



# FACULTY OF ARTS

## Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

January 13, 2024

**Opponent's report on MA thesis by Anton Romanenko:**  
The Translingual Poem: Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, Li-Young Lee

This is an ambitious and far-reaching thesis that analyzes the writing of three contemporary poets, Ilya Kaminsky, Wong May, and Li-Young Lee, arguing that their poetic practice is translingual, and situating their translingual poetry against the interaction of modernist Anglophone writers with non-English languages. An introductory chapter creatively frames the thesis around the author's first-hand experience of a translingual poetry reading, before authoritatively framing translingual poetic practice in linguistics, using the work of Daisuke Kimura and Suresh Canagarajah, among others.

A chapter on Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Jonas and Ivan Blatný provides the foundation for the thesis's later examination of contemporary translingual poetry by focusing on modernist models of engagement with foreign languages. The central chapters of the thesis examine the work of Kaminsky, Lee and May through the lens of form and content.

At the beginning of the thesis the author admits: "this thesis has turned out to be more of a critical work than a theoretical study" (14), and indeed, the close readings and analyses of individual poems in every chapter are the highlights of this work. Sensitive and informed, the analyses of poems shows the author's commendable comprehension of poetic practice and the critical and theoretical discourse about contemporary and modernist poetry.

The thesis is at times free-wheeling and tending toward tangential metaphor in its references, assumptions and assertions. For example: "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." (41); or "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." (50); or "Stevens's and Lee's poems are related to each other like two chords in a musical key to a tonal center." (64) These statements might be more specific and illuminating if they included reference to scientific studies or texts of musical theory, but ultimately they tell us more about the author's imagination than the poetry in question.

The comprehensive number of examples provides a sense of volume in the thesis, but this may be at the expense of clear and specific definitions of some key terms and concepts. For example, the definition of a translingual poem. May's poems seem the most clearly translingual in the thesis, where her "attempt to focus on an object (the cicada) results in a complex interplay of

linguistic structures across two languages.” (78) This sense of interplay is less obvious in the sections on Lee and Kaminsky, though the thesis does hint that Kaminsky’s translingualism might extend to sign language as well as Slavic languages.

Where the thesis does attempt to define the translingual poem more specifically, it typically engages a negative approach or defines it in terms that could seem to apply to almost any poem: “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.” (60); or “Translingualism as a creative principle can be described as the expression of content through the formal means of a chosen language.” (66); or “Translingual authors emphasize the potentiality of language that reveals itself in different dimensions such as sound, writing, and sign.” (72)

There are some typographical errors. For example: “One of Russia’s most well-known Romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov” (6); or “T.S.Eliot’s” (18, 37, 38);

I’m not sure the thesis adequately proves what I found to be one of the most intriguing ideas proposed in the introduction: “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.” (7) However, the thesis certainly has value in its cogent readings and comparisons of these contemporary poets, and it situates their work against the backdrop of modernist translingualism in a way that is insightful and sufficiently original while still being grounded in theory and the critical discourse.

In light of the above comments, I have three questions to pose:

- 1) What are the language-unspecific universal poetic principles that can be applied in some languages, and how do they appear in the work of Kaminsky, May and Lee?
- 2) What, precisely, is a translingual poem and how does it differ from a non-translingual poem? And, further, is there an inherent value in translingual poetry, and if so, how has that value (or the public’s perception of it) changed since modernism?
- 3) Does Kaminsky’s inclusion of images of sign language in his poetry suggest that his work could be translingual in this regard as well? How would people who are deaf, mute, blind, or with health conditions or impairments that influence their communication inflect your arguments about translingual poetry?

In light of the questions and opinions expressed above, I hereby recommend the mark of 2 (**velmi dobře**) for this thesis work, depending on the student’s performance during the defense.

Stephan B. Delbos, MFA, PhD