incorporates more than one language can be seen as a particularly effective vehicle for expressing issues of migration, displacement and social instability. The poetry in question frequently draws on the experiences of its authors and the circumstances of its composition, which often entail travelling between nations and simply being at home in no one state. The instability of political borders and the effects of war are inseparable from the forces that produce this poetry. Paradoxically, war, with all the destruction it brings, has often been the catalyst for multilingual and translingual poetry, as well as the obsessive

object of its hatred. In myriad ways, the poets under scrutiny compel us to confront the links between linguistic instability in translingual poetry on the one hand, and internationalism and political instability on the other. Rinne, and the other poets whose work we have considered, seem to share Voltaire's conviction that our words are unreliable materials, at least if our intention is to construct some mythical, all-encompassing linguistic totality – a solid wall of certainties. Instead of this, what translingual poems can do is precisely to magnify the inherent uncertainties of language and, in the process, bring into sharp relief the quasi-infinite complexity of words and the endless fascination that they elicit from us. Our experience of the world is often at odds with the tools we use to give it meaning. But it is the particular merit of translingual poetry to compel us to think about this opacity and feel it more acutely, and, occasionally, to open up portals through which we can glimpse a shared humanity.

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