UNIVERZITA KARLOVA – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The Translingual Poem: Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, Li-Young Lee

Translingvální báseň: Ilya Kaminsky, Wong Mayová, Li-Young Lee

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):
Doc. Justin Quinn, PhD

Zpracoval (author):
Anton Romanenko

Praha, leden 2024

Studijní obor (subject):
Anglofonní literatury a kultury

Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 10. ledna

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Prague, January 10, 2024   Anton Romanenko

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Incident at a Poetry Reading

In 2023 I attended a poetry reading in Prague, organized by a collective known as the Prague Multilingual Scene. Most of the people who come to their events write poetry in English, which for many is a second language. That night, a poet was performing whose work especially interested me. His first name was Renat (unfortunately, I do not know his last name) and he was from Kharkiv. He had come to the Czech Republic following Russia's atrocious full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Renat was around 20 years old. He performed in English. As he told me later that night, he had dabbled in poetry while still living in Ukraine, although I am not certain whether he wrote in Russian or Ukrainian. Introducing his poems on the stage, he said that he switched into English because he had met new friends in Czechia, and he wanted to express his appreciation of their relationship poetically in a language they were able to understand. His knowledge of Czech was not yet sufficient for writing poetry, so he turned to English as a compromise, a lingua franca. After the reading, Renat kindly shared two of his translingual poems with me. I would like to cite one of them as I find it deeply moving as well as insightful and pertinent to my future discussion:

> Birdies send me wishes, from my lovely home;
> Nightingales sing me on the roofs of chrome.
> Now I'm also mightant, with new land and language
> All my dreams and struggles – are my only baggage.
>
> In my darkest hour, when the skies have fallen,
> When my peaceful future was violently stolen
> The soul was cured from this terrible wreck
> With kind Czech friends – Richard, Matej, Frantishek
>
> It was said that friendship makes us move straight forward.
> Friendship is for leaders, not for one who's a coward.
> Friends will stay around in my joy and sorrow.
> And my heart is beating "thank you for tomorrow".
>
> In a distant country I was largely gifted:
> Found my dear comrades, I am so uplifted!
> Nightingales sing me on the roofs of chrome.
> Birdies send me wishes from my second home.

Apart from minor inaccuracies like the typo in what was probably meant to be "migrant," as well as the occasional missed article, the poem succeeds at imitating the Romantic lyrical model. Language here becomes a propelling force guiding the logic of narration, and the rhyme ensures the thematic movement. The combination of words "sorrow / tomorrow" is an example of how, through the formal interplay of language, the poet's experience of escaping war's horror transforms into a promise of the future life. The poem effectively stages a conflict of human emotions against the historical background of war, foregrounding the idea that friendship is a way out of the misery of loneliness and post-war trauma. The fact that such critical interpretation is possible at all is indicative of the poem's wholesomeness. This text is an artefact that can be analyzed effectively with interpretational models already existing in the Anglophone literary context, which means that it fits well with it.

What cultural stimuli made Renat choose the exact form and tone? The basic assumption here is that no cultural phenomenon appears in a vacuum. One way to look at the poem is to say that Renat wrote it based on an idea of poetry that he must have received in his first culture. However, already at this level difficulties arise. Every culture is a mosaic of borrowed and homemade forms and notions. How much of Renat poem's Romanticism can be attributed to the Ukrainian Russophone environment of Kharkiv (before the war Kharkiv was a dominantly Russophone city) where in schools two national literatures were taught? Ukrainian and Russian Romantic literary models are different from each other. One of Russia's most well-known Romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) served as an officer in the Caucasus region, contributing to the Russian colonial effort. Even in his poems where he is critical of the Russian statehood, he indirectly glorifies the Russian nation. Contrary to this, most of Taras Shevchenko's (1814-1861) Romantic poems thematized breaking away from the colonial oppression of the Russian Empire. Has this conflict of Romantic models influenced Renat's handling of the Romantic lyrical intonation? On a broader level, the question can be asked how much of Renat's Romantic sensibility can be attributed to the fact that Romanticism is probably the most well-

known poetic movement of all times? As for the form, the question is why his poem is based primarily on rhyme and not on other formal devices. Is there a way of accounting for all these choices when all we have in our possession is just the text?

As for the formal side of the poem, apparent features, such as rhyme, rhythm, or sound similarity are the most recognizable external aspects of language that provoke linguistic creativity. In one of the most recent studies on literary translingualism, the critic and translingual poet Eugene Ostashevsky discusses how translingual attention to language often starts as an engagement with its materiality.[1] Both poets and language learners are prone to being creative with word puns, rhymes, and sound semblances as they learn the language and discover its possibilities. As for the other questions about Renat's poem, it may be more complicated and perhaps even unnecessary to look for an answer. The questions themselves are indicative of how many different cultural contingencies are involved into the creation of a translingual poem. These contingencies operate on various anthropological and literary levels. The most immediate human dimension of the translingual poem is the desire to communicate a poetic content so that it can be understood by people from a particular linguistic community. Renat switched into English to address his friends Richard, Matej, and František. Yet, translingual literary practice is broader than being a lingua franca poet. The formal aspects of the translingual poem include the ways in which the poet handles the materiality of language. An important structuralist point to be made here is that the application of the poetic function (Roman Jakobson) does not depend on grammatical excellency. Judging by his command of English as it was revealed in our conversation after the poetry reading, Renat was not the most experienced speaker. Yet, he was able to handle formal elements such as rhyme and rhythm to create a poetic effect. One of the reasons why translingual literary practice is possible at all is that there are language-unspecific universal poetic principles that can be applied in some languages. For example, in her discussion of English and Chinese poetries Cecile Chu-

---

[1] Eugene Ostashevsky, "Translingualism: A Poetics of Language Mixing and Estrangement," *boundary 2* 50, no. 4 (November 2023): 183.

chin Sun speaks of repetition as the lenses that can be used for the comparison of such distant literary traditions.[2] Characteristically, Cecile Chu-chin Sun speaks of repetition and not anaphora. Repetition is a broader term that can be discovered in different languages and traditions, whereas anaphora is a concept developed by Western literary criticism and is rather applicable for the analysis of Western literary artefacts. The fact that there are principles common to different languages and literary cultures is why the translingual practice is possible at all. If poetry involves arranging linguistic patterns for an artistic effect, this implies that it can achieved in many languages, suggesting a more universal understanding of the poetic effect. From this perspective, poetry is seen as a cognitive faculty of the human brain, which takes delight in recognizing patterns. The cognitive poetic function manifests itself in the creative bending of linguistic material, but this material can change. Devices and metaphors change as languages change, but poetry remains. Literary tradition is a history of preferring certain devices over others. For example, in Anglophone poetry assonance has played a more important role than in Russian where the inflectional structure of the noun has allowed, historically, for a more persistent use of rhyme.

We have seen in Renat's poem that the structure of Romantic lyrical subject can be conveyed effectively despite minor linguistic inaccuracies. This brings us to another important aspect of translingual writing. The thematic arrangement of a translingual text is always a complex network of potential meanings, both actualized and dormant, conscious and unconscious, disclosed and unrevealed. One may say that the same is true of monolingual poetry and that the creative process of writing is generally impossible to account for. No psychological or cognitive theory can fully describe how creativity functions. However, I would still argue that the translingual poem operates in a more complex modality because it combines more than one field of cultural and linguistic potentiality. In a translingual text the poetic choice can be affected by the author's first culture *and* by their second culture. Perhaps, at this point the mere distinction between cultures as discrete entities should be abandoned. In translingual writing it is impossible (and unnecessary) to

---

[2] Cecile Chu-chin Sun, *The Poetics of Repetition in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

demarcate the line between one culture and another. As Yasemin Yildiz suggests, a multilingual

person's relation to different cultural dimensions such as "familiar inheritance, social

embeddedness, emotional attachment, personal identification, or linguistic competence"[3] can be

associated with several languages that the person speaks:

> Contrary to the monolingual paradigm, it is possible for all these different dimensions to be distributed across multiple languages, a possibility that becomes visible only in multilingual formations or when the monolingual paradigm is held in abeyance. Multiple origins, relations, and emotional investments are possible and occur daily […] This means that we need to reimagine subjects as open to crisscrossing linguistic identifications, if not woven from the fabric of numerous linguistic sources. Such multiplicity breaks with the monolingual premise so often hidden in the notion that language correlates to identity. Languages do indeed relate to identities, but not in any predetermined, predictable way […][4]

The translingual person does not probably think of themselves as being divided into two parts; one

part being, for example, Chinese and the other English. Instead, the identity of a translingual

speaker can be seen as a unified whole, the result of a history of growth and change. A similar

logic applies to poetry. Rather than being separated into discrete fields, the cultural data is fused

in a single whole, encapsulated in the poem.

One reason why cultures can be conceptualized as distinct domains is to discuss cultural

exchange. This notion encompasses the ways in which meanings generated in one culture travel

to another. However, in translingual poetry, this concept becomes less relevant because all

potential cultural exchange occurs in the mind of the translingual author. Different cultural

meanings are fused into one entity before being materialized in language. This is an important

distinction as it affects how translingual poems can be engaged with critically. When we speak of

cultural exchange in the work of authors belonging to different cultures, we discuss the ways in

which ideas as singular intellectual entities are produced, transmitted, and transformed through the

---

[3] Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 205.
[4] Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, 205.

language and identities of these authors. During this process, a lot of things can be distorted. As Justin Quinn writes in his book on transnationalism and cold war poetry, when it comes to "the journey of cultural artefacts out of one language […] into another […] we need to attend to how the alien material resonates in its host culture, how it is transformed there and what happens when it travels on."[5] When dealing with poems produced by distinct authors, the "journey of cultural artefacts" is more easily traceable because a unit of measurement is a text. It is possible to recreate the ways in which cultural meanings travel from the work of one author to another. A good example is Ezra Pound's essay on Chinese language. Pound's understanding of Chinese was far from academically precise,[6] yet he was able to create an original artistic theory that affected the development of Anglophone poetry in the twentieth century. The inaccuracy of cultural exchange in Pound's work can be identified because the result of Pound's interpretation of Chinese is a text, a distinct separate unit produced by an individual. This is different in the case of translingual writing. It is harder to identify the concrete ways in which different cultural information is mixed up in a translingual poem because the fusion of different cultural meanings happens on a pre-textual stage.

Translingual Poetic Practice as a Cognitive Faculty

A discussion of poetry from the monolingual perspective is often aimed at discovering the links between the content of a poem and the devices allowed for by the materiality of a language. The goal of this activity is to discover the ways in which the sensuous dimension of words is correlated with the poem's meaning:

> To understand p[oetry], therefore, we must understand words and the word. […] In all the arts the medium is mere substance, alien and opaque to expression; and in this respect words appear in p. as pure sound—sounds in and of themselves, having aural textures, and sounds patterned,

[5]Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 42.

[6] See, for instance: Haun Saussy, Ernest Fenollosa, and Ezra Pound, "Fenollosa Compounded: A Discrimination," in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, eds. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008)

qua pattern. […] Sound must be taken as sound in p., but also as the creator of meaning. Neither can erase the other, since each requires the other in order to exist. These two dimensions of the word are constant interinanimations of each other inverse.[7]

While looking for the intersection of form and theme is important for understanding the translingual poem as well, a discussion of translingual poetry should start earlier, before language itself comes into the picture. Translingual poetic practice presupposes a dimension of poetry that reveals itself not in the materiality of language, but as a cognitive function of the speaker's mind. From this perspective, the most basic definition of poetry would be an arrangement of patterns. The incentive of poetry originates before an artist discovers a language. As we will see later, this intermedial understanding of poetry is important for such translingual writers as Wong May who is not only a poet but also a painter. For Ilya Kaminsky, the intermedial dimension of language is also important. The application of the poetic function is not the result of the specificity of language, but rather of the author's cognitive decision to create poetry. From that perspective, language can be seen as a type of material that an artist chooses to use as a medium for fulfilling their desire to conduct a poetic practice. This is also why in the work of early translingual poets like Ivan Blatný, whose poems will be discussed in the next chapter, there is a substantial use of multilingualism. Combining two languages in the space of one poem means switching from the materiality of one language to another for the most immediate artistic effect. The poetic effect emerges not in the language itself, but in the space between languages.

Understanding poetry as a cognitive faculty correlates with contemporary linguistic research that moves away from describing language as a rigid formal system. Approaches such as usage-based linguistics conceptualize language "as a cognitive resource constructed and continuously developing on the basis of analyses of the frequency and distribution of form-meaning pairings in the input experienced during usage events."[8] Since language is not seen as a

---

[7] T.V.F.Brogan, "Poetry," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger, T.V.F.Brogan, Frank J. Warnke, O.B.Hardison, and Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 939.
[8] Christopher J. Hall, "Cognitive perspectives on English as a lingua franca," in *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, eds. Jennifer Jenkins, Will Baker, and Martin Dewey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 75.

formal system, linguistic competence can be described as an ability to correlate one's language proficiency with the "virtual language," which refers to "a mental repertoire of possibilities for novel English constructions determined "bottom-up" by individual experience. On this interpretation, there will be as many "virtual Englishes" as there are users of English."[9] To speak a language means to acquire an experience-based proficiency in an arbitrary symbolic network. There are as many symbolic networks as there are languages, and the speaker's movement through them is only indicative of the extent to which they are willing to invest cognitively into engaging with this network. From this perspective, translingualism is understood as a form of communication that is conceptualized not in terms of the structural characteristics of linguistic systems, but as a performative action based on the cognitive ability to navigate symbolic networks:

> Moving beyond the notion of multilingualism as a collection of discrete language systems, the translingual orientation offers a more integrated and nuanced way of understanding how people communicate. Without assuming the need for shared norms for communicative success, the translingual orientation attends to negotiation practices and diverse semiotic resources. One way to explain the term *translingual* is to consider its prefix—*trans*—because it highlights the two central premises of the term. First, the prefix acknowledges the fact that communication transcends individual languages. Since modernity, societies have had a long tradition of labeling languages and varieties within them, such as English, Japanese, and African American Vernacular English. However, partly because of the postmodern social conditions, featuring the increasingly immense mobility of people across geographical and digital spaces, scholars […] are now compelled to view communication as involving mobile semiotic resources that can be put together for particular contexts, audiences, and purposes […] Aligned with this practice-oriented perspective, translingual practice regards linguistic boundaries not as empirically attestable objects, but as ideological constructs. By the same token, the binary relationship between native speakers and nonnative speakers is also abandoned in the translingual perspective.[10]

---

[9] Hall, "Cognitive perspectives on English as a lingua franca," 80.

[10] Daisuke Kimura and Suresh Canagarajah, "Translingual practice and ELF," in *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, eds. Jennifer Jenkins, Will Baker, and Martin Dewey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 295-296.

The idea that communication transcends individual languages is reinforced by Renat's poem analyzed at the beginning of this chapter. For Renat it was important to communicate a certain emotional content to his Czech friends, which is why he addressed the symbolic network of another language. The difference between the non-poetic communicative situation and the poetic one is that the artistic context implies more potential layers of meaning. One of these layers is literary tradition. The translingual poem is a text that navigates not only through the symbolic network of a language, but also through the symbolic network of tradition. In Renat's poem the tradition is that of European Romanticism. The Romantic lyrical model allows for a smooth transition into translingual literary mode, since Romanticism is a part of many European literary cultures and similar Romantic tropes are recognizable across different national literatures. However, the deeper a translingual writer delves into the tradition they are adopting, the more complex and nuanced their engagement with linguistic and cultural symbolic networks becomes.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis analyzes the work of three contemporary translingual poets, Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, and Li-Young Lee. It situates their translingual poetic practice in the context of Anglophone modernist literature, arguing that contemporary literary translingualism is different from the translingual models practiced in modernism. Chapter two analyzes the modernist models exemplified by Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Jolas, and Ivan Blatný and sets a historical context, allowing for the further critical engagement with the texts of the contemporary translingual poets. Chapters three and four analyze poems by Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, and Li-Young Lee through the concepts of theme (content) and form. These notions are understood broadly, enabling a discussion of authors whose cultural backgrounds and poetic methods vary substantially. Each of the two chapters focuses closely on several poems, trying to reveal how the poets construct formal and thematic arrangements for the creation of the poetic effect. Often, the analysis relies on comparing the translingual poets with established Anglophone writers.

This thesis has turned out to be more of a critical work rather than a theoretical study. More theoretical books on (not only literary) translingualism include titles such as *The Translingual Imagination* (2000) or *Nimble Tongues: Studies in Literary Translingualism* (2020) by Steven G. Kellman, or *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmpolitan Relations* (2014) by Suresh Canagarajah. Particularly interesting is Eugene Ostashevsky's essay *Translingualism: A Poetics of Language Mixing and Estrangement* (2023), which was published in the last months of working on my thesis. I could not engage with it more substantially, as most of my thesis had been already completed by the time I read it, but it fundamentally aligns with my thinking and intuition. Ostashevsky's ideas can be very efficient for future research in literary translingualism. However, for now I wanted to focus on the immediate critical analysis of the poems, revealing their human dimension as well as their textual mechanics. As I hope to have shown with Renat's poem, translingual poetic practice is often the result of drastic changes in the author's biography, which is why the biographical, human dimension of literary translingualism cannot be ignored.

Chapter 2: Models of Literary Translingualism in Modernism and Beyond

New Writers, Old Problems

In one of his interviews, Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon reveals that the most frequently asked question at his readings concerns his use of English as a non-native speaker.[11] Even though in anglophone literature there have been several major writers for whom English was a second language, the notion of someone writing in a language that is not their mother tongue is often viewed as unusual. Yet, literary translingualism is not a new practice. Different types of translingual writing have existed in the past. Contemporary literary translingualism develops these historical models. This chapter explores the work of three translingual poets who lived and wrote poetry in the 20th century, preceding contemporary poets.

During the modernist period, two main models of literary translingualism emerged. The first is represented by Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov who both adopted English. Even though their work aligns with the historical boundaries of modernism, Conrad and Nabokov's adoption of the translingual method can be seen as a necessity, something they had to do to continue writing. This stands in contrast to the second variant of modernist translingual practice, exemplified by Franco-German-American writer Eugene Jolas, whose translingual and multilingual poems were a modernist experiment. Jolas, a prominent figure in the surrealist movement, used translingual texts to explore the limits of language and subjectivity. His translingual writing, deeply theoretical, emerged from modernist polemics and fundamentally aligned with the concept of "art for art's sake."

A third model of literary translingualism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, which is associated with the work of Czech poet Ivan Blatný, who wrote multilingual and translingual poems during his exile in England in the 1970s. Blatný was among the first

---

[11] Aleksandar Hemon, *Writers on the Fly*, interviewed by Ben Hill, YouTube, April 28, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcOmTstY1E4&t=16s.

translingual writers to shift the attention from linguistic playfulness and meticulousness to the communicative aspect of poetry. Unlike modernist writers like Nabokov or Jolas, Blatný's poems were not as focused on achieving a perfect style or creating experiments. Instead, his work delved into the communicative aspect of translingual and multilingual writing. It focused more on mediating the poetic effect as something that can be found in the unrefined, multilingual space between languages. This is neither an experiment nor a style. Rather, Blatný's multilingual and translingual writing emerged as a natural response to his life conditions. The primary goal of his texts was to communicate the immediate poetic content using the means that were available to him.

Together, Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Jolas, and Ivan Blatný set precedents for contemporary translingual poetry. While none of these authors is necessarily a direct influence on the poets I will discuss later in the thesis, they help us understand contemporary forms of translingual poetry.

The Anxiety of Influence

Modernist translingual writers assimilated and reproduced preexisting literary models. Justin Quinn describes the work of Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov as an attempt to correlate their own writing with an established literary line, which positioned them in a clear relation to traditions and audiences:

> When forging his prose style, Joseph Conrad modelled it on the particular mode of realist fiction that had emerged in England during the nineteenth century. Nabokov is a more complex case, if only because he was influenced by so many models from both the Russian and French traditions, when he turned to English in the 1930s. Yet anglophone prose had also absorbed many of those models (Turgenev, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Balzac, among others) in the preceding decades through writers such as James, Howells, Galsworthy, Forster, to name but a few; so, these eased his passage into English. Nabokov projected an image of European aristocratic sophistication in his prose, deliberately keeping the raw and raucous elements of US literature at arm's length (though he maintained an

anomalous fondness for Jack London). His style had an extraterritorial mien, a non-local provenance (at least from the point of view of a nativist US or British tradition), but he was targeting the center of a predominantly British tradition, and an Anglo-American European audience. Also, his works required a high English proficiency in readers. The contours and features of Nabokov's novels thus roughly answer the abilities of a particular audience.[12]

Nabokov's engagement with the tradition of European literature, which was associated with linguistic and thematic complexity, required a great effort to reproduce his preferred style in a second language. On a broader scale, the challenge of aligning one's work with an established tradition was one of the key preoccupations of modernism. Modernism problematized the relation to tradition as much as it broke with it. These two extremes are embodied by the poets T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, each significant for understanding the evolution of translingual writing. The translingual literary mode encompasses both a movement towards and away from tradition, involving a simultaneous departure from one culture and an embrace of another.

For modernist translingual writers, T.S. Eliot's perspective, as expressed in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919) is pertinent. Eliot argued that as a poet "develops or acquires the consciousness of the past," this growth results in the "continual surrender of himself [the poet] as he is at the moment to something more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."[13] Eliot suggests that for a writer to integrate into a tradition, they must be both subtly recognizable and strikingly innovative. Eliot himself, an American who became a prominent European Anglophone writer, can be seen as a proto-translingual figure. Rejecting a nativist American tradition as perhaps represented by a precursor like Walt Whitman or a peer like William Carlos Williams, he adopted a European Anglophone idiom, tracing back to poets like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and John Donne. Eliot's shift between the stylistic realms of American and British literature resembles the transition translingual writers make as they adopt a new language and literary tradition. This process can be understood

---

[12] This passage from an unpublished book was shared with me in personal communication.
[13] T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1934), 17.

through Harold Bloom's concept of the 'anxiety of influence,' which articulates the mechanics of how a poet acquires their own voice among other writers:

> When a potential poet first discovers poetry as being both external and internal to himself, he begins a process that will end only when he has no more poetry within him, long after he has the power (or desire) to discover it outside himself again. Though all such discovery is a self-recognition, indeed a Second Birth, and ought, in the pure good of theory, to be accomplished in a perfect solipsism, it s an act never complete in itself. Poetic Influence in the sense – amazing, agonizing, delighting – of other poets, as felt in the depths of the all but perfect solipsist, the potentially strong poet. For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of being found by poems – great poems – outside him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever. [14]

In this passage the awareness of *the other selves* refers to the necessity of learning the work of canonized authors that a poet must familiarize themselves with on their quest of becoming a poet. It is impossible to become a poet without taking into consideration the work of others, without making their legacy part of one's own poetic identity. Bloom speaks of "the dread of threatened autonomy". The choice of the word is significant. Autonomy, from the monolingual perspective, means a complete otherness. An autonomous poem is a poem written in another language. To use a language is to be aware of its symbolic contingencies and be able to use them consciously for artistic purposes. The better the poet controls the meanings flowing into their work, the more they become aware of the intricacies of a tradition they adopt. This sense of control, of self-awareness is at the core of T.S.Eliot's model of being unique through losing oneself. The anxiety of influence can be seen as a literary mechanism of assimilation and self-identification as it is through correlating one's work with the work of the others that the newly emerged author creates their unique voice.

---

[14] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25-26.

Vladimir Nabokov: The Painful Mastery of Style

Vladimir Nabokov's first English novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) is self-aware as it attempts to overcome the limitations imposed by the author's translingualism. On the one hand, the novel generally contains the sophisticated elements of Nabokov's Russian style. On the other hand, as the author's first attempt to write in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* foregrounds its own translingual strangeness. The novel is unique because this rhetoric is made visible to the reader.

Working on the novel, Nabokov was uncertain of his English. To minimize its linguistic flaws, he asked his friend Lucie Léon to copy-edit the manuscript. Brian Boyd cites her recollections of their sessions:

> Volodia started coming over several afternoons a week, around 3 p.m. He was always on time. He was most anxious that this first novel in English should sound neither "foreign" nor read as though it had been translated into English. We both sat at the large mahogany desk and worked for several hours each time.[15]

Nabokov's worry that the language of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* might reveal the non-English origin of its author tells us much about modernist translingual literary subjectivity. He was concerned not only about the idiomaticity of the language but also about the subtler category of the inner flow of prose. He wished to produce an impression that the novel originated in an Anglophone linguistic environment without overtones of translation. Like a butterfly mimicking the color scheme of a flower field it inhabits, Nabokov sought to emulate Englishness – perhaps not because he was afraid that he would not be accepted, but because it was an artistic gesture in keeping with the aspirations of modernism.

One of the ways in which Nabokov mitigated this anxiety was by turning it into a formal element of the novel. Although not strictly autobiographical, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is about a Russian writer who switches into English, like Nabokov himself. The narrator of the novel

---

[15] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 503.

is Sebastian Knight's brother (although it is not clear whether the narrator can be trusted). It is through his detached gaze that the reader learns about the details of Knight's life. The narrator also frequently comments on Knight's work, including his imperfect use of English:

> one little detail strikes me as especially pathetic. It appears that Sebastian's English, though fluent and idiomatic, was decidedly that of a foreigner. His r's when beginning a word, rolled and rasped, he made queer mistakes, saying, for instance, 'I have seized a cold' or 'that fellow is sympathetic' — merely meaning that he was a nice Chap. He misplaced the accent in such words as 'interesting' or 'laboratory'. He mispronounced names like 'Socrates' or 'Desdemona'. Once corrected, he would never repeat the mistake, but the very fact of his not being quite sure about certain words distressed him enormously and he used to blush a bright pink when, owing to a chance verbal flaw, some utterance of his would not be quite understood by an obtuse listener. In those days, he wrote far better than he spoke, but still there was something vaguely un-English about his poems.[16]

In this passage Nabokov projects the author's own linguistic uncertainty to a character in the novel. However, as the narrator continuously proves his ability to write in an exquisite style, the alleged linguistic inadequacy paradoxically only emphasizes the novel's linguistic brilliance. Nabokov seems to admit that a part of his anglophone novel has something to do with a lack of linguistic nativity, but at the same time he introduces a mechanism in his text that turns translingualism into a visible element actively engaged with the rest of the novel's formal elements. Translingualism is not only an attribute of a character. Instead, it becomes a formal entity that partly governs the logic of narration and determines where the narrator's attention is invested. The purpose of this move is to juxtapose a perceived lack of linguistic competence, as illustrated by Sebastian Knight's imperfect English, with the linguistic mastery attributed to the narrator. Nabokov's linguistic self-consciousness becomes a constitutive part of his English style.

Sebastian Knight's inability to reproduce Englishness lies in his failure to come to terms with English languaculture. The latter is a term developed by a number of scholars who lived and worked after Nabokov's death, and their research can shed light on the rhetoric of translingual linguistic uncertainty in Nabokov's novel. Languaculture refers to the ways in which linguistic

---

[16] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 40-41.

and cultural categories are intertwined in shaping "ways of seeing and acting, ways of thinking

and feeling."[17] As James P. Lantolf writes:

> Given that different languacultures utilize different classificatory systems, participants in different systems will have different experiences of reality, but will assume that their way of talking and thinking about reality is natural and obvious for all to see. Thus, English classifies time as something tangible and equivalent to an object that has substance such as 'a book'. Users of this languaculture pluralize and quantify time as they do books (e.g., books, days, five books, five days) and they use it as an argument of possessive verbs such as 'have' (e.g., I have five books, I have five days left before the exam).[18]

This explains the use of the word "un-English" in the passage from Nabokov's novel quoted above.

The term "un-Englishness" refers to any communicative instance in which the speaker applies a

conceptual frame borrowed from their native language to their second language. In *The Real Life

of Sebastian Knight*, for example, one of Knight's mistakes is saying "that fellow is sympathetic,"

which is one of the most common errors speakers of English as a second language may make. The

English word "sympathetic" is phonetically and etymologically similar to the Russian word

"sympatichnyj" meaning "nice" (and eventually entered English through the use of "simpatico"

by Italian immigrants). Nabokov was aware of the differences between the linguistic and cultural

frameworks of the languages he spoke. In one of his interviews, he provided a brief comparison

between English and Russian: "English is, syntactically, an extremely flexible medium, but

Russian can be given even more subtle twists and turns."[19] This awareness of the contrasts in

stylistic and conceptual affordances of his creative languages was the result of his transition into

English, which he seemed to take as irreversible as it was tragic. As he himself commented on it:

> that was a very difficult kind of switch. My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English.[20]

---

[17] James P.Lantolf, "Re(de)fining language proficiency in light of the concept of 'languaculture'," in *Advanced Language Learning*, ed. by Heidi Byrnes (Bungay: Continuum, 2006), 76.

[18] Lantolf, *Re(de)fining Language proficiency*, 76.

[19] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage books, 1990), 36.

[20] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 15.

Nabokov humbly bragged that his English was "second-rate," yet when he made this remark, *Lolita* had sold so well that he could afford to live in a five-star hotel in Montreux, Switzerland, where he moved in 1961 and remained until his death in 1977. His comment reveals the conceptual controversy at the core of his literary translingualism. Despite his success, Nabokov still considered his English to be non-native, far from the monolingual ideal and also distant from his more "natural" mother tongue.

Nabokov's first literary endeavors in Russian were poems he wrote in his youth before immigrating to Europe. Even though he is mostly known as a prose writer, he never abandoned his poetic ambitions. He also composed poems in English (his first poem in English was published in the *New Yorker*), and, like his novels, they are meticulously self-aware about their language. His novel *Pale Fire* is almost half written in rhyming verse. The novel is structured like an academic commentary to a long poem, with postmodern self-referentiality. One consequence of this structure is that we focus on the analytical, intellectual dimension of the text over the lyrical. Nabokov follows this pattern in other poems unrelated to the novel. Rather than focusing on lyrical effects, in his translingual verse Nabokov seems more interested in wordplay, puns, intellectualization, and cultural allusions. A notable example is the text "An Evening of Russian Poetry" which is about Nabokov's "personal drama" of switching from Russian into English as a writer. While the poem conveys a sense of melancholic contemplation, the lyrical appeal is not the main focus, as it competes with the poet's investment in the language itself. Translingualism is a visible independent textual element weaved into the fabrics of the text:

> The rhyme is the line's birthday, as you know,
> and there are certain customary twins
> in Russian as in other tongues. For instance,
> love automatically rhymes with blood,
> nature with liberty, sadness with distance,
> humane with everlasting, prince with mud,
> moon with a multitude of words, but sun
> and song and wind and life and death with none. [21]

[21] Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Poems*, ed. Thomas Karshan (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 2012), 135.

In this stanza the poet is as captivated by capturing the ghosts of Russian rhymes in English sentences as he is mediating a lyrical effect. The bookish interplay of allusions and puns becomes synonymous with lyricism itself. In the culminating last stanzas, the intellectualization reaches its apogee as Nabokov makes the two languages collide, effectively using his bilingualism as a literary device:

> Bessónitza, tvoy vzor oonýl i stráshen;
> lubóv moyá, otstóopnika prostée.
>
> (Insomnia, your stare is dull and ashen,
> my love, forgive me this apostasy.)[22]

Here the Russian phrase is paired with an English phrase that is almost identical in terms of sound and meaning. Taken separately in their respective languages, the two fragments can be read as instances of a lyrical poem as they thematize the feeling of sadness and the emotions of the speaker. However, when they are brought together in a bilingual poem, their meaning extends beyond the melancholia of a poet suffering from insomnia. It now includes the untranslatability of languages. The voice of the lyrical subject is clear, but it becomes intertwined with a linguistic self-awareness that intellectualizes the lyrical situation by turning it into an interplay of linguistic signs.

The bilingual element in Nabokov's poem represents an experiment with languages as a formal system. This experiment is notable for how constrained and meticulously conducted it is. Even though the poem has a distinct lyrical dimension, the main thematic tension arises from the impossibility of the languages coinciding in their meanings and sounds – after all, they are different languages. "An Evening of Russian Poetry" is about the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign; the rest of the thematic content, which involves insomnia, can be viewed as a secondary layer supporting this main subject. Nabokov's thematizing of language is typically modernist. Here, paradoxically, his work intersects with more radical forms of modernist poetics, despite his avoidance of extremer experimental forms.

---

[22] Nabokov, *Selected Poems*, 138.

Eugene Jolas: Translingualism as a Device

Nabokov was not the only modernist writer to experiment with bilingual poetics. His work has surprising parallels with the French-German-American writer and publisher Eugene Jolas. He was an important figure in modernist polemics of the 1920s in France, an editor of the influential surrealist journal *transition*, and the first publisher of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.[23] Jolas and Nabokov met during a dinner with Joyce, to which they were both invited by Lucie Léon, but there is no evidence that the two writers continued to communicate afterwards. The lack of further interaction is unsurprising, considering how far their literary worlds were from each other. For Nabokov linguistic experimentation was less important than for Jolas, who was drawn to radical poetics like Futurism. Jolas composed multilingual and translingual poems, combining the macaronic method with the surrealist poetics of nonsense. As is common with modernist authors, Jolas's literary practice was intertwined with his theoretical considerations. Jolas believed a universal language could unite humanity. This language, which was to be based on American English, was baptized Atlantica. In the spirit of the manifestos of the 1920s, Jolas wrote of Atlantica as a "language that will dance and sing, that will be the vision of the 'troisième oeil,' that will bind the races in a fabulous unity."[24] Since he was also a poet, Jolas attempted to illustrate his theory in his own poetic work. The scholar Eugenia Kelbert cites one of Jolas's previously unpublished poems, demonstrating how he defended his dream of the universal translingual ideal in a style that is reminiscent of his own theoretical writing as well as futurist poetics:

> The new language came with wingbeat of metallic birds
> The new vocabulary was a gustwind in the copse [sic] of the stonetrees
> where the undefested river had its source
> The ruins of the old tongues lay fallow in the dribblerain
> The new words made the great journey through the healing spring with the
> swirl of an ecstatic dance [...][25]

---

[23] Eugenia Kelbert, "Eugene Jolas: A Poet of Multilingualism," *L2 Journal* 7, no.1 (2015): 51, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9f7486t2#author.

[24] Kelbert, *L2 Journal*, 51.

[25] Kelbert, *L2 Journal*, 51.

Like Nabokov, Jolas's text is aware of its own linguistic makeup. However, unlike Nabokov, who rather tried to hide his translingualism behind complex and sophisticated stylistic arrangements, Jolas's poem draws attention to itself. The poem's formal preoccupation with language mirrors its main theme, which is also language. This marks one of the points where Nabokov and Jolas differ. For Nabokov, the lyrical dimension was as valuable as the linguistic, whereas Jolas's main motivation in writing seemed to be making a statement. The poem's central effect lies in its ability, or lack thereof, to manipulate language, to balance between conforming to the rules of English and failing to comprehend them. As Eugenia Kellbert writes:

> Is it a translingual's command of the language that makes the poet use the definite article in cases where a native speaker would most likely have used most of these nouns ("new language," "new vocabulary," "ruins of old tongues," etc.) as general terms? Perhaps, especially as Jolas tends, on the whole, to use nouns without articles (even in the plural) with great reluctance. In any case, the effect is striking: a mix of linguistic awkwardness with genuine ostranenie, a rhythmic incantatory quality and a somewhat ominous connotation.[26]

Kelbert's analysis of Jolas's text employs the formalist notion of estrangement (*ostranenie*). That her analysis relies on a central concept of modernist literary criticism indicates how much the poem is a product of its historical and cultural context. Viktor Shklovsky's notion of estrangement fosters an understanding of textuality as a formal system comprised of devices. According to this view, the artistic effect is a matter of the manipulation of these devices. Jolas's translingual poem is ultimately an experiment where pure linguistic mechanisms are constructed independently of the subject matter. Another Jolas's text, a poem called "Arra" is a great illustration of how far this method can go:

> Crimes are hidden in the nettle-forests
> Fleeta boor rinde glossa aston
> A glasta groons in lallaboontarim
> The munsterbells thunder sin
>
> Minder alaroos annafrintam rinf
> Goona brasts perimens

---

[26] Kelbert, *L2 Journal*, 61.

> Brinta briolster anagrim frilla
> A ghorla heelts the ropam in its juft
> Frimantana roons questicrams
> Ums rinters
> Ams froors
> The ancient guilt weeps[27]

Here Jolas uses nonsense made-up words alongside real English ones, incorporating the pure sonic gesture into the fabric of the poem. This liberates device from content. The radical, almost surrealist, move is both evocative of and distinct from Nabokov's use of macaronic poetics in his poem about the Russian language. While stylistically and thematically Jolas and Nabokov are very different, they both share a typically modernist preoccupation with language as a collection of formal opportunities for constricting riddles, puns, coincidences, and paradoxes. Yet, for Nabokov, the formal device serves as an opportunity to highlight the lyrical dimension of the poem, whereas for Jolas the forging of the device is the main objective.

Jolas's brand of modernism is closer Ezra Pound's famous phrase "make it new," whereas Nabokov is closer to T. S. Eliot's attempt to affiliate himself with tradition. Both extremes are important for understanding how contemporary literary translingualism works. Jolas's experimentation liberates the text from semantic constraints, whereas Nabokov's work emphasizes a lyrical dimension that is always related to a tradition. One of the first attempts to combine these two modes can be observed in the work of the Czech poet Ivan Blatný.

Ivan Blatný: The Formation of the Translingual Lyric

After the Second World War the status of translingual writing changed. The political catastrophes of the 20th century displaced and dislocated large numbers of people, making them refugees, exiles, victims of repressions, nomads on the run. Increasingly, people were either forced out of their native countries or decided to leave their birth places voluntarily. These processes blurred the boundaries between the local and transnational in the formation of a human identity. In such circumstances the meaning of literary translingualism also evolved. As more people migrated,

---

[27] Kelbert, *L2 Journal*, 56.

translingualism ceased to function merely as a literary device. Instead, its immediate communicative aspect was emphasized. The ability to express oneself became more important than linguistic experimentation. Consequently, literary translingualism became less a matter of intricately conceived textuality and more of a cognitive tool to navigate the symbolic resources of languages.

This shift in the meaning and application of literary translingualism can be seen in the work and life of the Czech poet Ivan Blatný, who began to write poems in English after he was hospitalized with a mental illness, only a few months after settling in England as a political exile in 1948. Blatný's decision not to return to the communist Czechoslovakia was sudden and surprising, and it was probably one of the reasons that led to his hospitalization. During his years in a mental home Blatný composed thousands of poems, most of which are macaronic texts combining several languages. Writing poetry proved to be a form of therapy for him. The poems that made their way into the collection *Bixley Remedial School* (1982) are often hard to decipher, as these texts combine allusions to Blatný's life and world literature with complex language that at times seems almost nonsensical. Sometimes Blatný uses macaronic elements, where the lyrical dimension is often significant, even though the overall thematic content is obscure. A good example is the poem entitled "Slavnost":

> Poetry is a panacea for all illnesses
> bratři Marxové vylupují žloutek
>
> Der Dichter spricht in verscgiedenen Sprachen
> na dně jezera kde vodníci nocijí
>
> Volná cesta byla zatarasena
> quite blocked by gaiety girls.[28]

This poem differs from both Jolas and Nabokov's multilingual texts in the way it brings different languages together. In Nabokov's work Russian and English are masterfully intertwined as different symbolic systems. The author uses them to create a deliberate and controlled literary

---

[28] Ivan Blatný, *The Drug of Art: Selected Poems*, ed. Veronika Tuckerová (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2007), 106.

effect rooted in the application of multilingualism. Nabokov's "An Evening of Russian Poetry" relies on the poet's ability to uncover resemblances and parallels between different languages, combining them in a crafted multilingual artefact that can still be read as a translingual text: the poem was intended for English-speaking readers. In contrast, Jolas uses randomness to structure the text. In his nonsense poem meaning is no longer a consideration; the primary associative method is sound that determines what "words" are used. Blatný is situated somewhere between these models. His multilingual poem appears random at first glance, but it is not as random as Jolas's text. At the same time, Blatný is far from Nabokov's precisely calibrated multilingual poetics. There are moments of subtle associative connections in "Slavnost" where the use of language is neither too unpredictable nor perfectly balanced. For instance, in the last stanza the Czech word "zatarasena" (barricaded, obstructed) is semantically connected with the following English line: "quite blocked by gaiety girls." The verbs "to barricade" and "to block" are synonymous with the Czech verb. The repetition of these synonyms in two different languages creates the effect of semantic anaphora, but its purpose is not linguistic experimentation or stylistic sophistication. Blatný no longer focuses so much on the language so much and instead concentrates on expressing a certain emotions content. The poem's message is obscure, but perhaps it has something to do with the notion of blockage, of being stuck, of not being able to progress. In the first stanza, poetry is said to be "a panacea for all illness," but whether the poem succeed at being a cure is questionable. The poem ends with a feeling of stupor as the meaning is capture between the two synonymous phrases in Czech and English, like a person in a room with no doors or windows. This feeling may not be conveyed too clearly, and my interpretation may be far-fetched. However, the semantical effect of "standstill" is outlined in the multilingual space of the poem, resulting in lyrical overtones. This personal lyrical intonation is the main point of Blatný's text. The poem's main function is communicational.

This principle is also maintained in Blatný's translingual poems. For example, in the text called "Janua Sapientiae" Blatný seems to comment on his translingualism by employing a

metaphor that is simultaneously intricate, yet not overtly meticulous linguistically. He describes his ability to speak English as an "instrument" that enables him to transfigure objects:

> The Monx speak Monx
> I speak czech and english
> I have an instrument for getting traffic-wordens
> out of the drain-pipes
> and changing them into an apple-rose
>
> It all happens in time-space
> when the traffic warden is already out
> we can hear the noise[29]

The obscurity of the language is neither the result of a surrealist technique nor an intellectual maneuver. The linguistic strangeness arises instead from Blatný's struggle to express lyrical content in a medium that was new to him. However, this form of strangeness differs from the types of linguistic "unusualness" manifested by Jolas and Nabokov. Both Nabokov and Jolas express an idealized form of translingual subjectivity. For Nabokov, this ideal is linguistic perfection; for Jolas it is avant-grade experimentation. In contrast, Blatný's linguistic awkwardness is a byproduct of his attempt to formulate a translingual lyrical subject. In other words, in Blatný work, language is secondary to the poem's main goal, which is to mediate a lyrical effect. For Nabokov, the lyrical dimension was also important, but it was tightly intertwined with his interest in language. A similar kind of interest guided Jolas's work, who prioritized linguistic experimentation as his primary objective.

With Blatný's collection *Bixley Remedial School* a new type of literary tranalingualism was born. This new translingual subject emerged as a more direct, more immediate reincarnation of previous models. Nabokov completed his first English novel a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War, which indirectly highlights how much translingual writing is influenced by the global political situation. Blatný also began to explore the translingual due to the circumstances of his biography. Yet, for him writing had a more personal and local meaning, since he used it as a form of therapy. His poems have more urgency and tension, as they are more

---

[29] Ivan Blatný, *The Drug of Art*, 104.

invested in mediating the translingual lyrical effect. One of the reasons why Blatný's translingualism resulted in the creation of a lyrical subject may be that he, as a person, experienced a more radical dislocation than earlier translingual authors. Even though poems from *Bixley Remedial School* contain a lot of historical and cultural references, their meaning is deeply personal. In writing these texts Blatný was not trying to enter a literary competition aligning his own work with the work of other writers.

Blatný's model is more characteristic of contemporary forms of translingual writing. The the anxiety of influence operates differently in modernist and contemporary translingual authors: the former were more invested in self-actualization through conforming with the standards of the monolingual literary ideal, whereas contemporary translingual poets tend to be more interested in confronting their two cultural heritages in a unified linguistic environment. One of the reasons why contemporary translingual writing can emerge in this freer mode is that the standards of literariness have shifted in the twentieth century. This shift occurred, among other factors, due to writers whose treatment of the monolingual ideal differed from Nabokov's strategy of imitating a sophisticated style. Linton Kwesi Johnson's "Ingland Is a Bitch" is a great example of how literariness can be found in non-standardized language usage. Translingual writers have significantly contributed to this process.

According to Harold Bloom's logic, moving from one language to another forces the writer to learn from the poets of the new tradition and expose themselves to new anxieties of influence. In contrast, the contemporary translingual subject does not give up their initial culture and instead creates a textual space where all their cultural affiliations are intertwined and simultaneously present.

Poetry allows for a more flexible and immediate response to life events, which is why one of the first occurrences of literary translingualism in the post-war world is Ivan Blatný's collection *Bixley Remedy School*. These texts, which differ significantly from the previous modes of translingual writing, are concerned with expressing a lyrical voice. Blatný's texts marked a natural

turning point where translingual writing shifted from being a device that required constant polishing, adjustment, and perfection, to being a freer mode of expressing the self through the available linguistic means. Blatný's poems unfold in a very personal, therapeutic space where elements of his own biography and culture are interwoven with his new language and culture. Both Nabokov and Blatný were invested in working with the language and in constructing lyrical elements, but the difference between these writers lies in how they balanced these investments. Blatný's texts are far less focused on linguistic perfection, instead aiming to explore different facets of the translingual lyrical subjectivity, whereas Nabokov, even in his most emotional and lyrical texts, never quite abandons his linguistic self-awareness and his interest in the language that sometimes gets in the way of his poems' lyrical content.

Chapter 3: Content

Contemporary Debates on Lyric

One of the major debates in contemporary anglophone criticism concerns the shifting notion of the lyric. In the last chapter of his book *Poetry in a Global Age*, Jahan Ramazani points out that lyric cannot be reduced to either form or theme. Lyric, he argues, is not something stable or permanent:

> Not a fixed constellation in the literary firmament, lyric is a changing set of conventions, schemata, and practices that writers and audiences bring to works, sometimes unconsciously—works that summon, resist, remix, defy, and remake those encoded presuppositions, or what we might call, after Hans Robert Jauss, horizons of lyric expectation.[30]

Because of its fluid status, lyric can be hard to identify. Even Culler himself concludes that it is not possible to have a universal answer to the question of how the lyrical manifests itself:

> the lyric's varied imagining of the world, our possible relations to it and its to us, which may be a version of enchantment, it pursues, with all the elegance it can muster, a structuring of that linguistic material whose visceral appeal requires a name other that enchantment.[31]

Thanks to its uncertain status the concept of lyric can be a good way into translingual poetry precisely because it lacks the constraints of more rigid literary terms. Besides, translingual texts may be informed by traditions where lyric is either different from the anglophone notion of it, or totally non-existent. As Jahan Ramazani suggests, because of its variability lyric can be a common ground for comparing literary artefacts from different contexts:

> Under modernity, all writers swim in global currents, even when imagining themselves as exclusively regional or national. With attention to the intricate intercultural melding and friction at the level of trope, stanza, rhyme, idiom, and sonic texture, a dialogically transnationalized, transregionalized, and translocalized lyric studies can thus help move us beyond (a) local and national models, in foregrounding how the local or national is traversed by

---

[30] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 241.
[31] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 352.

A discussion of translingual poetry may provide an insight into how lyrical poetry is understood in anglophone criticism. The work of translingual authors, whose backgrounds in different cultures and languages inform their work with a specific notion of lyric, may shed light on how the lyrical is conceptualized in anglophone poetry. Jonathan Culler suggests that a similar method can be used diachronically when accessing earlier historical works with the experience of having read newer texts: "fundamental to the nature of genre is the way in which new works allow us to see how earlier works were functioning, displaying already, perhaps in different form, features that are brought out in later instances."[33] In a similar manner, lyrical structures in the work of translingual authors can tells us something bout lyrical poetry in general.

Ilya Kaminsky, Li-Young Lee, and Wong May come from different backgrounds in which lyric (or an analogous concept) mean different things. Kaminsky has a lot in common with the lyrical intonation of Russophone modernist poets, who explored the solemnity and tragedy of life. In Li-Young Lee's work, the lyrical agency reveals itself as a continuous exercise of an almost religious quality that is reminiscent of a prayer. Even though a similar tradition of a prayer poem exists in Western literature, this approach is closer to the notion of the self that we find in Eastern meditative practices (Li-Young Lee has talked about the importance of yoga in this respect). Finally, for Wong May, lyric as such seems to be a less important concept than the poetic sensibility conveyed by classical Chinese poets. This is something she learned through a lifelong experience of reading poetry in Chinese and her work as a translator.

Ilya Kaminsky: The Anglophone Legacy of Russophone Modernism

The critic Andrew Epstein describes the development of contemporary American poetry as an attempt to return to the lyric while holding on to the traditions of experimental avant-garde poetics

---

[32] Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age*, 246.
[33] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 43.

represented by such groups as the Language poets. Such contemporary poets as Dean Young succeed at this as his "poems pop up with moments of weird humor, [and yet] his trademark move is to shift on a dime from the ironic and fantastical to moments of private pain and seemingly genuine feeling. Nearly every Young poem swivels at some point from postmodern hijinks to the disarmingly personal."[34] Even though poets like Dean Young can write lyrical poems, as Epstein notices earlier in his book, the pervasive influence of irony, one of postmodernism's main rhetorical figures, makes some critics and commentators "lament the turn away from more personal, accessible, and narrative-based writing toward more obscure, difficult, and ironic poetry […]"[35] It is in the context of the friction between the postmodern irony and the lack of the lyrical that Kaminsky's first book of poetry *Dancing in Odessa* (2004) appeared on the American literary scene.

In one of his interviews, Kaminsky suggested that that his literary affiliations lie far from irony: "If you live in Brooklyn or Bloomsbury, you're ironic 24/7. It's a useful device but any device has to have some sort of emotional urgency, otherwise it's just style. But maybe as an eastern European I'm just more comfortable with emotion."[36] It is noteworthy that Kaminsky associates the sincerity of emotion with his connection to Eastern Europe. While this is a remark that says a lot about the author's view on his first Russophone poetic tradition, Kaminsky's poems in *Dancing in Odessa* can indeed be read as pursuing lyrical enchantment and emotional solemnity. The latter is perhaps one of the most fundamental qualities of Kaminsky's work. His poems never resort to irony or postmodern grotesque, even when they depict what seems brutally unrealistic violence:

> my grandfather composed lectures on the supply
>
> and demand of clouds in our country:
> the State declared him an enemy of the people.
> He ran after a train with tomatoes in his coat

---

[34] Andrew Epstein, The Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry since 1945 (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 215.

[35] Epstein, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry since 1945*, 21.

[36] Ilya Kaminsky, "I will Never Hear my Father's Voice," interview by Claire Armistead, *The Guardian*, July 19, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/19/ilya-kaminsky-interview.

and danced naked on the table in front of our house –
he was shot, and my grandmother raped
by the public prosecutor, who stuck his pen in her vagina.[37]

The seriousness of Kaminsky's poems can be attributed to his life experience and the experiences of the people he writes about, who had to endure extreme circumstances such as rape or political persecution. However, the fact that Kaminsky and his characters went through such difficult events does not imply that the most suitable artistic mode to speak about these experiences is a lyrical poem. On the contrary, postmodernism is better at depicting excessive meaningless violence through the grotesque and over-exaggeration. Lyrical intonation is the author's own choice. It may have some grounding in the Russophone modernist tradition, which abound with tragical lyrical poems reflecting the historic events of the time, but as Kaminsky suggested in his interview, style needs to have a sense of emotional urgency. The main reason why Kaminsky chooses the lyric is that it provides a personal window into a collective history. Using such tools as narrative and metaphor, Kaminsky tells the story of a self in a larger historical context. For example, the title poem of the collection "Dancing in Odessa" conveys both the feeling of belonging and being lost, a sense of dreamy contemplation and documental chronicling, as the poet reflects on his past:

> […] The city trembled,
> a ghost-ship setting sail.
> And my classmate invented twenty names for Jew.
> He was an angel, he had no name,
> we wrestled, yes. My grandfathers fought
>
> the German tanks on tractors, I kept a suitcase full
> of Brodsky's poems. The city trembled,
> a ghost-ship setting sail.
> At night, I woke to whisper: *yes, we lived.*
> We lived, yes, don't say it was a dream.[38]

The poem's semantic rhythm is set through the repetition of the phrase "the city trembled." The image of a city on the verge of breaking down is the source of its many bits of historical and cultural data. As these bits of information "dance" around the narrative line, their oscillation

---

[37] Ilya Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa* (London: Faber and Faber, 2021), 6.
[38] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 14.

produces a lyrical and not narrative effect. Chronicling turns into imagining; the recounting of events gains emotional value. Significantly, this act of narrativization happens in a language that is not the author's mother tongue. The line "yes, we lived" is a symbolic reclaiming of experience gained in the first language through the author's second language. As the parts of the author's first culture experience are recognized in his second language, the lyrical intonation becomes sharper. The elements of the Russophone culture contained in the poem in such lines as "I kept a suitcase of Brodsky's poems" provide a more texturized context of the circumstances in which the lyrical protagonist has lived. The figure of Joseph Brodsky, who is considered to be one of the most influential Russophone poets, is particularly illuminating. Brodsky was a role model for many Russophone poets of Kaminsky's generation. His cultural significance can be compared to figures such as Seamus Heaney in the Anglophone world. Kaminsky's mentioning of him means more than simply an autobiographical detail. It is also a signal about his artistic affinities.

Joseph Brodsky is mentioned in *Dancing in Odessa* alongside other emblematic figures such as Osip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, Isaac Babel, Marina Tsvetaeva. All the Russophone poets included in this list establish a connection between Kaminsky's collection and the tradition of Russophone modernism. Brodsky, who knew Anna Akhmatova in person and is said to be the last poet of Russian modernism, is a particularly important figure for understanding the relation between Russophone and Anglophone modernist traditions, as well as the relation between Kaminsky's two literary languages and contexts.

One of the reasons Brodsky was such an innovative poet is that he extensively borrowed themes and formal features from Anglophone poetry and adapted foreign influences. Brodsky was particularly interested in the work of John Donn, T.S. Eliot, G.G. Byron, and W.H. Auden. As Nila Friedberg shows in a study of Bordsky's rhythmical patterns, the incorporation of the anglophone rhythms into Brodsky's poems was possible because there were similar tendencies in the Russian tradition:

> As careful examination of the history of Russian
> versification reveals, the ostensibly "English" rhythms of

Brodsky appear also in the verse of such Russian predecessors as Marian Tsvetaeva, Boris Slutsky, and Vladislav Khodasevch, all of whom Brodsky read and valued, and all of whom employed this unusual form in a manner suggesting no foreign associations whatsoever.[39]

Rhythm, however, was not the only thing that Brodsky borrowed from Anglophone poets. Thematically, Brodsky was close to Donne, Eliot, and Byron whose Romanticism he interpreted as a kind of modernist bittersweet cynicism. Yet the innovations that Brodsky developed under the influence of the Anglophone tradition are less seen in translation. When his poems are rendered into English, their Anglophone affiliations stand out as something too recognizable. For example, in a poem called "Christmas Ballad," which reflects on the lack of Christianity in atheist Soviet Moscow, the mood is reminiscent of T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

> In anguish unaccountable
> The steady ship that burns at dark,
> The small shy streetlamp of the night,
> Floats out of Alexandar Park
> In the exhaustion of dull bricks.
> Like a pale-yellow, tiny rose,
> It drifts along past lovers' heads
> And walkers' feet.[40]

One of the most interesting aspects of the Russian text is the first line "in aguish unaccountable." Part of the originality of this line is that it uses the reversed phrase order, putting the adjective after the noun. This poetic move was out of fashion in Russian poetry since Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837). By the time Brodsky recreated it, it had become obsolete. Yet, Brodsky managed to use it in the right context, contrasting the archaic solemnity of the Russian language with the mundane reality of atheist Moscow. Can one say that the English translation captures this effect? The translation does not reveal the touch of newness contained in the use of the archaic phrase order. Rather, the translated poem seems to be doing what many other Anglophone texts have done before. Since Brodsky drew his inspiration from Anglophone poets, the effect of the translation is

---

[39] Nila Friedberg, *English Rhythms in Russian Verse: On the Experiment of Joseph Brodsky* (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter Mouton, 2011), 3.
[40] Joseph Brodsky, *Selected Poems*, trans. George L.King (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), 29.

akin to a boomerang thrown into the wind only to return and hit the reader with an unpleasant and crude recognition. For example, in the sentence "like a pale-yellow, tiny rose, it drifts along, past lovers' heads and walkers' feet" one easily recognizes a variation on T.S.Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Eliot's text is similar in mood, symbolism, and even color-scheme: "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes."[41] The correct translation must capture the formal similarities between Brodsky's text and T.S. Eliot's poetics. However, this is exactly what hinders the appreciation of Brodsky's poetic sensibility. In translation it looks just too similar to what his poetic Anglophone teachers had done before him. This problem can be resolved in a translingual poem. A translingual author can translate the feeling and the intonation, and not necessarily the formal elements, of which the poem is composed.

In *Dancing in Odessa* Kaminsky address Brodsky in an elegy. Elegy is an archaic form, and the way Kaminsky constructs his poem is also old-fashioned in a way. In addressing a literary figure Kaminsky repeats the paradigmatic poetic gesture of speaking to a poetic mentor, which is something that is difficult to imagine in terms of postmodern poetics where the referentiality is often put to test, making it harder to address an author as a real figure. In doing that Kaminsky is also using the kind of language that is close to Brodsky's style:

> I left your Russia for good, poems sewn into my pillow
> rushing towards my own training
> to live with your lines
> on a verge of a story set against itself.
> To live with your lines, those where sails rise, waves
> Beat against the city's granite in each vowel, –
> Pages open by themselves, a quiet voice
> speaks of suffering, of water.[42]

The imagery of water, city's granite, waves, and suffering are typical Brodsky's themes and metaphors. Kaminsky reproduces these elements, but there is a distance between the stylistic figures and the author's voice. This distance is rather contemplative than ironic. The poem is about departing from Brodsky's influence and not about embracing it. As the poet says: "I left your

---

[41] T.S.Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1963), 13.
[42] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 46.

Russia for good," signaling that he breaks away from a whole domain of cultural meanings and associations. Yet these lines are Brodskian in nature. Brodsky was keen on thematizing his exile, often using it as a lyrical strategy. However, if Brodsky's lyrical voice attempted to be tragical in all seriousness, Kaminsky's tragic intonation is taken critically. The poem is self-aware of itself. Kaminsky does not simply borrow the metaphor from Brodsky. Instead, he borrows the structure of lyrical intonation. As a result, Kaminsky manages to stay truthful to his modernist influences, but he does so whilst keeping his unique contemporary voice. The poem reads as a modern text despite its relying on essentially obsolete imagery. It is difficult to imagine any contemporary poet speaking of "water and suffering" seriously. These words are rather Byronic, but through them Kaminsky establishes a connection with Brodsky's Russophone modernism and, consequently, with the anglophone tradition as well.

Kaminsky reclaims his position in the anglophone context by addressing Brodsky, who himself was influenced by anglophone poetry. This indirect way to enter the tradition is indicative of the translingual literary practice. Through Brodsky the elements of the Anglophone literary tradition had already made their way into Kaminsky's poetic lexicon, even before he switched into English. In this context translingualism is more than just a detail of the author's biography. It is an intertextual method that allows for the borrowing of a poetic sensibility independent of the concrete linguistic form associated with it. Kaminsky's metaphors of "water and suffering" are only slightly evocative of Brodsky – they are not direct quotes. Kaminsky forges a lyrical subject that evokes Brodsky's lyrical voice, which was informed by the Anglophone tradition. Where translation fails to transmit the originality of this intonation, the translingual rendition can succeed as it can capture the feeling without repeating the same linguistic figures. Kaminsky's elegy to Brosky reads both as a parody evocative of his style and Kaminsky's own self-reflection on his position in anglophone literature.

Li-Young Lee: The Yoga of the Lyric

The elegy is a form typical of the European literary context that Kaminsky is a part of. In a way, elegiac intonation is paradoxical because in an elegy the addressee is almost unimportant in comparison to the speaker. Kaminsky's elegy to Joseph Brodsky is as much about Brodsky as it is about himself. Such a cultural form is indicative of the mechanisms of self-construction and self-narrativization practiced in Western cultures. As the writer Gish Jen has argued, individualistic forms like that are less common in Chinese culture:

> In a series of experiments begun in the late 1980s, [Wang] found that Asians, Asian-born immigrants, and even the children of those immigrants – second-generation Americans like me – tend to tell very different self-narratives than European Americans; and that this difference is linked to deeper differences in self-construction.[43]

Jen provides an example of the difference in self-construction, discussing a Song Dynasty landscape, *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (11th century) by Fan Kuan. In this painting the mountain "is portrayed not as something from which to retreat, but as something wholly benevolent, and in harmony with nature."[44] The human presence in this scene is almost self-diminishing: "the tiny traveler is in any case unperturbed and, we may gather from the mules, well supplied for a long journey. There is no sense that he needs to be larger or to exert more control over his environment, quite the contrary."[45] According to Gish Jen, the painting is more preoccupied with tying things together in a harmonious whole rather than emphasizing the individuality of the scene's distinct elements:

> The interdependent substrate of the painting is clear, too, in a myriad of other ways besides the size of the human figure. The painting uses shifting perspectives rather than a single vanishing point, for example. And in making palpable *qi* — the energy connecting all things — as well as the Daoist ideal of becoming one with nature, this work is hardly about decontextualization. In fact, we could say it is about a

---

[43] Gish Jen, *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), Kindle.
[44] Gish Jen, *Tiger Writing*, Kindle.
[45] Gish Jen, *Tiger Writing*, Kindle.

radical *con*textualization. [...] What's more, his [Fan Kuan] dominant achievement was not felt to have been in portraying a singular, transient object, that mountain. Rather it was said to have been in transmitting the spirit of the mountains — in capturing, in other words, an ineffable, eternal essence reminiscent of the sort of scientific phenomena we have associated with interdependence in its Chinese form — field-related phenomena like acoustic resonance and magnetism. This was something he was able to do, people said, by painting like nature itself, purposelessly and without exercise of his will.[46]

In this passage the artwork is conceptualized as a phenomenon of an almost depersonalizing nature. The sense of the individual self is dissolved in an artwork similar to how a single soundwave is lost in the flow of sound in a sonic environment. Gish Jen's remarks can prove to be helpful for understanding how Li-Young Lee's poetic sensibility is different from other anglophone poets such as Ilya Kaminsky, who come into English from another European tradition.

Li-Young Lee's own words are also indicative of how his approach to poetry is different from Ilya Kaminsky's more European manner. In one of his interviews, Lee speaks about poetry as a religious practice. However, his point of view is not informed by a Western understanding of religion. For him, the religious aspect of poetry is closer to the practice of yoga:

the whole enterprise of writing absolutely seems to me like a spiritual practice. It's a yoga. It's definitely part of my prayer life, my meditation life, my contemplative life. […] you know the word religio. It comes from Latin, and it means yokedness, bondedness. The same word in Sanskrit is yoga. We get the word yoke from yoga. So yoga is any practice that reminds us of our original condition, our embeddedness in God, whether it's breathing meditation or East Indian yogas or any art form. The ancients in India and China said that the practice of art was a royal yoga, the yoga of yogas. When you practice an art form, you realize that the poem is a descendent of your psyche, but your psyche, if you pay attention, is a descendent of something else, let's say the cosmos. Then the cosmos is a descendent of something else, let's say the mind of God. So ultimately you go from the mind of God to the cosmos to the psyche to the poem. Those are concentric circles of embeddedness. And the knowledge of our condition of deep embeddedness in a cosmic context, it seems to me, inculcates fearlessness, trust, love, openness, generosity—a more comprehensive, fuller human being. So it seems to me that's a sacred practice.[47]

---

[46] Gish Jen, *Tiger Writing*, Kindle.

[47] Li-Young Lee, "A Conversation with Li-Young Lee," interview by Paul T. Corrigan, *Image*, Accessed August 7, 2023, https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-li-young-lee/.

As a religious enterprise yoga is different from religious rituals practiced by Western monotheistic religions. The ritual, such as prayer, is a much more rigid form than a yoga exercise. This has parallels with how the prayer form is used in secular poetry. The prayer can be defined as a condensed use of language addressed to God, which ideally must result in the mobilization of the reader's religious sentiments. As a secular form, the prayer produces the effect of "important speech". It is a statement that is more valuable and serene than other types of poetic eloquence. For example, in Kaminsky's "Author's Prayer" there is a sense of psalm-like ardor, but it originates not so much from the willingness to come closer to God, but rather from the poet's appreciation of his own ability to produce art. The title of the poem is emblematic because it relocates the focus from God to the poet figure:

> Yes, I live. I can cross the streets asking 'What year is it?'
> I can dance in my sleep and laugh
>
> in front of the mirror.
> Even sleep is a prayer, Lord,
>
> I will praise your madness, and
> in a language not mine, speak
>
> of music that wakes us, music
> in which we move. For whatever I say
>
> is a kind of petition and the darkest
> days must I praise.[48]

Kaminsky puts an emphasis on the fact that English is not "his" language. The notion of spirituality here is intricately interwoven with language and the idea of linguistic eloquence. The rhetoric of the poem consists of relocating the sense of self-diminishment, which is a part of the Christian tradition, from the domain of spirituality to the domain of language. Just like the sinner is an imperfect interpreter of God's will, so the translingual poet is an imperfect user of their second language. But as the sinner is granted the possibility to rejoice in God and to praise the Lord, so can the translingual poet discover the miracle of the metaphor. Kaminsky's prayer is deeply

---

[48] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 1.

informed by the Western understanding of Christianity whose rhetoric of sin and absolution is reenacted in the metaphorical structure of the poem.

In Li-Young Lee's work there is rarely such a focus on the linguistic representation of the self. In one of his most well-known long poems "The City in Which I Love You" the link between language and the speaking subject is more direct. The mentioning of the prayer form does not evoke connotations with any religious tradition. Rather, prayer is understood as a mode of engagement with the world:

> Is prayer, then, the proper attitude
> for the mind that long to be freely blown,
> but which gets snagged on the barb
> called world, that
> tooth-ache, the actual? What prayer
>
> would I build? And to whom?
> Where are you
> in the cities in which I love you,
> the cities daily risen to work and to money,
> to the magnificent miles and the gold coasts?[49]

Even though Li-Young Lee uses the word "prayer," the concept differs from how Kaminsky uses it. The prayer for him is less a matter of linguistic plasticity and more a mode of contemplation. He seems to almost avoid linguistic self-awareness as an obstacle that stands between the poet figure and poetic attention. Language just happens. Elaborating on the comparison between yoga and prayer, one may say that yoga is a form of action that presupposes a more immediate involvement in the world than the prayer. A prayer is a ritual that actualizes the speaker as an independent entity in the God-human relationship. Contrary to this, yoga is a way of dissolvement, a position to observe from. Understood as yoga, poetry can be described as a way of using language that is more immediate and unconditioned, less focused on expressing a sense of selfhood and more oriented towards its own practice, a way of being.

"The City in Which I love You" is a poem that can be understood, if not as a form of prayer, then as a kind of spiritual scripture. As the title suggests, the poem is about a city, which provides

---

[49] Li-Young Lee, *The City in Which I Love You* (Rochester: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1990), 55.

an expectation of walking around streets and places. However, the description of physical movement rarely suggests a sense of direction or helps to visualize the scene where movement happens. Instead, verbs of movement provoke metaphors and speech figures that convey emotional and not mimetic content:

> But in the city
> in which I love you,
> no one comes, no one
> meets me in the brick clefts;
> in the wedged dark,
>
> no finger touches me secretly, no mouth
> tastes my flawless salt,
> no one wakens the honey in the cells, finds the humming
> in the ribs, the rich business in the recesses;
> hulls clogged, I continue laden, translated
>
> by exhaustion and time's appetite, my sleep abandoned
> in bus stations and storefront stoops,
> my insomnia erected under a sky
> cross-hatched by wires, branches,
> and black flights of rain. Lewd body of wind
>
> jams me in the passageways, doors slam
> like guns going off, a gun goes off, a pie plate spins
> past, whizzing its thin tremolo,
> a plastic bag, fat with wind, barrels by and slaps
> a chain-link fence, wraps it like clung skin.[50]

The consequence of replacing real referents with metaphors in describing movement is that the narrative structure of the poem fulfills the lyrical function. Since metaphors bear no direct referential meaning, when they evoke imaginary objects, these objects do not portray reality, but work in a way to stir up emotions. Very much in tune with T.S.Eliot's notion of the objective correlative, the metaphor in "The City in which I Love you" closes up in itself, producing a pressurized tension that conveys emotional content. From that perspective, the title is emblematic. The noun "city" is definite, yet its definiteness is the result of being complemented by the clause "in which I love you". The city in question is not a concrete place, but rather an attribute. Any city is the city if it is "the city in which I love you".

---

[50] Lee, *The City in Which I Love You*, 53.

The city as a location can be said to metaphorically represent language itself. The poet enters the city / language as an active observer, but also as a user of its trottoirs, a walker. The poem thus enacts the literary archetype of Baudelaire's flaneur. In describing this character, the French poet wrote:

> this solitary mortal endowed with an active imagination, always roaming the great desert of men, has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity', for want of a better term to express the idea in question. The aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory.[51]

The flaneur is universalized by virtue of being immersed into the crowd; by being an unidentified observer. As an archetype the flaneur is an ultimate expression of modernity because s/he lacks rootedness. Li-Young Lee's approach to the lyrical agency in "The City in Which I Love You" has the flaneur's characteristics as it combines traces that are mutually exclusive: uprootedness and tradition, fixedness and mutability, abstraction, and specificity. Yet the difference between Lee's lyrical subject and Baudelaire's flaneur is that the latter is more focused on themselves. The flaneur is a more individualistic figure, whose sense of being immersed into the unfolding of modernity is an active position. Lee's lyrical subject does not pursue this. In contrast to the flaneur's energetic attempt to trace the fleeing marks of modernity, Lee's lyrical subject is more of an observer, a collector of the debris of modernity's failure:

> Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches, swastikaed synagogues, defended houses of worship, past newspapered windows of tenements, along the violated, the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed city I call home, in which I am a guest...[52]

The image of the swasticated synagogue is perhaps one of the most eloquent symbols of the 20th century's catastrophes. Yet, the swasticated synagogue that Lee refers to does not represent any

---

[51] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. P.E.Charvet (UK: Penguin Books, 2010), Kindle.
[52] Lee, *The City in Which I Love You*, 51.

building. It is a generic image like other buildings in the poem that are also simultaneously concrete and abstract. Lee draws a scenery that is vaguely recognizable, but it is not a description of any concrete location. Rather, it is a generic landscape that is evocative of traces, symbols, and experiences characteristic of the twenty first century. The city of language in which the lyrical subject is walking is a network of meanings and ideas, a constellation of words and things that have been said and done before. The poet picks up certain themes, observes them, and makes them part of the artwork.

One of the things the poet practices in this virtual city is the act of loving. The whole poem is structured around love longing, but the object of love never receives any tangible concrete attributes. Much like the lady-addressee of Shakespeare's sonnets the "you" in "The City in Which I Love You" is an organizational principle that holds many of the poem's disjointed themes, metaphors, and elements together. It is noteworthy that it is "you" and not "I" that is the focus of the lyrical longing. The deployment of the lyrical "I" depends on the appearance of the "you" addressee. There is a sense of vacantness, of unfulfilled-ness about the "you". As a result, the "I" is similarly undetermined. It is as if the "you" was a mirror in which the lyrical self is looking for itself, but each time it fails to fulfill the act of self-identification:

> that man was not me;
> his wound was his, his death not mine.
> And the soldier
> who fired the shot, then lit a cigarette:
> ha was not me.
>
> And the ones I do not see
> in cities all over the world,
> the ones sitting, standing, lying down, those
> in prisons playing checkers with their knocked-out teeth:
> they are not me. Some of them are
>
> my age, even my height and weight;
> none of them is me.
> The woman who is slapped, the man who is kicked,
> the ones who don't survive,
> whose names I do not know;
>
> they are not me forever,
> the ones who no longer live

> in the cities in which
> you are not,
> the cities in which I looked for you.[53]

It is striking how Li-Young Lee's ability to find the correct linguistic definition for an external object is contrasted with the inability to define the "I." In these stanzas Lee combines the masterful description of a thing ("the checkers player with their knocked-out teeth") with a failure to connect the "I" with any of these ready identifications. The lyrical subject is none of those things. It can perfectly describe them, but not itself. A similar self-effacing lyrical agency is also characteristic of Wong May's work, which I hope to show later in the thesis.

The lyrical subject of Li-Young Lee's poem is constructed according to the principle of negative presence. Just like the translingual poem presupposes the language in which it is not written, the lyrical "I" of "The City in Which I Love You" is something that it is not. This type of lyric is a combination of the ability to fill semantic emptiness with a precise description and one's own self-erasure. The whole poem, in fact, is a systematic attempt to negate the lyrical subject. Consider how much Lee's method of negative self-identification is different from some of the most emblematic anglophone lyrical strategies such as the one employed by Shakespeare in Sonnet 60. The sonnet is an attempt to cover the initial anxiety of death with a surplus of conceit, metaphor, and rhetorical figures:

> Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
> So do our minutes hasten to their end;[54]

These two lines are the starting point for the enterprise of metaphorical description, of speaking about love, and of addressing one's words to the object of love: "And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, / Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand." The purpose of this lyrical endeavor is to overcome the feeling of lack and anxiety. Lee's poem follows this method only partially. It combines the mastery of the metaphor with an unwillingness to use language to fulfill desire. Lee's

---

[53] Lee, *The City in Which I Love You*, 54-55.
[54] William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, intr. Martin Hilský (Brno: Atlantis: 2012), 202.

lyrical agency merely states things as they are and does not actively engage with them. The lyrical

"I" is independent of the things that the poet is saying, it is just another element in the scene:

> Morning comes to this city vacant of you.
> Pages and windows flare, and you are not there.
> Someone sweeps his portion of sidewalk,
> Wakens the drunk, slumped like laundry,
> And you are gone.
>
> You are not in the wind
> Which someone notes in the margins of a book.
> You are gone out of the small fires in abandoned lots
> Where human figures huddle,
> Each spiring to its own ghost.
>
> Between brick walls, in a space no wider than my face,
> A leafless sapling stands in mud.
> In its branches, a nest of raw mouths
> Gaping and cheeping, scrawny fires that must eat.
> My hunger for you is no less than theirs.[55]

One of the implications of the unwillingness to seize the object of love is the emergence of political

rhetoric. "The City in Which I Love You" sets the scene for the mythologization of subjectivity.

It outlines a vacuum in which subjectivity, an identity, can emerge as a new form of existence that

is not bound to any tradition. This is where the political aspect of the poem manifests itself. "The

City in Which I Love You" stands next in line with such important texts as John Winthrop's *A

Model of Christian Charity* where one of the foundational pillars of American cultural imagination

is set up. In that sermon Winthrop described the image of the "city upon a hill" that operated as a

master signifier for a new nation on the verge of creating itself. In a similar manner, Lee described

the promise of a city that can be walked by an outsider. However, in Lee's case, the notion of the

city is unlinked from any ideological system, such as nation, religion, or morality:

> Straight from my father's wrath,
> and long from my mother's womb,
> late in this century and on a Wednesday morning,
> bearing the mark of one who's experienced
> neither heaven nor hell,
>
> my birthplace vanished, my citizenship earned,
> in league with stones of the earth, I

---

[55] Lee, *The City in Which I Love You*, 56.

enter, without retreat or help from history,
the days of no day, my earth
of no earth, I re-enter

the city in which I love you.
And I never believed that the multitude
of dreams and many words were vain.[56]

"The City in Which I Love You" creates a sense of spatiotemporal unity, but the coordinates of space and time are imaginary. The city represents the spatial metaphor of a temporal spiritual practice: the yoga of being attentive to the world, of expressing emotions and lyrical presence through narration. The city views, the flow of time as well as the movement of the lyrical subject take place inside a subjective reality that is held together by the power of the poet's imagination. This reality can be interpreted as language itself through which the translingual poet perceives the world.

Wong May: Classical Chinese Poetry and the Lyric

In her occasional interviews Wong May often speaks about the importance of silence in her work. In turn, interpreters of her poems have pointed out that "there is a sense of erasure, and of silence"[57] in Wong May's poems texts. Wong May's theory behind her writing is almost self-effacing in nature: "I read poetry to forget that I am reading. I write poetry to forget that I am writing."[58] Alongside that, Wong May denies what she has termed as the state of "Narcissus in crisis", which can be characterized as a fixation of contemporary culture on "self-obsession" and "infantile I-my-me-it is."[59] This can be seen as a form of anti-lyricism. If one of the main concerns of lyric is to construct the representation of a self in language ("a personality provoked into speech,"[60]as Helen

---

[56] Lee, *The City in Which I Love You*, 57.
[57] Wong May, "Wong May interview: A transnational and constantly surprising thinker," interview by Seán Hewitt, *The Irish Times*, March 30, 2022, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/wong-may-interview-a-transnational-and-constantly-surprising-thinker-1.4838124.
[58] Wong May, "What You Write Is Nobody's Business, An Interview with Wong May," interview by Zachary Schomburg, *The Believer*, May 1, 2014, https://www.thebeliever.net/what-you-write-is-nobodys-business-an-interview-with-wong-may/.
[59] May, interview by Hewit.
[60] Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry* (Boston: Bedford Books of St.Martin's Press, 1997) 171.

Vendler described it), then Wong May's strategy of not paying attention to the self is a rejection of the lyrical agency in the form in which it has been practiced in Western literature.

There are two perspectives from which Wong May's method can be understood. Firstly, it is her background in classical Chinese poetry. May's mother was a Classical Chinese poet, which suggests that at least part of her idea of poetry must have been received through her parent's influence. At the same time – and this might be a more interesting coincidence – May's views resonate with a tradition of self-effacing poetry that already exists in Anglophone literature and is represented by T.S.Eliot. In fact, May herself has mentioned in an interview that Eliot was one of her first encounters with literature in English:

> I remember coming upon "Ash Wednesday" when I was a schoolgirl, with very little English. The book just happened that day to open on the page. So entranced by the vision of the lady in the garden—the desk had moved for me; I saw myself following the lady—to the end of the world.[61]

To understand the specificity of Wong May's anglophone poems and their position between the Anglophone and Chinese traditions, it is important to differentiate between the two modes of the self-effacing lyrical agency – one represented by T.S.Eliot and another by Classical Chinese poetry. While it may seem that Wong May follows Eliot's modernist method of hiding lyrical personality behind complex textuality, the roots of her denial of the lyrical "I" lie in the Chinese tradition. Wong May's sense of anonymity resonates powerfully with Eliot, but only because Eliot, through his own work, prepared the ground for a poet like Wong May to be assimilated into the anglophone tradition. Wong May's unique poetic voice is like an echo captured between two valleys: their soundwaves intertwine and create a unified soundscape, but they go into different directions.

Before discussing Wong May's own poems, it might be useful to look at how she adapts the classical Chinese poetic intonation into English through translation. In her collection of translations of Tang poems, entitled *In the Same Light* (2022), Wong May has included an

---

[61] May, interview by Schomburg.

extensive study of the poems. These insightful notes provide a glimpse into Chinese literary culture and language helping to better understand the poetic texts. Sometimes the commentary is structured around excerpts from the poems, fusing the original text with its interpretation. It is in these moments that Wong May is most clear about the "selfless" intonation of Chinese poetry. In the following passage, for example, she explains the paradox according to which the author's subjectivity can be simultaneously included and excluded from the poem:

> You ask again, after reading a quatrain, where is Wang Wei?
>
> *River flows outside heaven & Earth*
> *Now & then, the color of mountains*
>
> In this, Chinese poets have an unfair advantage. A language blessedly uninflected, words unchanged be tense, gender, easy on the quantitative, forgoing singular/plural, stripped of grammar, a taciturn, forgiving tongue it seems; much is edited out, including punctuation; (Do the words not suffice? Punctation is extraneous, foreign.) The language lends itself to the impersonal style. Chinese 'grammar' is not rule-bound, but sensed – surmised from the correct usage of words in context. the naming words especially stand or fall on their own, free of conjunctions; a regulated poem by Du Fu must read like Braille? Strung on a voice, it halts you, like prayer beads, the nouns are lozenges, hard boiled-sweets, verbs acting on their own, parts of speech jostling against each other; parallels draw close, dart apart, images coalesce. Here you have some of the elements of classical Chinese poetry. […]
>
> Consciousness without the self. Things regard each other. Mountains looked on by a river:
>
> My silly infant girl, dozing, bit me in her hunger,
> I held her close covering her mouth
> The tigers & wolves might hear us.
> She struggled, her cries shriller;
> The young son showing off
> Foraging for wild plums.[62]

The piece Wong May provides at the end of the passage is her translation of a poem by Du Fu. It reads as a poem with a lyrical intonation, but the speaking figure seems to be fading away giving

---

[62] Wong May, *In the Same Light: 200 Tang Poems for Our Century* (Manchester: Carcanet Poetry, 2022), 304.

way to other things in the scene. The impersonal style is reached by a gradual listing of objects that eventually outnumber the observer. The effect is almost picturesque, reminiscent of a painting. As May mentions elsewhere in her book, in Chinese classical culture painting and poetry were considered to be one art. Its main concern is the representation of an absence: "In the visual arts, one can always argue that the *void* is more presentable – representable than *time*; the void certainly is very much a preoccupation of Chinese landscape painters: UnAvoidable in a discussion of this nature."[63] The speaker of the Du Fu poem is literally overwhelmed by the landscape he is drawing. Subjectivity in this scenario becomes nothing more than a formal principle holding the depicted objects together. The personality of the speaker is important insofar it enables us to look at the world through his eyes.

It might be interesting to read this poem without Wong May's explanations. Taken out of the context, will it still produce the same effect of non-lyrical contemplation or will it be interpreted as an instance of lyrical poetry? If we did not know anything about the author or Wong May's thoughts about Tang poetry, will we be inclined to give more value to the lyrical "I" taking into account even the significance of its absence? After all, there are poems in the Anglophone tradition that employ the similar strategy of diminishing the self for a greater lyrical effect. For example, Elizabeth Bishop's "Arrival at Santos" is about the self-effacing merging with the scenery, even though the lyrical self remains a prominent element in the poem's structure:

> Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
> here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery;
> impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
> sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,[64]

The important adjective here is "some." It is used to turn the scenery into an entity without description. The scene is thus almost excluded from the speaker's gaze, not granted the possibility of being described. This is the opposite of what happens in the Du Fu poem where the poet is so focused on the things around him that he himself almost ceases to exist. In Bishop's poem the

---

[63] Wong May, *In the Same Light*, 295.
[64] Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 87.

scenery as such is only important insofar it expresses the speaker's emotional state. The speaker's ability to see is more important than the thing seen. Contrary to this, the person in Du Fu's poem is hidden behind the meticulous listing of the details of the world around him. The singularity of his own gaze is less important than what it perceives. Bishop's rejection of the lyrical intonation is in itself a form of lyrical strategy. It complies with the tradition of the lyrical self being denounced for the purpose of creating an impression of dramatic self-absence. But the purpose of this move is self-affirmation. By not allowing the lyrical voice to sound properly, the poet highlights the absence in which the lyrical intonation is anticipated. In this scenario, the void is not being observed, but is expected to be filled with the observer's presence.

In her own poems, Wong May employs the strategy of self-negation that has more in common with Du Fu than Elizabeth Bishop. According to this method, the poet does not produce any statements of self-affirmation or self-negation. Rather the poet's task is merely to state things as they are (which is evocative of Li-Young Lee's method), avoiding engagement with them. A great example of this is the poem "Vague" that is about the relationship between nature and the observer's capacity to name things:

> When in Spring
> The trees
>   grow vague
> With blossoms
>
>   the   vague   pink
>
> I don't seek
> To know
> What trees
> They are[65]

Discussing this poem, it is difficult to rely on the usual critical lexicon that includes such words as "problematizes," "speaks about," "discerns," "expresses." These verbs imply actions, and May's poetry is an attempt to avoid action. English turns out to be a surprisingly great medium for that. The verb "grow" in the sentence "the trees grow vague" can be both a lexical and a copular verb.

---

[65] Wong May, *Picasso's Tears* (Portland: Octopus Books, 2014), 109.

As a lexical verb, it means to 'increase in size', but as a copular verb it is used to connect an object to a quality. Trees can quite literally grow, perform the action of getting bigger, but in this context the verb is used to imply that they change their state. In other languages the similar sentence would require a full lexical verb. For example, in Russian one would have to say "the tree is greening." In English, such semantic precision can be avoided. Wong May uses this grammatical peculiarity for a poetic effect. Interestingly, the word "vague," which is used to describe the state of the tree, is not a concrete color but rather an abstract quality. The poet linguistically fixates the change in the tree's appearance, but does not elaborate further, leaving the mystery of its blooming uninterrupted. Similarly to how the verb "grow" is used in its copular and not lexical sense, the poem's speaker rejects a direct action and instead chooses observation as their mode of engagement with reality. The ability to identify a "vagueness" is akin to depicting a void, which, as Wong May reminds us, is the main preoccupation of Chinese painting. The vagueness of the trees is the paradoxical affirmation of their presence through ambiguity. In a similar manner, the (anti)lyrical intonation of the poem reveals itself through the dynamics of not naming, of remaining unengaged with knowledge. The brilliant consequence of Wong May's translingualism is that she finds the expression of this poetic sensibility in an English grammatical category.

Wong May's self-effacing lyrical intonation throws a new light on the legacy of Anglophone modernism, particularly on T.S.Eliot's work. The poet's relation to the forms of lyrical selfhood is complex. In his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" Eliot famously wrote that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."[66] This position makes any form of lyrical agency problematic. Yet in Eliot's poems the lyrical intonation is strong and well-defined. One way to interpret his essay is to say that Eliot preferred "a tranquil recollection of emotion" as his poetic method instead of the Romantic method. Eliot did not reject emotions completely. He believed that they belong to poetry, but they need to be handled carefully and meticulously with a surgeon's

---

[66] T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 21.

precision and a scientist's estrangement. He speaks about this in his essay on *Hamlet* where he

argues that the play's main flaw is that it cannot tackle the subject it has taken:

> The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are
> not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of
> emotional relief. In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery
> of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the
> dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot
> express in art.[67]

In his own poetic work T.S.Eliot tried to achieve the exact opposite of the "buffoonery of emotion"

by constructing complex networks of metaphors and references which could mediate emotions

indirectly. Here is an example of how this is done in *The Waste Land*:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.[68]

Here the emotion is discernable, and the lyrical intonation is well articulated. Melancholy, sadness,

anxiety, even despair pervade these lines, but this mood is expressed indirectly. The only two times

when the pronoun "I" is used, it refers to a voice that has more in common with the figure of the

omnipresent narrator in a novel than with a lyrical "I." The self in this stanza is hidden. The poem's

lyrical subject is partially absent from the scene. Instead of calling things directly by their name,

the lyrical voice provides an objective correlative for every tint of emotion that the poet wants to

express. The poet hides his lyrical subjectivity behind the things that are not himself: the objects

of the world, places, nature, history, allusions. But it is precisely in the poet's calling our attention

to these things that the poem's lyrical dimension reveals itself. It consists of the conflict between

---

[67] T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 146.
[68] T.S.Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 63-64.

wanting to know things of this world and being able to call them by their name, and the impossibility of speaking about them directly. The feeling of melancholic contemplation is provoked by an intellectual realization that the only way to access reality is to do that indirectly.

Unlike T.S.Eliot, Wong May's poetic subject does not seek to acquire knowledge. May's poetic statement may be said to be the following: "there are things in this world (trees growing vague with blossoms) that I know exist, but I do not want to learn about them; their existence is independent of the temporary slot that my self occupies." T.S.Eliot's lyrical subject is not content with not knowing. The dominating emotion in *The Waste Land* is the anxiety of the poet who cannot bear the incompleteness of the reference. The poet must make up for the anxiety of being at a loss with a symbolic network of references, allusions, and emotional substitutes. This huge, complex assemblage is in itself a lyrical endeavor.

T.S.Eliot's poetics of escaping from emotions and Wong May's self-effacing anti-lyricism are evocative of each other, but originate from different sources. The similarity of May's and Eliot's work highlights the differences in their approaches to poetry. The critic Dorothy J. Wang has discussed a similar proposition in relation to the parallels between T.S.Eliot and the Asian American poet John Yau:

> A typical objection might run: "If John Yau and T. S. Eliot in their poetry both question a stable and transparent subjectivity, then why is what Yau is doing specifically 'Asian American' or 'Chinese American'"? The fallacious assumption here is that because Yau and Eliot both seem to be making similar poetic (and metaphysical) moves, these moves are formally and substantively identical. But Eliot and Yau are not actually doing the same thing in their poetries. Given how radically different their persons, subjectivities, histories, contexts, and so on are, there is no way that their projects of destabilizing subjectivity are the same. Nor can the resulting poems be the same.[69]

---

[69] Dorothy J.Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 37.

Even though Wong May's first encounter with anglophone poetry was T.S.Eliot, the similarity between their work may be described as an accident, rather than an influence. The mere notion of influence becomes problematic in translingual poetry. What exactly is implied when we say that one poet is influenced by another? The context of cultural influence is as important as its substance. With translingual poets, the context is especially significant as cultural information may be received and transmitted through different languages. T.S.Eliot and Wong May come from distinct historical and cultural contexts, which makes the similarities between them all the more visible. Eliot's own work can be critically rethought by Wong May's translingual poetry in the same way as May's translingual poetry is at least partly possible thanks to Eliot's modernist project.

The Political Dimension of the Translingual Lyric

In the chapter of his *Theory of the Lyric* dedicated to lyric and society Johnathan Culler discusses how lyrical poetry, even though it is not engaged directly with politics, can acquire a tangible political dimension. Commenting on Jacques Ranciére's words, Culler says the following:

> "The poet belongs to politics as one who does not belong there, who ignores its customs and scatters its words." Not belonging in a realm one inhabits, ignoring or resisting its customs, and scattering or dispersing the words that organize life and social value certainly make possible social engagement but scarcely insure social and political effects.[70]

Culler's argument is that there may be a political and social meaning in lyrical activity, even though there are few visible criteria that can ascertain just how influential it is. As Culler writes: "No one doubts that lyrics often have explicit social or political themes and are the vehicles of protest as well as praise, though the question of their social effects is hard to determine."[71] The mere existence of lyrical poetry is an indication of a certain state of political system. Not every society can afford to have lyrical poetry, and there are periods when the creation of lyric is

---

[70] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 296 – 297.
[71] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 296 – 297.

challenging due to political and cultural circumstances. During times of war, such as ours, mediating lyrical agency is particularly problematic.

The political value of translingual poetry is revealed in the fact that translinguality is the trait of a minority. Politically speaking, the translingual subject is the one whose social, cultural, and political adequacy needs to be constantly reaffirmed by a proof of linguistic competence. To write poetry as a translingual author means to acknowledge one's own fragile and unstable position in society. It also means to engage with the lyric in a language that has been appropriated by a political class to exercise control. For an outsider, to use a country's official language implies that the privileged status of literary production is no longer an unattainable holy grail. Instead, language and meaning become more down-to-earth and open to authors who have been for a long time rejected the right to create literature. Poetry belongs to the ordinary people and situations; it occurs naturally even among non-native speakers. Translingual poetic practice reflects this reality.

Translinguality highlights the otherness of the lyrical "I." One of the ways to look at the "I" in the lyrical poem is that it is an agency that the poet constructs to be adopted by the reader. The reader accepts the speech of the poet as their own, and, in pronouncing the words of the poem, actualizes its meanings. From this perspective, translinguality suggests that radical austerity, such having a different mother tongue, is no longer an obstacle for the mediation of the lyric. Translingual writing can produce a readership that engages with literature produced by authors whose position to nativity and language is that of the other. From that perspective, translingual writing contributes to the evolution of sympathy as a political modality. The lyric produced in translingual writing enables the reader to experience poetry through the gaze of the other. The success of that experience depends on the formal features of the poem.

Chapter 4: Form

Formal Arrangements of the Translingual Poem

Form can be defined as "metrical patterns as well as lexical, syntactic, and linear arrangements" of language used for a literary purpose.[72] In more abstract terms, form can be understood as a meaningful engagement with the materiality of language. Apart from context, form is the major criterion that distinguishes literary use of language from non-literary. As Shira Wolosky argues:

> Formal features organize a poem as a textual unit. But in formalizing a relationship between artist and audience, verse forms are profoundly historical. Placing the reader in relation to the poem, and mediating his or her experience of it, verse forms shift as their social contexts change, and reflect changed conceptions both of poetry's place within an ongoing cultural life and of the poet/reader relationship. Thus, poetry's forms are not fixed abstractions. Rather, they give design to that moment of encounter between writer and audience, within terms of expectation and mutual positioning, and within a larger social organization that frames them both.[73]

The form of a poem is what shapes the reader's encounter with its language and themes. Being able to identify the uniqueness of the poem's form means increasing the chances of capturing the themes expressed in it. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century poetic form has been understood as a matter of individual selection and experimentation rather than a set of rules that can be applied universally. As Charles Olson's famous formula goes, "form is never more than an extension of content."[74] In turn, people like Paul Fussell have argued that:

> The contemporary poet will not write in stanzas like the sonnet, or the Venus and Adonis, or the In Memoriam – fixed forms which are irretrievably associated with the opposite of what he himself wants to register about experience. For him to use even a form so devoid of specific thematic and emotional associations as, say, the tetrameter quatrain is to imply an attitude toward order and reason and

---

[72] Frederick Garber, "Form," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger, T.V.F.Brogan, Fanrk J. Warnke, O.B.Hardison, and Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 420-421.

[73] Shira Wolosky, *The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90-91.

[74] Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friendlander (Berkley: University Carolina Press, 1997), 240.

> the predictable and the recurrent which today he probably
> will not want his poem to imply.[75]

Olson and Fussell's understanding of form suggests that in contemporary poetry, where almost all possible poetic structures have been attempted, refining form is a challenging, non-trivial activity. Part of the poet's task involves navigating through the tradition, which may seem overwhelming. Every poem presents a unique subject matter to the poet, and if the wrong form is used, the subject may be inadequately expressed. The challenge is to forge a suitable shape for the poetic content avoiding unwanted distortion.

In the case of the translingual poem the refinement of form is complicated by the author's exposure to another culture. Here the assumption is that the translingual author has a potentially wider array of formal possibilities to choose from, having engaged with the notion of literature, either as a reader or an author, in more than one tradition. As a result, the various forms provided by the author's cultures may collide, producing networks and hierarchies that are inevitably at work when the poet crafts a text. The translingual poem is an artefact resulting from the interconnection of such varieties of forms: those imposed by the culture and the language in which the poem is written, as well as those belonging to the author's first culture. Together, these constellations of forms create networks of both concrete and hypothetical, actualized and non-actualized relations, which play a role in the final iteration of the text. In reading a translingual poem, it is important to keep in mind this quantum duality of its formal appearance. The form of a translingual poem is what it is, but also what it is not. It is the language in which the text is written, but also the language in which it is not written. The latter may be just as important as the former. To choose a definite form means not so much to pick up a shape that is suitable for the poem's content, but to reject everything that is unsuitable. The gesture of rejection is at the very core of translingual writing, where the refinement of form begins already at the level of choosing the language, as the author decides to move from one language to another.

---

[75] Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, 1979), 152.

Li-Young Lee: The Translingual Poem and Tradition

Similarity may best highlight difference. The uniqueness of translingual authors' work is most evident in instances where they intersect with other writers who have preceded them. A notable example is Li-Young Lee's poem "The Parable of the Jar," whose title alludes to Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." However, further examination of Lee's poem reveals that it bears little resemblance to Stevens. The comparison of the two poems demonstrates how seemingly coincidental subject matter can be associated with thematic and formal arrangements that are radically different from each other.

The main similarity between Stevens's and Lee's poems is that they both use the image of a jar as a starting point. Whereas Stevens's poem is abstractedly philosophical, Lee's text is probably related to the parable of the empty jar, a story attributed to Jesus Christ, even though its authenticity is uncertain. The differences in how the two poets treat the subject can be highlighted by the differences in the form of their poems. As Helen Vendler pointed out:

> A poem's form, after all, is the chief factor that distinguishes one poem from another. Without a registering of form, poems treating similar subjects begin to seem indistinguishable from each other.[76]

Stevens's poem is more precise and hermeneutic. It relies on the internal parameters of the form to establish its effect of philosophical bewilderment. The poem consists of three stanzas of regular rhythm, which produces a sense of brittle firmness reminding us of air captured in glass:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.
> The jar was round upon the ground
> And tall and of a port in air.
>
> It took dominion everywhere.

---

[76] Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 4.

> The jar was gray and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.[77]

In contrast, Lee's poem is loose and unrestrained. Even though there are slight indications of such formal features as rhyme at the beginning of the poem, the overall shape is flexible:

> By night, the jar sleeps
> without dreaming, stars inside and out,
> moon a few hours and sometimes
> hair tied up, sometimes hair down.
>
> By day, voices inside the jar
> signal presences impossible to confirm,
> despite the blinding action of the sea
> and the earth's turning repose
> repeated in the contours of the jar, its body
> a mortal occasion of timeless law.
>
> Questions asked into the mouth of the jar
> such as: "Will I have a good death?"
>
> Or: "Where did Noah keep the bees?
> In the rafters? Were there hives
> in the ribs of the boat?"
>
> Or: "Did Jonah use soot to make the drawings
> found on the inside of Leviathan's triple oven?"
>
> Such questions
> sentence the one who asks them to a life
> strangely familiar, yet not
> altogether one's own.[78]

In both Stevens's and Lee's poems, the object they describe can be interpreted as a metaphor of form. Stevens's jar is tight and constrained, while Lee's jar resembles a vase with a narrow bottleneck and an undefined, free-flowing lower part. The first stanza outlines a rhythmical pattern that is also reinforced by the "out/down" rhyme. However, any regularity is disrupted at the beginning of the second stanza, where the anaphoric combination "by night" does not follow the metrical pattern established in the first stanza. Instead, the poem switches to a freer mode of narration. This method reaches its apogee in stanzas three, four and five where the poet introduces

---

[77] Wallace Stevens, *Harmonium* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 92.
[78] Li-Young Lee, *Behind my Eyes: Poems* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), Kindle.

indirect questions. The indirect question is an unusual choice for a lyrical poem. It is more characteristic of narrative epic genres that facilitate the interaction of characters through dialogue. Since in Lee's poem there are no characters, the questions take on a lyrical function. Being asked by no one in particular, they convey a feeling of contemplative loneliness. Each new question deepens this pensive ambience, propelling the poem forward. Critic Derek D. Attridge described this method as "dynamic effects of meaning"[79]. In his discussion of Milton, Attridge proposed the idea that form can be defined as semantic movement. Elements of meaning create and break expectations across large textual parts:

> Semantic movement is not confined within the sentence, however; a sentence may produce an expectation of semantic climax in a following sentence, or delay arrival at an expected climax until a later sentence, or prolong the effect of the climax reached in a previous sentence. When we talk of phrasing, therefore, we need not limit ourselves to linguistically defined phrases, but include effects of meanings and syntax operating over spans of any length.[80]

Semantic rhythm is a more universal device of meaning creation than linguistic rhythm since it is not rooted in the materiality of a concrete language. The translingual aspect of Li-Young Lee's poem can be seen in its relying on the movement of units of meaning rather than on the materiality of language, which is what Stevens does. The indirect questions in Lee's poem propel the semantic development of the poem resulting in the final effect of estrangement:

> Such questions
> sentence the one who asks them to a life
> strangely familiar, yet not
> altogether one's own.[81]

Thematically these lines describe what the poem does to the reader's mind on a formal level. The slight indications of formal features such as rhyme, rhythm, or anaphora in the beginning of the poem recall Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" as something that is "strangely familiar", but as Lee's poem is less rigid formally, it becomes obvious that the poet does not pursue something that is not

---

[79] Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32.
[80] Attridge, *Moving Words*, 33.

"his own". Instead of doing what another poet has done, Lee invents a new form. This form is less meticulously balanced than Steven's, but it still illuminates a transcendental experience of wonder and bewilderment. Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" is like the very jar it describes. It is an object that needs to be examined through the magnifying glass of form. Contrary to this, Lee's "The Parable of the Jar" is like a magnifying glass itself because through language it allows to recount stories from a distant religious tradition and evoke a feeling of melancholic contemplation.

Stevens's and Lee's poems are related to each other like two chords in a musical key to a tonal center. These texts are part of the same larger context, and there is no dissonance between them, even though they consist of different content. However, some of Lee's poems are like chords borrowed from other tonalities. A notable example is a poem called "Evening Hieroglyph." In this text, Lee employs the notion of a hieroglyph as an extended metaphor for what the poem describes:

> Birds keep changing places in the empty tree
> like decimals or numerals reconfiguring
>
> some word which, spoken, might sound the key
> that rights the tumblers in the iron lock
> that keeps the gate dividing me from me.
>
> Late January. The birds face all
> one direction and flit
> from branch to branch.
>
> They raise no voice
> against or for oncoming dark, no answer
> to questions asked by one
> whose entire being seems a question
>
> posed to himself, one no longer new
> on earth, unknowing, and yet,
> still not the next thing.[82]

The poem's form can be seen as an extended metaphor of non-phonetic writing. The speech figures used in it suggest a way of signification that is based on icons and indexes, rather than signs. In semiotics, a sign has an arbitrary relation with the thing it signifies, whereas an icon is something that resembles the object it represents; an index is an element pointing to another item in a shared

---

[82] Li-Young Lee, *Behind my Eyes*, 36.

context. (The index of a fire is smoke.) Lee's comparison of birds to "decimals or numerals reconfiguring" invokes the notion of icon. A sequence of numbers resembles the sharp quick movement of birds the way the number "2" resembles a swan. At the same time, the birds changing places in a tree suggest a sense of purpose behind their simple actions, a higher dominion of meaning. The birds' movement is thus indexical of a religious sense of God, whose figure is given in the last two stanzas as "one whose entire being seems a question posed to himself". God is described as a question mark, which is a sign with no phonetic substance, yet its inclusion in a sentence can alter that sentence's meaning.

The signification of God's appearance in a physical context is what the poem tries to express through its form. It is on this level that its structure can be understood as an extended hieroglyph. A hieroglyph is a unit of writing that conveys meaning through pictorial representation. In most cases the hieroglyph does not indicate the thing it shows, functioning more like a letter conveying a sound. Chinese characters can be referred to as hieroglyphs as well, however they indicate phonemes like western languages. In Lee's poem there seems to be nothing that suggests its relation to the Chinese language. Rather, Lee may be talking about hieroglyph in the most general sense as an alternative to the logic of writing underlying European languages and even the language of the poem. Languages based on the phonetic principles of writing (representing phonemes through letters) enable to record reality in a detailed, yet indirect way. In order to describe something, it is necessary to exploit a variety of tricks and "technologies" such as comparison or metaphor. Often this includes the introduction of a perspective and subjective characterization. In turn, hieroglyphic writing is more closely related to pictorial representation, even if these signs represent phonemes.

This combination of pictorial and metaphorical aspects of writing borrowed from two different systems is what Lee's poem conveys through its form. The crucial moment in the poem is in the third stanza when, amid the flow of subjective figurative language, it suddenly switches to a restrained mode of description focusing on the mere facts of nature:

> Late January. The birds face all
> one direction and flit
> from branch to branch.[83]

This stanza is like a hieroglyphic character, and the rest of the poem is its meaning. The phrase "the birds face all one direction and flit from branch to branch" has the same semantic content as the metaphor introduced in the first stanza "birds keep changing places in the empty tree like decimals or numerals reconfiguring". The difference between the two phrases is that the first one depicts reality through strict representation, and the second through metaphor. The division of the descriptive and metaphorical modes of speech juxtaposes the speaker's inner world with the outer world of natural phenomena. Hieroglyphic logic is enacted here: the object is not merely depicted, it needs to be called by a name, introduced as a sound. The rest of the poem is this process of calling the situation by its name. The evening that is depicted in the poem stands for something else, for an unseen experience of the transcendental. The meaning of the evening hieroglyph is something that is more than itself: a sense of God.

This division between the seen and unseen, the literal and metaphoric, the hieroglyph and the letter is the main formal principle on which the poem is based. It is exemplified in one of its oxymoronic images: "the gate dividing me from me", which can also be interpreted as a metaphor for translingual writing. Translingualism as a creative principle can be described as the expression of content through the formal means of a chosen language. This is where translingual literary practice reveals its transmedial potential. Switching between different languages is akin to switching between different artistic mediums.

Ilya Kaminsky: Sound, Writing, and Sign in *Deaf Republic*

In Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* the notion of form plays a crucial role in both the organization of individual poems and the collection as a whole. The book is about a fictional town occupied during a war. Its citizens decide to become deaf as a protest after the soldiers kill a little boy named

---

[83] Li-Young Lee, *Behind my Eyes*, 36.

Petya. Judging by the names of the poems' characters and toponyms, the city is situated in a Slavic country. This suggests certain parallels with Ukraine entangled in war with Russia since 2014, however no direct comparisons are ever made by the author. The collection consists of lyrical poems in which the author's real emotions are incorporated into a fictional narrative. The combination of lyricism and fictionality, real emotions and made-up content is reflected in the collection's structure. The main body of texts is bookended by two poems situating it in contemporary America. In "We Lived Happily during the War" and "In a Time of Peace" a western speaker checks their privilege in comparison to the rest of the world where wars, poverty, and horrible conditions are more common and are in fact sometimes caused by the (historical) imperialism of western countries. As the poem "We Lived Happily during the War" goes: "And when they bombed other people's houses, we / protested / but not enough, we opposed them but not / enough."[84] Many anglophone poets have expressed similar sentiments. Kaminsky's poems, however, are about a fictional war. This shifts the modality of the texts to a more abstract level of empathy. It also highlights the imaginative structure of the collection as an artwork. The lyrical poems are united by a singular narrative that has its own dramatis personae, much like a play. The collection's first poem, "Gunshot," starts with the words "Our country is the stage,"[85] creating an illusion of dramatic setting and adding a sense of interdimensional immediacy to the narrative and lyrical dimensions of the poems. The blending of narration, representation, and lyric is a core aspect of *Deaf Republic*.

The sense of intermediality also reveals itself in another formal peculiarity of the book. The poems are accompanied by representations of words in a sign language. This adds a further semantic dimension to *Deaf Republic*. For someone who does not speak a sign language, these images work like yet another source of metaphorical knowledge. For example, the sign for the word "story" is composed of two gestures: first, the palms being clasped together, and then half-

---

[84] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 3.
[85] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 11.

opened with their lower ridges still connected. This sign reminds one slightly of the hands of a person preparing to pray, a similarity that evokes one of the collection's themes. Religious sentiments are expressed in several poems. One bright example is a text called "Elegy":

> *Six words,*
> *Lord*:
>
> please ease
> of song
>
> my tongue.[86]

Kaminsky thematizes deafness through thematic and formal arrangements, while also attending to the sonic dimension of language. In "Elegy" assonance and rhyme are used to highlight the main point of text – a supplication to God. Sound devices are not uncommon in *Deaf Republic*. Another example of this technique includes the poem "Lullaby" where rhyme highlights a feeling of tenderness in the lyrical subject's voice:

> Little daughter
> rainwater
>
> snow and branches protect you
> whitewashed walls[87]

Sound is deftly employed as a formal feature throughout the collection. Kaminsky's handling of the audible aspects of words is indicative of the function of sound in contemporary poetry. The sonic dimension of language is probably the trickiest aspect of linguistic creativity for a poet to handle, even though poetry often starts as an exploration of the sensuous side of words. In his study of literary translingualism, the critic Eugene Ostashevsky addresses formalism to describe the difference between poetic and communicational uses of language. This difference consists mainly in how the material side of language is treated in an utterance:

> the language of communication is automatized and
> consequently underarticulated: only so much of the material
> aspect of words is presented as to enable their recognition.
> By contrast, poetry is composed in a language that is slowed
> down, fully articulated, and phonetically more difficult.

---

[86] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 38.
[87] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 27.

> Overall, the language of communication pays attention to sense at the expense of sound, whereas the language of poetry pays attention to sound at the expense of sense.[88]

While sound can be a guiding principle for word selection in poetry, it can also be a diversion. If we are too focused on the materiality of language, we may scant the content. An extreme example of this can be found in Eugene Jolas's nonsense poems. In contrast, Kaminsky's translingual poetic sensibility finds a balance between various incarnations of language. Sign language is also a linguistic dimension, one that is obscured in the traditional conception of textuality. By introducing sign language as an additional formal plane that functions alongside the written texts, Kaminsky emphasizes the arbitrariness of sound as a poetic device. Sound is just one way of meaning making in poetry, perhaps not the most important one. The poetic text is both written language and language can be read aloud and transformed into sound. This sonic materiality of poetry is gestural in its nature. It possesses a concrete corporeal potential that cannot be fully expressed in writing but can be revealed in performance.

The relationship between corporeality and text is one of the main concerns of sign language poetry. The primary vehicle for poetic expression in sign language is the body of the poet. As the deaf poet Paul Scott has put it, "For deaf people, I am the book,"[89] referring to how his body becomes a site for the localization of the poetic text. The scholar Erika Raniolo discusses the theoretical approach to meaning creation in sign language poetry through the concepts of iconicity and signification:

> As regards the study of sign languages, we refer to the modèle sémiologique (semiological model) developed by Christian Cuxac […] This model is structured taking into account above all the centrality of iconicity in the sign languages: according to this model, the so-called Structures de Grande Iconicité (highly iconic structures) have the potential not only to dire (to say) but also to montrer (to show). Through iconicity, these structures allow perceptive experiences, be they real or imagined, to be

---

[88] Ostashevsky, "Translingualism: A Poetics of Language Mixing and Estrangement," 183.
[89] Erika Raniolo, "Translating Poetry in Sign Language: An Embodied Perspective," *Frontiers in Communication* 7 (May 2022): 3, https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2022.806132.

> transposed into linguistic expression. In this process, the central role belongs to the body and to all its components that are involved in linguistic utterance […][90]

Raniolo's discussion draws attention to an important aspect of all types of poetic texts, not just those composed in sign language. In a poem, form not only tells, but also shows. Arranged into lines on a page, the words of a poem become iconic. The iconicity of form reveals itself in how the arrangement of lines is aligned with the subject matter of the poem. For example, in Kaminsky's "Deafness, an Insurgency, Begins" the form is iconic of an act of narration:

> Our country woke up next morning and refused to hear soldiers.
>> In the name of Petya, we refuse.
>> At six a.m., when soldiers compliment girls in the alley, the girls
> slide by, pointing to their ears. At eight, the bakery door is shut in
> soldier Ivanoff's face, though he's their best customer. At ten,
> Momma Galya chalks NO ONE HEARS YOU on the gates of the
> soldiers' barracks.
>> By eleven a.m., arrests begin.
>> Our hearing doesn't weaken, but something silent in us
> strengthens.
>> After curfew, families of the arrested hang homemade puppets
> out of their windows. The streets empty but for the squeaks of strings
> and the tap tap, against the buildings, of wooden fists and feet.

>> In the ears of the town, snow falls.[91]

Town

The form of this poem resembles prose more than poetry. Certain sentences, such as "In the name of Petya, we refuse" are written as separate lines to emphasize their importance in the story's structure, as sometimes happens in prose. The sign word for "town" is also a part of the poem. Its inclusion serves to expand the medial flexibility of English as a vehicle for poetry. The sign word

[90] Rachel Sutton-Spence and Ronice Müller de Quadros, "'I Am The Book'—Deaf Poets' Views on Signed Poetry," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 19, no. 4 (2014): 546, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43666307.
[91] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 14.

does not operate as an independent image. Rather, it is semantically connected with the rest of the poem. Moreover, it enhances the text's imaginative potential, allowing readers to visualize how the citizens of the town communicate with each other and the signs they use to evade the soldiers. The poem is intended for those readers in English who can access the language in its written and sonic forms. Kaminsky never performs the transition into the medium of sign language, but he introduces its elements into the text, thereby enlarging its capacity for signification. Language now exists in a three-dimensional state: as sound, as writing, and as sign.

Most of the formal choices in *Deaf Republic* reflect its main themes: silence, deafness, grief, and the political power of not speaking. Form becomes iconic of the ways in which silence is incorporated into language and utterances. In several poems the arrangement of the lines on the page shows how silence is the condition of sound, and the emptiness of the page is the condition of writing. A good example is the short text "Question" that occupies one whole page:

> What is a child?
> A quiet between two bombardments.[92]

Here the form of the poem is not just these two lines, but also the blankness that surrounds them. The word "quiet" used as a countable noun makes the feeling of quietness more tangible and physical. Silence here is conceptualized as a presence, a precious thing that is craved for. In a similar manner, the vacantness of the page, unfilled with writing, represents a visible metaphor for quietness, absence of sound. In other poems, Kaminsky works with silence similarly, using it as a counterweight to balance the meaning deployed in individual lines. In the poem called "In bombardment, Galya" the couplet is a unit in which rhythmic arrangements are distributed unevenly in each case:

In the twenty-seventh day of aerial bombardment, I
Have nothing except my body, and the walls of this empty apartment flap and flap like a lung.

How to say I only want some quiet; I, a deaf woman, want some quiet, I want some quiet;
I, in the middle of

The nursery where earth asks of me, earth asks of me

---

[92] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 28.

Too much, I

(Before I give up my hiccupping heart and sleep) count
Our strength — a woman and a child.[93]

The uneven length of individual lines speeds up and slows down the pace of narration for dramatic effect. For example, in couplets one and three the second lines both end with the pronoun "I," but the effect differs. In the first couplet, the pronoun is obscured by the density of language and detail. The poet's self is eclipsed by the action: the long exhaustive temporality of ongoing bombardments and the detailed description of the apartment. In contrast, in the third couplet, the "I" is more tangible and distinct, standing out at the end of a shorter line. Some of the lines in the poem gain length through the repetition of the same semantic units. In the third couplet the phrase "earth asks of me" is used twice consecutively, and in the second couplet "I want some quiet" is also repeated twice. This amalgamation of rhythmic units, devoid of semantic weight, emphasizes the sonic, corporeal aspect of language. Meaning is manipulated not through the interplay of synonymity and additional words, but through the bending of rhythm. Kaminsky distributes silences though the poem like black dots on a canvas. As the monolithic whole of the text is punctured with these little interruptions, the poem's texture becomes more complex. It begins to breathe like the lung it describes in the first couplet, turning into a kind of sound gesture.

Form in *Deaf Republic* is indicative of the approach to language in translingual writing. Translingual authors emphasize the potentiality of language that reveals itself in different dimensions such as sound, writing, and sign. Language is typically thought of a concrete material system consisting of peculiar sounds and words, *a* language. However, as Kaminsky's use of sign language elements suggests, language can manifest in different forms. It can exist as a sound, as writing, and as gesture. Sign language can have poetic signification. Language is not limited to the modalities of sound and textuality traditionally employed by poetry. Poetic content can travel through the dimensions of language in the same way as it can travel through different languages.

---

[93] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 57.

Sign language creates poetic effects in a similar manner to English, Czech, or other spoken languages. This is where translingual poetic practice reveals its transmedial aspect. Literary translingualism foregrounds an understanding of the poetic effect as something that extends beyond the material capacities of a specific language and even beyond the medium of language itself.

Wong May: The Transmedial Dimension of Poetry

Of the three poets discussed in this thesis Wong May is probably the most formally experimental. Her latest collection *Picasso's Tears* (2014), comprised of poems written through the years of 1978-2013, contains a broad variety of formal arrangements. May's technique may be partly explained by the fact that she is also a painter, and perceives art as unbound to a single medium. May remarks on this in one of her rare interviews:

> No matter what I do, language is not important. – it is poetry. Even words are not important. I will always be doing poetry. I can be painting. I could be doing anything. It would be poetry by any other means. […] I'm no longer interested in the well-contained poems. I want to do something that's more like a symphony with all the different trends coming together. That's free, coming and going, anything can happen. Poetry and picture, visual arts send us out to the world and see how the world can save us.[94]

Wong's views are reminiscent of the work of cultural critic Caroline Levine, who thinks of form as a principle that can produce patterns, orders, shapes and configurations across various fields and contexts. According to Levine, form should neither be seen as an organic continuity, nor as a technology imposing limitations. Crucial to this concept is the idea of ontological transversality, which implies that form can travel through different modes or states of existence. Form is something that is not confined to any single medium. Rather, it is a principle that can be applied in diverse contexts:

---

[94] Wong May, "Wong May Profile," *Windham-Campbell Prizes and Literary Festival*, YouTube, March 23, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmJYwxF5K3Q.

> Precisely because they [forms] are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns are iterable – portable. They can be picked up and moved to new contexts. A school borrows the idea of spectators in rows from ancient theater. A novelist takes from epic poetry the narrative structure of the quest. Forms also afford movement across varied materials. A rhythm can impose its powerful order on laboring bodies as well as odes.[95]

This can be applied to Wong May's poetic sensibility. As a poet who is also a painter, she tends to create more complex formal arrangements in her poems, probably because her intermedial awareness enables her to see the arbitrariness of any formal relations that are specific to a concrete medium. It is also noteworthy that as somebody who lives and works in Ireland Wong May continues a line established by the Irish painter Jack B. Yeats, the brother of W. B. Yeats, who once said that "all painting to be painting must be poetry, and all poetry must be painting."[96] Even though Jack Yeats did not write poetry himself, he was for some time close with Samuel Beckett, when the writer lived in Ireland after returning from Paris, and thus was intellectually a part of the context of anglophone literary modernism. As such the view that "painting must be poetry" is modernist enough, and it is interesting that Wong May picks up that tradition whose adoption of English mirrors Samuel Beckett's shift to French.

Wong May's linguistic and pictorial sensibility as well as her Irish connections are best revealed in the poem "Irish Postcard *1/3*". This is the first in a short series of "postcard poems" included in *Picasso's Tears*. In these concise texts, May combines the idea of visual representation with linguistic description employing the notion of a postcard. The postcard has a lot in common with a poem. Both can be described as fragmentary glimpses of an experience. Likewise, a poem is a linguistic rendition of a feeling or emotion, or a state of mind for a reader. Here is one of Wong May's postcards:

> In a country where butchers
> Sell eggs
>   & sheepskins
> The shape of the country's map

---

[95] Catherine Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 7.
[96] Lois Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett 1906-1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 90.

what dread hand
Did he who made the lamb make thee
    – Did he who made the bomb
Help me?
Hairy laundry
        of the North/South Divide!
You think the map's been cut to suit
                the pelt.[97]

This stanzaic unit fulfills a function similar to that of a scenery in painting. It is depicting in broad terms the most general sense of what it feels to be somewhere. The choice of the indefinite article in "a country" is characteristic. At this point the representation is unspecific like the drawing of a field taken out of context: it could be anywhere, and it does not tell much yet. Later in the poem the representation is endowed with subjective experience:

& when the heart begins to beat
                wilder & more wild
At the nation's gate –
Did he smile his work to see
What brute grip
O what the hammer
                & what domain
Where over the bloodied sawdust after school
rolled my younger son's prize lolly[98]

Mythological and cultural information is recounted through allusion. The interchange of regular and irregular comparative forms of the adjective "wild" creates a sense of formal asymmetry. What starts as a general description of "a country" is followed by mythological detail and finally by an autobiographical fact. The poet speaks about her son as a part of the context that has been described before. Another reference to personal life is given at the end of the poem:

The 4 provinces look on,
Wide over the shop-soiled sawdust –
Not a bad side to take – my child,
the outside.[99]

In such biographical details language is more effective than painting as it can convey temporality. This temporality is historical: it expresses the subjective sense of progression and remembrance

---

[97] May, *Picasso's Tears*, 8.
[98] May, *Picasso's Tears*, 8-9.
[99] May, *Picasso's Tears*, 10.

that highlights the personal relation of an individual to a context. Wong May's speaking about her family creates such a sense of history. The postcard thus transforms into something that is more intimate and deeper that an impersonal representation. Like the short inscription that is often written on the other side of a postcard, Wong May's use of language opens up her subjective relation to the depicted scenery, telling about how her personal life is connected to it. The appearance of the child figure in the last lines reveals the biographical aspect of the poem, communicating information about May's personal life story.

The pictorial aspect is mainly evoked in those poems that mention Ireland. Those dedicated to China or Chinese culture do not have this intermedial dimension and concentrate almost solely on issues of language. For example, a poem called "Zhi Liao," which is the Chinese word for "cicada," is based on an extended onomatopoetic effect, recreating a linguistic calque of the sound made by cicadas:

> The cicadas
>   Each summer
> Like there's no September
> : July August
>   August
>
>
> So the cicadas begin
>   July July August & I say
> As if there's no September[100]

Throughout the poem the speaker expresses a fascination with the sensuous aspect of language. The poet repeatedly plays with words: "July July August & I say / As if there's no September," later there are other lines that abound in sound effects: "on the 18th day of the 18 month" and then later: "Switch over, tri / Tri-Angulate; in relative amplitude." These little poetic rattles have no ostensible semantic function. They seem to be included in the poem for their own sake, as though she tries to match things of the world with the sounds of words. Even though this interplay of sounds and words is in English, it was initiated by the onomatopoetic effect in Chinese:

> Cicada whose Chinese name

---

[100] May, *Picasso's Tears*, 202.

In 2 words
Is Zhi Liao, for the sound it makes.[101]

This method can be described as the transplantation of a formal device from one language into another. The sound produced by the word combination "Zhi Liao" is not repeated in the poem. Rather, the text isolates the onomatopoetic principle and relocates it into the materiality of English where it initiates an interplay of English phonemes. Once this sonic device is activated, a fireworks of meanings and sounds comes into play:

Zhi (verb – to know) Liao (indicative of

the past perfect)

Cicada in Chinese Signs
Know/Known/Known? – know – Known
Knooooooooow, now
Zhi- liao–
Zhi– liao – zhi – zhi– liao
Zzz – zzz
            No – – ah

UnAnswerable, a questing,
Bewildering chorus, [102]

It is noteworthy that the forms of the verb "to know" in this passage operate more as sound units rather than semantic units. It is solely in the domain of sound that the parallel with the Chinese verb forms "zhi liao" are established. The metaphor of the "bewildering chorus" can be applied to both the subject-matter of the poem as well as to its formal organization. The sounds of the poems, both Chinese and English, are like that chorus. They produce a sensory effect that demonstrates Wong May's translingualism.

The two poems by Wong May discussed above exemplify her belief that poetry is not confined to a specific medium. Instead, it is a universal and abstract principle, a dynamic flow of meaningful cognitive energy that can be enacted in various contexts and mediums. Just as May uses verbal and pictorial representation to depict a scene as well as to express her own subjective

[101] May, *Picasso's Tears*, 204.
[102] May, *Picasso's Tears*, 204.

experience of living in it, she also uses sound effects rooted in one language to initiate a sequence of semantic and sonic movements in another. The translingual poet's attempt to focus on an object (the cicada) results in a complex interplay of linguistic structures across two languages. In this interplay, one language serves as the source of creative activity for the other. The Chinese word initiates what is then continued in English. Between the two languages, as well as between the pictorial and verbal modes of representation, the text of the poem emerges.

The Foreignness of Poetic Language

A discussion of form in translingual poetry raises three questions. How does the form used by a poet correlate with the tradition in which the author was born and (supposedly) received their first notion of poetry? How does the form fit in with the tradition in which the author writes? And most importantly, how does the form of mark a text as a poem and not as a different kind of text?

Looking for the answers to questions one and two is futile. What can we learn by establishing that a certain poem written by a translingual author is rooted in a certain poetic tradition in their first culture? Alternatively, what can we gain by discovering that there are certain parallels between, for example, Li-Young Lee and Wallace Stevens? The kind of knowledge that is proven by such calculations is that X equals Y. In other words, it is similar to saying that "anglophone poetry is important for writers writing in English." On the contrary, the third question has important cultural, literary, and existential implications. By understanding how a person who comes to inhabit a culture and a different language after already receiving an education in their mother tongue, learns to handle the distinction between poetic and ordinary speech, we may discover how the boundaries between the poetic and ordinary modes of language are constructed.

This is ultimately an inquiry into form because form distinguishes the linguistic strangeness used for poetic purposes from other kinds of linguistic abnormality that may be associated, above all things, with a lack of linguistic proficiency. For example, his poem "Yet, I Am" Ilya Kaminsky uses what may seem like a mistake as a formal device mediating the poetic effect:

<div style="text-align:center">Yet, I am. I exists. I has

a body.[103]</div>

By using the third person verb forms with a first-person pronoun Kaminsky creates a sense of estrangement from one's own body, something that in another text he reaches by a dependent clause: "I, this body into which the hand of God plunges, / empty-chested, stand."[104] But unlike the second example, the first contains what under other circumstances may seem like a grammatical error, especially coming from somebody who is not a native speaker. Yet, we know that the phrase "I has a body" is a line of poetry and not linguistic clumsiness. How do we know that? It can be argued that its unidiomatic aspect estranges it from normal language, and thus we can say it is poetry. A similar idea was formulated by Helen Vendler's in one of her essays. In her analysis of Wallace Stevens's poem "The Region November" the critic discusses the poet's use of non-existent adjective forms "deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier" to talk about the movement of the trees' leaves. She argues that by acknowledging that the "trees are speaking nature's foreign words" the poet relies on the phonetic qualities of the syllables, trying to mimic and ultimately internalize the sounds of the trees so that they can "become part of a poem in English."[105] Vendler's idea is that a degree of foreignness is always associated with poetic experience and poetic language. For a text to become a poem, it needs to be translated, even if it means translating from English into English. The relation of ordinary linguistic usage to poetic language is similar to that of a mother tongue to a foreign language. All poets are mediators of this foreignness. All poets are translingual because they "translate" the common words into the language of poetry where these words come to mean different things. The more specific way of saying this would be to say that in poetry the referential function of words is bent back on itself.[106] The act of translation happens not only through the use of imagery and devices such as metaphor, but mainly through the imposition of formal structures on linguistic material. The difference between translingual authors and those

---

[103] Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*, 67.

[104] Ilya Kaminsky, *Deaf Republic*, 36.

[105] Helen Vendler, *Last Looks, Last Books Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 36.

[106] Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age*, 200.

writing in their mother tongue is the position towards poetic estrangement that they occupy by an accident of birth. Some, like Wallace Stevens, are born speaking the language that they then use to write poetry. In this case, the task of the poet is "unlearn" it, discover its foreignness. By writing poetry in English, such poets practice linguistic foreignness, trying to match the strangeness of language with poetic intentions. Others, like Ilya Kamisnky, are born speaking a different language. Their task is the opposite: to accommodate estrangement to the idiomaticity of the language. At the same time authors as Wong May deconstruct the language to a point where ordinary, non-artistic comprehension is impossible, which relates their work to the tradition of such authors as E. E. Cummings and James Joyce. This suggests that the exploration language idiomaticity is not the primary goal or defining characteristic of translingual poetic practice. Instead, it is the ability to shape unique experiences through language in a manner that ensures that the final output is read as poetry, rather than as another type of text. Translingualism in this regard means only that the poet occupies a special position in mediating linguistic strangeness. The vicissitudes of this position can be revealed through the uses of form. Rather than being a simple indicator of the ways in which the poet is related to their first and second culture, the unique use of form in a poem shows how the poet comes to correlate the sense of estrangement (foreignness), which is internal to all poetry, with the resources of the language in which they write.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Writing this thesis has proven to be surprising in many ways. One of the most unpredictable outcomes of my analysis is the extent to which my discussion has been informed by the discourse of literary modernism, particularly by the work of certain modernist authors. Initially, my purpose in analyzing Wong May, Li-Young Lee, and Ilya Kaminsky was to understand how these three translingual authors approach poetry. A poem is a complex artifact. Every culture has its own understanding of what defines it. In cultures that are remote from each other the differences can be immense. One of my initial questions was how (if at all) a translingual poet's first culture influences their literary practice. How does a translingual poet forge a poetic text? How do they address their translingualism? What is their position inside their adopted tradition? How do they use form and what themes do they explore? Another significant question was whether the work of translingual authors can tell us something about Anglophone poetry in general? In most cases looking for answers was somehow related to drawing parallels with the Anglophone modernist tradition. On the one hand, analogies with modernism help to illuminate how contemporary translingual writing has evolved. On the other hand, these comparisons have proven to be equally enlightening for seeing modernism from a new perspective. Established Anglophone poets have been as instrumental in understanding the work of the translingual "newcomers" as the latter in shedding light on the work of those Anglophone authors.

The modernist poet whose work was addressed the most is T.S.Eliot. His critical and poetic writing, as well as his position between British and American literary contexts, exemplifies how an author acquires their position within a tradition. One of T.S.Eliot's central ideas is that the work of a new poet restructures the tradition, illuminating it in new ways. T.S.Eliot's own position in the Anglophone canon can be seen from a new perspective when he is compared with poets like Wong May. For instance, Eliot's own "translingualism" becomes more apparent. Unlike the practical translingualism of everyday life, literary translingualism is a more complex matter as it involves an additional symbolic network of meaning, revealing itself in historical references,

allusions, and intertextuality. Switching from the American poetic tradition to the British one required Eliot to transition between literary idioms of distinct, yet related, natures. Fully translingual authors perform a similar transition, but on a more radical scale. The difference between Eliot and Wong May is that May's translingual switch requires a more encompassing change. But the main dynamics of translingual poetic practice takes place in symbolic networks. Renat's poem analyzed in the introductory chapter reproduces the Romantic lyrical model despite minor linguistic inaccuracies. The movement of translingual writing is the movement from one symbolic network to another. The fact that this movement is also accompanied by a switch between languages of everyday practical communication can be seen as a coincidence, albeit of significant nature.

The ways in which translingual authors relate to their acquired and first traditions are nuanced. For example, Ilya Kaminsky's connection with Anglophone modernism reveals itself, among other things, through his reinterpretation of Joseph Brodsky's lyrical intonation. Brodsky borrowed substantially from Anglophone poets and from T.S.Eliot in particular. The fact that Kaminsky was familiar with Brodsky's work in Russian before he began writing in English is significant. Brodsky is one of the cultural figures linking Kaminsky to Russophone modernism and consequently to Anglophone modernism. However, Kaminsky never simply imitates Brodsky's style, rather he recreates a similar intonation. Kaminsky's addressing Brodsky in English, which is a language they both used as translingual authors, is more of a reconfiguration of the positions that these authors hold in the Anglophone literary context. Kaminsky does not bring Brodsky into that context to reaffirm his figure. Instead, he displaces him by emphasizing Brodsky's affiliation with Russian culture. This is an important lyrical gesture with political implications. In his final years, Brodsky wrote a poem called "On the Independence of Ukraine" in which he reproduced an imperial view of Ukraine as Russia's colony, denying it the right to be an independent country (the poem was never included into any of Brodsky's collections and was performed for the first time in 1992 in California). Even though Brodsky's collection of essays,

which won him the Noble Prize, was written in English, he never fully became a translingual writer and remained close to the Russian context. Kaminsky's elegy about Brodsky is, to a certain extent, a re-estimation of his position inside the Anglophone context. Similarly to how T.S.Eliot's translingualism becomes more apparent through the comparison with Wong May, Joseph Brodsky's failure to become a translingual poet is suggested by Kaminsky's poem.

For translingual authors, the cultural relations they choose to maintain are as important as those they abandon. Of the three poets analyzed in this thesis Li-Young Lee is the only author who does not make literary allusions to his first culture as frequently as the others. His relation to the Chinese language and culture is both palpable and almost invisible in his work. For Lee, the entire process of writing poetry is imbued with the non-Western notion of yoga, which suggests a different understanding of literary practice. Throughout modernity, and especially in modernism, literature evolved into an increasingly autonomous field of knowledge, characterized by a growing disconnection between linguistic referentiality and life-practice. Operating within this Western literary modality, Lee nonetheless emphasizes the action-oriented aspect of language, language as a form of contemplative practice similar to yoga. In his poem "The City in Which I Love You," the lyrical subject is both present and absent from the scene. The lyrical appeal of the poem combines both the Western fixation on the lyrical self as a central projection of language and the non-Western idea of the self's illusionary nature. In this respect, Lee is closer to Wong May than Kaminsky, as May's theory of writing is based on a similar self-effacing understanding or lyrical agency. This (non)lyrical subjectivity has certain similarities with modernist authors' attempts to diminish the presence of personality in writing. Since Henry James to figures like Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, and T.S.Eliot, many Anglophone authors were concerned with inventing narrative and lyrical models that can eliminate the distorting effect of the personal gaze in a literary structure. These modernist writers explore ways in which literary content can be mediated "objectively" and independently of the author's personality. Li-Young Lee and Wong May pursue a similar goal. However, for them, diminishing their own self-presence is a more natural artistic gesture as they

come from a tradition where poetic practice is associated with self-absence to a greater extent. As Wong May's translations show, Classical Chinese literature is less concerned with the representation of the self. In her own poems she recreates elements of this Chinese sensibility. In turn, Kaminsky, whose literary background is European modernism, does not share such a philosophy of the self. Contrary to May and Lee, Kaminsky emphasizes the elements of Anglophone modernism that are concerned with a strong lyrical self-presence. However, all translingual writing involves the rejection of the self to a certain extent.

The different ways in which Li-Young Lee, Wong May, and Ilya Kaminsky's work relates to modernism highlight the idea that instead of one unified modernism there are many modernist traditions. As Peter Childs argues:

> Modernism has predominantly been represented in white, male, heterosexist, Euro-American middle-class terms, and any of the recent challenges to each of these aspects either reorients the term itself and dilutes the elitism of a pantheon of modernist writers, or introduces another one of a plurality of modernisms.[107]

The work of translingual authors reveals the extent to which modernism was never a unified movement but a mosaic of variations. Each of the translingual writers I have analyzed highlights a certain aspect of the modernist sensibility in their writing. In addressing the same modernist tradition different translingual writers focus on opposite ideas. Both Wong May and Ilya Kaminsky address, directly or indirectly, T.S.Eliot, yet they both highlight different aspects of Eliot's legacy in working with the lyric. Wong May emphasizes the self-effacing aspect of T.S.Eliot's strategy of escaping from emotions and personality in complex intertextuality. In turn, Kaminsky refers to the same modernist tradition to create an effect of solemnity. This paradoxical unity of the opposites suggests an understanding of modernism as a broken mirror. When a translignual author approaches it, different parts of their personality as well as their different cultural affiliations are

---

[107] Peter Childs, *Modernism*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 13.

reflected in the broken pieces. In the translingual poem, these pieces are glued together, producing a unity.

While contemporary translingual writers are rooted in the modernist momentum, modernism, as a historical context, was limited in its capacity to mediate a translingual writing subjectivity. As the examples of Vladimir Nabokov and Eugene Jolas suggest, the modernist translingual model was premised on an understanding of language as a rigid formal system. Both Nabokov and Jolas were keen on experimenting with the internal capacities of language. To understand their approach more clearly, it may be beneficial to place modernism in the broader context of modernity. As Peter Childs suggests, "modernism […] has frequently been seen as an aesthetic and cultural reaction to late modernity and modernization."[108] Modernity's development is marked by the gradual emergence of distinct discourses of art and science, evolving into separate and independent fields of meaning. Jürgen Habermas argues that throughout the development of what may be called modernity, the sciences and arts were progressively distanced from life-practice and conceptualized as singular domains of information-knowledge:

> In so far as the world-views have disintegrated and their traditional problems have been separated off under the perspectives of truth, normative rightness and authenticity or beauty, and can now be treated in each case as questions of knowledge, justice or taste respectively, there arises in the modern period a differentiation of the value spheres of science and knowledge, of morality and of art. Thus scientific discourse, moral and legal enquiry, artistic production and critical practice are now institutionalized within the corresponding cultural systems as the concerns of experts. And this professionalized treatment of the cultural heritage in terms of a single abstract consideration of validity in each case serves to bring to light the autonomous structures intrinsic to the cognitive-instrumental, the moral-practical and the aesthetic-*internal* histories of science and knowledge complexes.[109]

---

[108] Childs, *Modernism*, 18.

[109] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997) 48.

Literature's evolution into a distinct "knowledge complex" and its separation into an autonomous branch of aesthetic and academic practice reached its apogee in modernism. The emergence of such theoretical systems as formalism and structuralism is an indication of how literature, both as an activity and a field of study, became separated from life-practice and mundane everyday knowledge. Before modernism literature was more closely aligned with the praxis of life. For example, many Victorian critics thought of literature as being more intertwined with politics and practical morality. As Martin Prochazká writes:

> The aesthetic line of Victorian criticism reaches its peak in the work of its three representatives, John Ruskin, William Morris and Walter Pater. They differ from each other both politically and as art critics. While Ruskin emphasizes a direct connection between aesthetic and moral value and is firmly grounded in the liberal humanist tradition, Morris becomes a socialist seeing art as the agent for transforming the social order. In opposition to both of these critics, Pater deals with aesthetic pleasure as an individual contemplation of the aesthetic object and becomes the founder of "art-for-art's sake" movement in Britain.[110]

Even though the foundation for the "art-for-art's sake" approach to literature was laid during the Victorian era, it was in modernism that this position fully developed. In modernism, literary practice and criticism began to devote much of their attention to themselves. This conditioned the emergence of literary translingualism as a practice concerned with conducting linguistic experiments and reproducing nativity as a literary effect. Eugene Jolas's and Vladimir Nabokov's models of literary translingualism are deeply invested in exploring the limitations of language and its formal capacities for experimentation.

The new translingual model began to take shape with Ivan Blatný's multilingual and translingual poems. Blatný was the first translingual poet whose linguistic experimentation was not tied to the modernist preoccupation with language and its formal structures. With the appearance of Blatný's work, literary translingualism became more connected to life-practice and less concerned with the intricacies of language. In Blatný's poems, language is less understood as

---

[110] Martin Prochazká, *Literary History: An Historical Introduction* (Prague: Nakladatelství Karolinum, 2008), 56.

a formal system. Instead, Blatný uses language as a material, available to him at the moment of writing, that can forge a certain lyrical effect. The specific conditions of this material is less important than the effect it can produce. The translingual poets after Blatný also share this strategy. The most striking similarity can be seen in Wong May, whose theory of writing is based on the idea that to write means to forget that writing is happening. According to this perspective, language almost disappears out of the picture. What remains is the poetic effect, detached from the formal intricacies of a language.

Of course, poetry remains a verbal art, so to assert that language is not important at all would be unreasonable. Rather, the materiality of language becomes less significant. The poetic effect becomes detached from the concrete manifestations of literary devices. This provokes questions for further investigation into translingual poetics. Since Aristotle, the discussion of poetics has predominantly revolved around the analysis of concrete elements of a literary work expressed in a specific language. However, for translingual writing, the literary effect is more important than the means that enable it. This has certain parallels with transmedial practice where resources of one medium can be metaphorically reinterpreted in another. In the work of each traslingual poet I have analyzed, there is a certain transmedial feature. Kaminsky explores the gestural dimension of language in his book *Deaf Republic*, where images of sign language words accompany the writing. Wong May, who is also a painter, creates picturesque poems that metaphorically interpret visual forms, such as the postcard, through language. And Li-Young Lee sees poetry as a religious practice, placing the poetic text in a different modality in regard to its function as a verbal act. In each of these cases, translingualism is deeply intertwined with the transmedial impulse. Just as in the case with Renat's poem, which was discussed at the beginning of this thesis, mediating the poetic effect for the listener is more important than focusing on the formal interplay of arbitrary linguistic signs.

Bibliography

Attridge, Derek. *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life*. Translated by P.E. Charvet. UK: Penguin Books, 2010. Kindle.

Bishop, Elizabeth. *Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of* Influence: A Theory of Poetry. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Blatný, Ivan. *The Drug of Art: Selected Poems*. Edited by Veronika Tuckerová. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2007.

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Brodsky, Joseph. *Selected Poems*. Translated by George L. King. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973.

Brogan, T.V.F. "Poetry." In *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger, T.V.F. Brogan, Frank J. Warnke, O.B. Hardison, and Earl Miner, 938-942. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Childs, Peter. *Modernism* (2nd ed.). London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Chu-chin Sun, Cecile. *The Poetics of Repetition in English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1963.

Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1934.

Epstein, Andrew. *The Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry since 1945*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Friedberg, Nila. *English Rhythms in Russian Verse: On the Experiment of Joseph Brodsky*. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter Mouton, 2011.

Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. New York: Random House, 1979.

Garber, Frederick. "Form." In *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger, T.V.F. Brogan, Frank J. Warnke, O.B. Hardison, and Earl Miner, 420-421. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Gordon, Lois. *The World of Samuel Beckett 1906-1946*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, edited by Maurizio d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, 48. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997.

Hall, J. Christopher. "Cognitive Perspectives on English as a Lingua Franca." In *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, edited by Jennifer Jenkins, Will Baker, and Martin Dewey, 74-85. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Hemon, Aleksandar. *Writers on the Fly*. By Ben Hill. YouTube, April 28, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcOmTstY1E4&t=16s .

Jen, Gish. *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. Kindle.

Kaminsky, Ilya. *Dancing in Odessa*. London: Faber and Faber, 2021.

Kaminsky, Ilya. "I Will Never Hear My Father's Voice." By Claire Armistead. The Guardian, July 19, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/19/ilya-kaminsky-interview .

Kelbert, Eugenia. "Eugene Jolas: A Poet of Multilingualism." *L2 Journal* 7, no.1 (2015): 49-67. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9f7486t2#author.

Kimura, Daisuke, and Suresh Canagarajah. "Translingual Practice and ELF." In *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, edited by Jennifer Jenkins, Will Baker, and Martin Dewey, 295-309. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Lantolf, James P. "Re(de)fining Language Proficiency in Light of the Concept of 'Languaculture'." In *Advanced Language Learning*, edited by Heidi Byrnes, 72-95. London and New York: Continuum, 2006.

Lee, Li-Young. *Behind My Eyes: Poems*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. Kindle.

Lee, Li-Young. *The City in Which I Love You*. Rochester: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1990.

Lee, Li-Young. "A Conversation with Li-Young Lee." By Paul T. Corrigan. Image. Accessed August 7, 2023. https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-li-young-lee/.

Levine, Catherine. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

May, Wong. *In the Same Light: 200 Tang Poems for Our Century*. Manchester: Carcanet Poetry, 2022.

May, Wong. *Picasso's Tears*. Portland: Octopus Books, 2014.

May, Wong. "What You Write Is Nobody's Business, An Interview with Wong May." By Zachary Schomburg. The Believer, May 1, 2014. https://www.thebeliever.net/what-you-write-is-nobodys-business-an-interview-with-wong-may/.

May, Wong. "Wong May Interview: A Transnational and Constantly Surprising Thinker." By Seán Hewitt. The Irish Times, March 30, 2022. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/wong-may-interview-a-transnational-and-constantly-surprising-thinker-1.4838124.

May, Wong. "Wong May Profile." Windham-Campbell Prizes and Literary Festival. YouTube. March 23, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmJYwxF5K3Q.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Thomas Karshan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. USA: Penguin Books, 1941.

Olson, Charles. *Collected Prose*. Edited by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Ostashevsky, Eugene. "Translingualism: A Poetics of Language Mixing and Estrangement." *boundary 2* 50, no. 4 (November, 2023): 171-194.

Prochazká, Martin. *Literary History: An Historical Introduction*. Prague: Nakladatelství Karolinum, 2008.

Quinn, Justin. *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry in a Global Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Raniolo, Erika. "Translating Poetry in Sign Language: An Embodied Perspective." *Frontiers in Communication* 7 (May 2022): 1-9. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2022.806132.

Saussy, Haun, Ernest Fenollosa, and Ezra Pound. "Fenollosa Compounded: A Discrimination." In *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

Shakespeare, William. *The Sonnets*. Introduction by Martin Hilský. Brno: Atlantis, 2012.

Stevens, Wallace. *Harmonium*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

Sutton-Spence, Rachel, and Ronice Müller de Quadros. "'I Am The Book'—Deaf Poets' Views on Signed Poetry." *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 19, no. 4 (2014): 546-558. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43666307.

Vendler, Helen. *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Vendler, Helen. *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007.

Vendler, Helen. *Poems, Poets, Poetry*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Wang, Dorothy J. *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

Wolosky, Shira. *The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

Abstract

This thesis discusses the work of three contemporary Anglophone translingual poets: Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, and Li-Young Lee. A translingual poem is a poetic text written in a language that is not the author's mother tongue. Translingual literary practice was common in the Middle Ages, but during Romanticism the monolingual literary model became dominant. This started to change in modernism, where new forms of translingual writing subjectivity began to appear, exemplified by writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Jolas, and later Ivan Blatný. The thesis discusses these writers' works, establishing the connections between the modernist translingual subject and the contemporary one. It then proceeds to analyze the poems of Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, and Li-Young Lee, looking for the ways in which these authors relate to the literary traditions of their first and second languages through the use of form and poetic content. The thesis also discusses the intermedial quality of their work, as well as how the three poets approach the notion of the lyric.

Key words: translingualism, multilingualism, modernism, poetry, poem, poetics, transmediality, literature, lyric

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá analýzou tvorby tří současných anglofonních translingválních básníků: Ilji Kaminského, Wong Mayové a Li-Young Leeho. Translingvální básní se rozumí poetický text napsaný v jazyce, který není autorovou mateřštinou. Translingvální literární praxe byla běžná ve středověku. Během romantismu se dominantním způsobem literární produkce stal monolingvální model. V modernismu však došlo k obnovení literárního traslingvismu, což lze vidět například ve tvorbě autorů jako Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Jolas nebo později u Ivana Blatného. Diplomová práce analyzuje vybraná díla těchto autorů a popisuje jejich návaznosti na současnou formu literárního translingvismu. Dále se diplomová práce zabývá detailním rozborem vybraných básní od Ilji Kaminského, Wong Mayové a Li-Young Leeho. Cílem analýzy je ukázat, jak tito autoři pracují s pojmy básnické formy a obsahu a jak svojí tvorbou navazují na literární tradice svých jazyků. Diplomová práce se také věnuje transmedialním aspektům tvorby těchto autorů a tomu, jak přistupují k pojmu lyrična.

Klíčová slova: translingvismus, multilingvismus, modernismus, poezie, báseň, poetika, transmedialita, literatura, lyrika