



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report on MA Thesis

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

By Anton Romanenko

What happens when a poet writes in another language? Do they adapt the literary tradition of the second language, or do they import the forms, tropes, and allusions from their first language into the poems they write in their second language? Anton Romanenko knows that there are no straightforward answers to such questions. He also knows that the answers will vary from poet to poet, and that by attending to such differences we can learn much about his object of study: the translingual poem.

This is a wonderful thesis for several reasons, foremost among which is the student's alertness to the textures and nuances of particular poems, even as he builds a larger argument about translingual poetry. He chooses three different poets, one from a linguaculture close to him (Ilya Kaminsky), and two from China (Li-Young Lee and Wong May, who live in the US and Ireland respectively). He traces the transformative journeys of forms and themes as these poets move into English, contrasting them with the earlier models of Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Jolas, and Ivan Blatný.

Toward the end of chapter 3, Romanenko connects issues of lyric theory, translingual poetry and the political context in a manner that was revelatory. Lyric theory can often overlook the political or social dimension, and this is why it is exciting to read this conclusion:

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. (58)



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He shows how Lee's poems erase the self. The particular texture of such imaginative work – the text it creates – is Romanenko's main focus, linking this to Lee's practice of yoga. In his analyses of Wong May, he juxtaposes her erasure of the self with that of T. S. Eliot, demonstrating how differently the Chinese-born poet does it, while also alert to how her mode of writing is infused by Eliot's impersonality. I appreciated the interpretive delicacy that Romanenko brought to this, as exemplified in this passage: "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" (53).

Translingualism in the thesis involves not only English, Mandarin, and Russian, but is extended to encompass others means of communication – for instance, visual arts (Wong May is a painter, and Lee's poem also have ekphrastic dynamics), and sign language, in the case of Kaminsky. The last includes depictions of sign language in his poems, and Romanenko comments:

The sign word 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. (70–71)

There are so many other excellent insights in the thesis; I will give just one more here. Toward the end of chapter 4, he discusses language errors, comparing those in Kaminsky with those praised by Helen Vendler in Wallace Stevens. Often, exophone writers are measured by a different scale, when they commit what, say, language



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teachers would view as errors. Yet, Romanenko turns our attention to the creative role of errors in so-called native speakers, here Stevens, but we could also have adduced Walt Whitman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Russell Banks, Arthur Hugh Clough, and many others. He makes this comparison to get to an even larger point, as one of his subtitles indicates: the foreignness of poetic language. Such an idea profitably shifts us away from categories such as native speaker and exophone and opens up new transnational aspects on poetry in English.

It was a pleasure to work with the student on this thesis, and observe how he, chapter by chapter, built his argument, drawing upon an impressive range of critical theoretical works. I propose the grade **1/výborně**.

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