Ghostspeaking: Heteronyms and the Translation of Poetry

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

This thesis is composed of two parts: an exegesis, which examines the relationships between heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry, and a creative component consisting of a book of heteronymous poetry *Ghostspeaking* and the translation of two books by Cuban poet José Kozer – *Índole* and *Carece de causa*.

The exegesis opens by noting how heteronymous poetry has appealed especially to translators and has often taken the form of pseudo-translation. It is argued that heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry largely spring from their creator’s desire to introduce styles and aesthetic approaches from outside a given language and poetic community. Both practices rely on a poet’s ability to write in different voices, placing themselves at the service of other poets real or imagined. The argument is developed first by examining the work of Fernando Pessoa, instigator of the modern heteronym tradition, and later through analysis of Edmond Jabès’ *Le livre des questions* and Juan Gelman’s *Los poemas de Sidney West*. In all three cases – Pessoa, Jabès and Gelman – heteronyms or quasi-heteronyms take the form of fusion poets, fictional writers in whom literary traditions from outside their creator’s own language and poetic community are recombined in novel ways. Thus, for Pessoa, Jabès and Gelman respectively, 19th-century English and American poetry, Talmud and Kabbalah, 20th-century North American and German models combine with Portuguese, French and Argentine poetic traditions. The turn to heteronyms performs two main functions: it offers a way to introduce models and aesthetic attitudes from outside one’s poetic community, operating at times as a form of “translation by other means”, and it uses fiction to generate new poetry.

The exegesis concludes by asking to what extent it is possible to write in another’s voice, particularly when translating poetry. This question is examined through close analysis of five poems by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, César Vallejo, Charles Baudelaire and Marosa di Giorgio alongside translations by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Clayton Eshleman, Michael Smith, John Ashbery and Adam Giannelli. The analysis suggests that often
poet-translators can find analogues for a poem’s sound-shape and, to a significant extent, write poetry in a voice other than their own.

The heteronymous collection *Ghostspeaking* contains eleven imaginary poets from Latin America, France and Québec “translated” into English and accompanied by biographies and interviews developing their fictive identities. While some of the heteronyms, such as Ricardo Xavier Bousoño, Lazlo Thalassa and Ernesto Ray, have an affinity with neo-baroque poets like José Kozer, Gerardo Deniz and Néstor Perlongher, others like Antonio Almeida employ a more traditional poetics, demonstrating how the creator of heteronyms like the translator of poetry may seek to create different, even opposing, voices. Other heteronyms, like Antonieta Villanueva, open ways to explore parts of my own life through fiction, as poetry as memory and poetry as invention interact.

José Kozer (1940 - ) is a major figure within Spanish-language poetry of the last forty years. His books, *Índole* (2013) and *Carece de causa* (2004), reveal two different sides to his writing – a humorous ironic poetry of everyday life that delights in unexpected connections (*Índole*) and a sustained meditation on his Jewish heritage, particularly the life and death of his father and grandfather (*Carece de causa*). Both books are grounded in an aesthetics that prefers disruption, highly specific detail and abrupt shifts in subject matter and register, presenting a formidable range of difficulties for a translator.
EXEGESIS:

HETERONYMS AND THE TRANSLATION OF POETRY
Chapter One

Bending poetic traditions: heteronyms and the translation of poetry

Introduction

Heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry may seem unrelated but each in its own way intervenes in a society’s poetic culture, bending language and aesthetic habits and extending the range of what might be done within a given community’s poetry. Heteronymous poetry owes its origins to Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) whose principle heteronyms – Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos and Bernardo Soares – first appeared in the period 1914 –1920. Other poets who have used heteronyms include Cuban José Manuel Poveda, Colombian Álvaro Mutis, Venezuelan Eugenio Montejo, and Argentines Juan Gelman and Bernardo Schiavetta. A heteronym is an imaginary poet or writer who comes complete with their own style and aesthetic, as well as personality and biography, marking something new in the writing of the poet who invented them. Heteronymous poetry involves the creation of new poetry, while translation brings across into a new language work originally created in another language. Despite this obvious difference, there are important connections. Almost all those who have written heteronymous poetry are also translators. I will argue that this is no coincidence. Heteronymous poetry is itself often presented as translation, bringing the practice of heteronymous poetry into close relationship with

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1 José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926) wrote heteronymous work in the voice of Alma Rubens. Álvaro Mutis (1923-2013) invented the heteronym Maqroll who first appears as the author of a collection of poems Reseña de los hospitales de Ultramar (1973) but goes on to be the hero (at times narrator) of the sequence of picaresque novels gathered in English translation by Edith Grossman under the title The Adventures and Misadventures of Maqroll (2002). Mutis’ poems are gathered in Summa de Maqroll el Gaviero/Poesía reunida (1947-2000) (2008). Eugenio Montejo (1938-2008) wrote heteronymous work under the names Blas Coll, Tomás Linden, Lino Cervantes and Eduardo Polo. These are contained in El cuaderno de Blas Coll (2007) and Chamario (2004). Juan Gelman (1930-2014) wrote heteronymous poetry under the names Sidney West, John Wendell, Yamanokuchi Ando, José Galván and Julio Grecco. The poems by West, Wendell and Ando are labelled Traducciones (translations). Bernardo Schiavetta (1948 - ) continues to experiment with various heteronyms.
what are called pseudo-translations. The resemblances between translation and heteronymous poetry add to our understanding both of the heteronym tradition and of the practice of poets translating poetry. These resemblances concern the purposes of these activities and the underlying assumptions they involve about the nature of a poet’s style or “voice”. As well as constituting a projected intervention in a poetic culture, heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry rely on the assumption that a poet need not have a single style or “voice” but is capable of developing different “voices”. 

Heteronymous poetry with its fictive selves and the translation of poetry where the poet-translator seeks to represent a poet in a new language go beyond the stylistic variation one might expect within a poet’s own work. The word “voices”, implying distinctive soundscapes, distinctive styles and distinct selves figured through these two more measurable dimensions, serves to point out the specific strangeness to be found in heteronyms and translation.

The first two chapters of this exegesis focus on the question of why poets would want to write in a voice other than their own and what advantages such a practice might offer. After providing an overview of the novelty of heteronyms, their connections to translation and their social-political significance, I examine in more detail three examples of heteronymous or quasi-heteronymous work – the poetry of Fernando Pessoa in Chapter One, Le livre des questions by Edmond Jabès and Los poemas de Sidney West by Juan Gelman in the second chapter. Several factors explain my decision to focus on these three poets. As the founder of the heteronym tradition Pessoa is clearly a key figure. Jabès used a chorus of heteronym-like spokespeople to push poetry beyond its traditional bounds, blurring the distinctions between novel,

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2 The concept of voice in poetry is both controversial and fraught with indeterminacy, but, as David Nowell Smith suggests, it may be a fruitful indeterminacy, encompassing _inter alia_ a poem’s soundworld, a poet’s style, and an underlying persona or authentic self, but also pointing to a glide between these oppositions of inner and outer, sound and sense, physicality of language and interiority (1-4). The concept voice acts to highlight the complex entanglements between these binaries. Voice may be a useful concept for the analysis of poetry in part as it helps work against a tendency to divide sense-data, specifically the sound dimensions of poetry, from mental content. As a “conjunction of sound-making and meaning-making” voice both signals the physicality of language and acts as a “metonym for an authentic self within” (Nowell Smith 49). In this exegesis I will more often speak of a “style” or of “sound-patterning” as concepts more amenable to demonstration, but at a higher level the concept of voice emphasises the way these more verifiable dimensions of poetry serve to create the sense of a self inhabiting a body of poems.
philosophic reflection and poetry. My turn to heteronyms in *Apocrypha* was influenced by Jabès’ *Le livre des questions*, and Jabès’ use of multiple voices to create hybrid genres influences many features of my *Ghostspeaking*. Gelman’s *Los poemas de Sidney West* illustrates the presentation of heteronyms as translations and also demonstrates the way heteronyms can encourage humour, parody and a complex playfulness. The third chapter on the translation of poetry examines the related questions of whether it is possible to write fully alive poetry in a voice other than one’s own (something translators of poetry might be considered to be doing, at least to some extent) and how this might be achieved.

**Not pseudonyms or dramatic monologues, not hoaxes, parodies or pastiche: the novelty of heteronyms**

In heteronymous writing a poet develops a range of fictive authors and writes in varied styles under their names, creating a range of fictive “selves”. The practice differs from the pseudonym or hoax. The use of pseudonyms has existed, probably, for millennia, at least for as long as political and religious persecution, shyness, fear of the reactions of family members, or the knowledge that the chances for publication and positive reception are unequally available. A pseudonym enables a writer to send work out into the world under a false name, preserving their own anonymity. With heteronyms, as first developed by Pessoa around 1914-1920, something very different is at stake. Although the creator of a heteronym could send their work out solely under the heteronym’s name, concealing the connection to themselves, they generally have not done so. The purpose of using

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3 There are broadly two kinds of literary hoaxes – those aimed at catching out the literary establishment, always intending that the hoax be revealed, and the hoax (most often found in ‘memoirs’ or novels) that assumes a specific identity to gain the mass sales than come with “true” stories, probably never intending that the hoax be revealed. In the discussion of hoaxes throughout this exegesis it is most of all the first type of hoax that I have in mind, though there can be elements of both kinds in the one hoax.

4 In his early years Pessoa sent out some material, more often articles than poems, under fictional names but, with his poems, there was no great attempt at concealment. Very little of his poetry was published at all in his lifetime and mostly in journals, such as *Orpheu*, of which he was one of the editors. Pessoa hesitated frequently, sometimes changing his view within the one letter, over whether each heteronym should have their work published separately or in combined volumes clearly acknowledging his [Pessoa’s] authorship (Sadleir 5-7, 48, 57, 72-
heteronyms lies elsewhere. We could say that, while the decision to use a pseudonym is all about publication and reception, the heteronym, as Pessoa invented it, concerns the actual writing process. A heteronym is generally far more developed as a character than a pseudonym but, more importantly, a heteronym writes poetry that, to a significant degree, seems to come from elsewhere compared to the rest of their creator’s work. Writing of the difference between the pseudonym and the heteronym, Marilyn Scarantino Jones states: “An author’s pseudonymic work differs from his autonymic work only in so far as a different name is attached to it. A heteronym, however, is not merely a name different from the author’s but also a separate personality who expresses what the author does not or cannot” (254). Heteronyms also differ from dramatic monologues in that, while a dramatic monologue may be in the voice of a banker, a mass murderer, a painter or property developer, the heteronym is a poet who takes control of the poem as poem, molding its form and its aesthetics in ways that may differ dramatically from their creator’s prior tastes and habits. Typically, with a heteronym the alterity is located not simply in the life story but in the poetry itself. The first novelty of heteronyms is that, rather than being a mere fictional name given to a body of work or simply an imaginary life attached to an invented name, they embody a style and an aesthetic that is new for their creator.

73). Sadleir’s term “visible impersonation” captures the immediate transparency of his fictions (9-10). Kotowicz suggests Pessoa’s attitude to such matters was uncertain and inconsistent but it would be misleading to see Pessoa as a hoaxer (65-67).

5 In discussing the poems Gwen Harwood published under the names Walter Lehman and Francis Geyer, David Brooks uses the same test as Scarantino Jones to determine whether they are pseudonyms or heteronyms – if Lehman’s poems are no different from Harwood’s then Lehman is only a pseudonym (231-232). The difficulty with Scarantino Jones’ explanation is that we cannot know what a poet might have been able to write in their own name. We can only know what they did write. Could Gelman have written the poems that form Los poemas de Sidney West directly in his own name, simply calling it “Melody Springs” without any fictive attribution? Perhaps. We can look for similarities and differences in style and poetic structure between this book and other collections of Gelman’s. The presence of significant differences would support, though not prove, the contention that the use of a heteronym helped Gelman write in a manner he would not have done otherwise.

6 In his analysis of the dramatic monologue, Jonathan Culler argues that as readers we bracket the poetic, ritualistic elements, such as rhyme and verse form, from the fictional element. So we do not imagine J. Alfred Prufrock as himself a consummate poet employing rhymes and highly unusual imagery. There is a “dissociation of levels” between the fictional speaker and the ritualistic frame (Culler 274-275). In contrast, with a heteronym, the speaker is a poet. Pessoa’s heteronym Alberto Caeiro writes The Keeper of Sheep in a way that we would never say that Prufrock writes “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”.

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In this exegesis and in *Ghostspeaking* I use the term "heteronymous poetry" and not "persona poetry". The term "persona poetry" includes, and predominantly refers to, dramatic monologues. If applied to heteronymous poetry it elides the important differences between the two endeavours and renders Pessoa’s innovations invisible. It is important that heteronymous poetry be recognised as a form in its own right and not blurred into either the long-standing practice of taking on an imaginary identity in a poem or the use of a persona by Pound, Eliot and Yeats. A heteronym may function like a mask but it typically does much more than this. Pessoa was at pains to stress the difference between his heteronyms and Browning’s dramatic monologues.

A second innovation of heteronyms concerns the way they adapt and play with aspects of pre-existing works. A comparison of heteronyms with hoaxes, parodies and pastiches reveals the novelty in their approach to shaping a distinct style for different fictive voices. While such hoaxes as Ern Malley’s *The Darkening Ecliptic* or Adoré Floupette’s *Les Délíquesences* rely on parody to send up a school of poetry, heteronyms, as developed by Pessoa, were not designed to catch out the literary establishment and only rarely involve parody. Unlike hoaxes, parodies and pastiches, heteronyms typically draw their models across cultures, from outside their creator’s own language and

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7 The term "persona poetry" is used by John Bradley in his review of *Ghostspeaking*. Likewise it occurs in the title of *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Persona Poetry*, edited by Stacey Lynn Brown and Oliver de la Paz, a collection of dramatic monologues. From the article by Rebecca Hazelton it is clear that any poem written from a perspective other than the writer’s own qualifies as a "persona poem", without any implication of developing a different style or stepping outside the dominant poetic modes of one's own culture. To classify heteronymous poetry as "persona poetry" is to equate it with the dramatic monologue, if not with any poem that goes beyond the individual’s own life.

8 In "Dividiu Aristóteles", for example, implicitly referencing Browning, Pessoa differentiates the poet who creates “a multitude of characters” who share the one style from “the highest level of depersonalization” where a poet becomes many poets, each with their own “state of soul” matching a unique style. The difference between dramatic monologues and heteronyms is clear if we compare Eliot’s Prufrock or Browning’s Duke from “My last Duchess” with Pessoa’s Alberto Caeiro, Gelman’s Sidney West or Jabès’ imaginary rabbis. In Eliot and Browning the dramatic monologue serves to create a character and reveal their story while the poetry itself remains that of Eliot or Browning. Caeiro, Sidney West and the rabbis lack any character or story of this kind. Rather, as poets or commentators, they channel a type of poetry, a wisdom or a vision of life that, for their creators, seems to come from elsewhere.
culture. The distinctive aesthetic and style given to a specific heteronym, at least in the cases to be examined of Pessoa, Jabès and Gelman (as well as in my heteronymous works Apocrypha and Ghostspeaking), typically take the shape of what I will call “fusion” poets. Obviously all poetry relies on a range of influences, but heteronyms typically involve the fusion into a single poetic persona of apparently separate, unrelated poetic lineages that originated in different languages, cultures and times. Thus Pessoa’s Alberto Caeiro in The Keeper of Sheep unites, in a single coherent voice, aspects of Walt Whitman, Blake and Shelley as well as late 19th-century Portuguese poetry and the classical pastoral tradition. Caeiro’s work reimagines both English-language and Portuguese poetry. Through the invention of a “fusion poet” the creator of a heteronym steps outside the apparent range of poetic choices offered by one particular culture at a given historic moment and imagines other directions the various poetic and literary lineages might have taken.9

Heteronyms are particularly interesting for the type of intertextuality they promote as one form of palimpsest. As Gérard Genette analyses, palimpsests – pastiches, parodies, travesties, send-ups, some hoaxes – can be classified along several axes (29-30). Palimpsests can be imitative of a style, content or both. They can elevate the original to a nobler topic or style, or lower the original, again in content or style. They can be satirical, ridiculing a particular writer or school of writers, or they can be a respectful honouring, or

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9 Salvadoran poet Andrés Moz, creator of the fictive poets Shizuka Ogawa, Amy Loan, Thom Seeling and Zigzer Branz, cites as the advantages for him of using heteronyms the ability to escape current Centroamerican traditions of poetry (“escapar de la tradición centroamericana y de la poesía que se está trabajando actualmente en la región”) and the chance to escape not only his own time and “canon” but also his own voice (“mis heterónimos tienen una función que considero fundamental, - al menos en mi caso- y es que aún cuando escape de la época y del “canon”, también puedo escapar de mi propia voz.”). For Moz, the fictional element in his heteronyms is less important than the permission their use gives for stylistic, thematic and tonal experimentation beyond the limits normally granted by his region’s predominant poetics. For the creation of Shizuka Ogawa Moz cites as the most important influences Toriko Takarabe, Ki no Tsurayuki, Fujiwara no Teika and Fumiko Hayashi from Japan and Li Tai Po from China. Moz comments, “I like to make this mixture of styles in Shizuka because I know that, without any problems, through him I can be situational, synthesize images, create a discourse with less material and produce the short line and its music, its actions, that I cannot achieve when I write as Andrés Moz.” (“[…] me gusta hacer esa mezcla de estilos en Shizuka, porque sé, que sin problema alguno, con él puedo ser situacional, sintetizar las imágenes, trazar un discurso con menos recursos y manejar el verso corto y su musicalidad, actividad, que no puedo sobrellevar cuando escribo como Andrés Moz.”) Significantly Moz sees Shizuka as being a “mixture” or fusion of several poets from both Japan and China and makes clear that, through this heteronym, it is possible for him to write a poetry he does not believe he could achieve if writing as himself. (Interview with Andrés Moz conducted by email, 1 September 2016).
somewhere in between. They can be a humorous diversion or an entirely serious use of a pre-existing plot-line or literary form to give one’s own writing greater resonance. To locate the heteronym tradition, as practised by Pessoa, Jabès, Gelman and myself, within these various axes, heteronyms frequently involve imitation of both content and style, they tend more towards respectful honouring than satiric attack, though there is often some implicit critique of a poet or school of poets involved; though humorous elements are often present, their dominant purpose is serious. Not aiming at close parodic imitation, a heteronym is not marked by the deliberate exaggeration of another’s style. Unlike hoaxes, heteronyms lack the intent to deceive and do not aim to ridicule a particular poet or style of poetry.

10 In the case of Gelman, it is neither content nor style that he borrows from Edgar Lee Masters’ Spoon River Anthology but a form. Masters and Gelman both structure their book as a sequence of poems, each bearing the name of a former townsperson buried in the cemetery overlooking a small town in Ohio or Illinois. Apart from this, the manner of writing and the content are extremely different.

11 As analysed by Genette and Toury, a distinctive feature of pastiches, parodies and a certain kind of pseudo-translation like The Book of Mormon, is that the stylistic effects typical of the original are multiplied in the new work. For example, while the King James Bible uses the phrase ‘and it came to pass’ in 1.45% of its verses it occurs in close to 20% of the verses in The Book of Mormon (Toury 54). Using this kind of analysis I compared the Ernesto Ray poem “Hammerblows” from Ghostspeaking with its model, Perlongher’s “Cadáveres” (Perlongher 79-89). Perlongher’s poem is built around the repetition of the phrase “Hay cadáveres” (“There are corpses”), Ray’s poem around the phrase “There are blows”, but while Perlongher uses his refrain 55 times in 373 lines or roughly every seventh line, in “Hammerblows” the refrain appears only 9 times in its 125 lines, or roughly every fourteenth line. Interruption of syntax, the use of asterisks to replace words, the dominance of five, six or seven line stanzas are all distinguishing features of Perlongher’s poem. In contrast, the stanzas in “Hammerblows” are mostly longer and follow no regular pattern, while a break in syntax occurs only once. Also “Hammerblows” is marked by the rap-like use of rhyme within the same line while Perlongher uses rhyme only at the end of lines with no particular echo of rap. The personal focus of “Hammerblows” also differs from the political focus of Perlongher’s poem. The analysis suggests that, even in those (relatively rare) cases where a poem in Ghostspeaking has a conscious model, it cannot be considered a pastiche. The presence of Perlongher is too attenuated. (There is also the echo of Vallejo’s line “Hay golpes en la vida” from “Los heraldos negros”, as acknowledged by the epigraph. The echo of Vallejo could be seen as continuing through the poem – making the whole a fusion of poets and poems, rather than the imitation of a single poem.) The use of a rap element was also suggested by the biography of Ernesto Ray as originally a performing singer-songwriter. This analysis supports the general idea that heteronyms are very different from pastiches or parodies, containing traces of several writers rather than operating on one writer or school of writers alone.

12 Neither Gelman, Jabès, Montejo, Mutis, nor myself placed their heteronymous poems in magazines or books solely in their heteronym’s name. Although Pessoa did do this occasionally early in his career it was not his dominant practice – he published so little, corresponded so voluminously and by the mid 1920s was well-known for his heteronymous production (Kotowicz 65-67). In part this lack of interest in any serious subterfuge may be because none of these poets sought to generate controversy for its own sake or wanted the kind of notoriety hoaxes create. By making clear their own authorship, these authors also highlight the seriousness with which they view their work. Pessoa emphasizes his own seriousness in his letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, 19 January 1915 (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3510).
is a certain paradox involved in many literary hoaxes: to ridicule a particular school of poetry’s vacuity, the hoaxer’s poems should contain a significant number of obviously inept lines – otherwise the hoaxer cannot turn on the editor or critic and say, “You published and praised this nonsense”, and yet as a creative hoaxer one wants to write interesting, fully alive poetry.\textsuperscript{13} The heteronym writer has no need to intersperse at least a few deliberately inept lines. Compared to parody, pastiche or literary hoax, in heteronyms the presence of other writers is far lighter. Whitman’s, Blake’s or Wordsworth’s presence in Pessoa’s \textit{The Keeper of Sheep} is quite unlike the presence of Mallarmé, Verlaine or Baudelaire in Adoré Floupette’s \textit{Les Déliquescences} (Brooks 282-301). There is not the same reproduction in vastly amplified form of a given poet’s signature vocabulary or stylistic gestures. In hoax, as in parody and pastiche, the signature vocabulary, favoured images or syntactic approaches, increase in frequency compared to their presence in the original. This is in keeping with the “fun” aspect of these poems. To enjoy Floupette or Ern Malley fully, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the poets being sent-up or, at least, recognise that a deliberate send-up is taking place. Since heteronymous poetry, for the most part, draws on broader thematic or aesthetic elements of several poets at once, it does not rely so heavily on the reader’s awareness of a literary background. One could also note that while hoaxers generally operate within their own language and its poetry, creators of heteronyms work across languages and diverse poetries.

\textsuperscript{13} As Brooks notes, Stewart and McAuley’s Ern Malley hoax was clearly targeted at Max Harris and the poets he published in \textit{Angry Penguins} as well as “a loose confederation of ‘experimental’ or ‘avant-garde’ poetries in England and the United States” (137). The initial aim was to ridicule and discredit Harris. Philip Mead argues for the unpredictability of aesthetic literary hoaxes, as the hoaxers’ unconscious often produces a genuine experimental poetry charged with its own richness and density, despite a conscious intention of debunking. Given the “instability” of current poetic aesthetics (lack of almost any consensus values as to what is or is not good poetry), it is not surprising that the merits/demerits of Ern Malley or the Yasusada poet as poets continue to divide critics and readers (Mead 342-345). Rekdal offers one analysis of the ethical dimensions of the Yasusada hoax (107-128). It is also unclear whether the Yasusada poet should be considered a true hoax at all as no one came forward to claim responsibility and only minimal perspicacity was required to realize that Yasusada’s biography made no sense. Equally importantly, there seems no effort in the work to debunk or send-up any particular style of poetry and the power and beauty of many of the poems fit better with either a pseudonym or a disinterested desire to send poetry out into the world free of attribution. Forrest Gander argues persuasively that “Yasusada is more than a hoax” and may well be best considered “an impossible gesture of solidarity” that, by remaining anonymous, lives with the equally unacceptable options of speech or silence on the part of a US citizen towards the atrocity of Hiroshima (\textit{A Faithful Existence} 57, 64).
Although there are clear conceptual differences between a heteronym, a pseudonym and a hoax, in practice these categories can bleed into each other. As Brooks argues, the lines between them are in fact fairly porous, depending mainly on the writer’s intentions and on social context (24-27). Thus we accept as unproblematic Mary Evans’ presenting of her work as by a male George Eliot to ensure publication and a fair critical reception. As Brooks suggests, what is taken as a legitimate use of a pseudonym and what is viewed as reprehensible hoaxing is largely determined by social factors. Commenting on both Pessoa and Romain Gary’s production under the name Émile Ajar, Brooks suggests the distinction heteronym/pseudonym/hoax has a complex psychological level, heteronym being a more suitable term where an author is “maintaining faith with – writing in the light of – a conception of truth or identity that is at variance with the social norm” (30). A heteronym could be used as the basis for a hoax, though Pessoa, Montejo, Mutis or Gelman, to name just a few prominent writers of heteronyms, did not practice hoaxing. Likewise a pseudonym could also be a heteronym if it develops into a new style and a new voice for its creator. To the extent that the invented name attached to a poem starts to become more like an imaginary other driving the creative process we have moved from a pseudonym to a heteronym.

**Heteronymous poetry as a distinct way of writing**

The distinctive nature of heteronymous poetry, as well as one aspect of its kinship with the translation of poetry, is apparent in the model it offers for the creative process. Most commonly, within contemporary English-language poetic culture, there would seem to be two approaches to the writing of poetry. There is the direct approach of writing out of one’s life, one’s world, one’s experience, informed by a sense of style and poetic structure gathered from one’s reading and education, a model of the poet speaking a life and a perspective on the world. An alternate model relies more on playing with language, using constraints, word games, deliberately experimenting with forms. Of course in practice these approaches often cross over so that what starts as purely personal recollection may turn to word play to gain energy
and humour, or what starts with a formal procedure may accumulate personal resonances as it progresses, but in broad terms there is a strong sense of there being two predominant approaches. The heteronym tradition, like the translation of poetry, does not, generally, fit either model. In both cases the poet or poet-translator starts neither with their own life nor with language itself in the form of games, procedures, constraints or pure forms. There is a poet, real or imagined, other than oneself, and one’s task is to do justice to that poet.¹⁴

Not all poets can, or would want to, write directly out of their own life. Neither do all poets work well within more abstract, game-playing strategies, such as the constraints of Oulipo or the impersonality of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Unlike constraints or more abstract conceptual poetry, heteronyms remain firmly attached to lived stories.¹⁵ While heteronyms create a distance from one’s biographic self, they take their starting point within the range of such experiences and emotions as loss, grief, embarrassment, the sense of worthlessness, or outrage at social and political evil.¹⁶ Yet they also offer a distance that may help resolve some of the aesthetic and ethical problems posed by the fact that such experiences and emotions can readily slip into the banal. Heteronyms potentially provide seamless transitions between personal revelation and fiction, between poetry as memory and poetry as invention. In doing so heteronyms rely for their effectiveness on two qualities: their status as fictions and their capacity to destabilise expectations and conventions.

¹⁴ Doing justice to a real or imagined poet, as Lyn Hejinian argues in discussing translation, does not reduce the poet’s role to the mechanical transposition of the original, as if the poet-translator was only an “aesthetic functionary”, but requires constant inventiveness and the discovery of fresh ways to “render the familiar unfamiliar”, extending well beyond considerations of rhyme, metre and imagery (299–302).

¹⁵ Heteronymous poetry also differs from the contemporary “more conceptual than directly expressive” poetry discussed by Marjorie Perloff in Unoriginal Genius (11) in that it typically uses fictions to explore the personal concerns of its creators. Pessoa, Gelman and Jabès were not concerned with the application of procedures to generate text from other text. Their work is not based on citation, collaging or sampling, does not use “expropriations” but is “original” work and, though inflected or bent by strong traces of other poets and writers, does not involve any significant direct usage of others’ words.

¹⁶ These emotions notably all involve painful or uncomfortable experience. It may be that heteronyms are especially useful in generating the energy to transform experiences and emotions fraught with the risk of self-pity into poems that go beyond feeling sorry for oneself. On the other hand, many of Pessoa’s poems in the persona of Álvaro de Campos, such as “Salute to Walt Whitman”, are joyful and exuberant in mood.
Heteronymous poetry and translation

Heteronyms have particularly interested poets with a special fascination for poetry in languages not their own, seeing in the work of foreign poets opportunities for widening the creative range of their own writing. In the heteronymous work of Pessoa, Jabès and Gelman, there is a movement across language barriers, a carrying across and a transmutation of the original poets (or writers) involved in the fusion. It may be that a language gap sparks the imagination, dislocating pre-existent patterns, giving the creator of heteronyms permission to re-work the original poet in ways not authorized within the original language and culture. Language itself, combined with cultural assumptions about what poetry is, inflects these changes. There is a parallel here – as well as a contrast – with the act of translation. Where the translator generally seeks to minimize the gulf between their new poem and the original, the heteronym writer is more interested in the transformative shifts that bring something significant from the original across into a new language and a new poetic culture while recombining it with other traditions. In both cases differences in poetic culture and language create slippage yet, ideally, both translator and heteronym-writer capture and re-present something important in the original. Both, in different ways, work to enable poetry from different languages and cultures to go on speaking to wider and wider audiences, bending the language and conventions of their own home-grown literature in the process.

The connections between heteronymous poetry and translation are complex.

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17 Lyn Hejinian, reflecting on her collaborative experience of translating Russian poets Arkadii Dragomoschenko and Ilya Kutik, writes, “Every language speaks of reality, but the reality of which it speaks is one that is preconceived, idealized; a worldview, and even, in the broadest sense, an ideology, are in place within every language. Or to put it more boldly, in every language a world is prefigured” (298). Accordingly, every language brings with it a slightly different prefiguration of the world and generates its own background poetic culture, encouraging particular values or styles of approach to poetry. Hejinian’s discussion of rhyme and metric regularity in Russian and contemporary American poetry explores one such example (306-313). It follows that the move across languages and their associated poetic cultures has a powerful potential for disruption.
At a basic level, most writers of heteronymous poetry, like Pessoa, Gelman, Bernardo Schiavetta or myself, are also translators, with an interest in expanding the possibilities of poetry in one language by using models from another language’s traditions. Secondly, some poets, like Gelman, present their heteronymous poetry as “translations” of non-existent poets. The turn to heteronyms, like the decision to translate a new poet or group of poets, frequently involves the desire to intervene in the pre-existing poetry of one’s own language and culture. Part of my attraction as a translator to José Kozer’s poetry lies in its creation of a space not readily found in contemporary English-language poetry – more difficult and “experimental”

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18 Pessoa was involved daily in commercial translation. In 1915-16 he also translated into Portuguese six books by various Theosophists and late in his life worked on an English translation of a collection of his stories The Anarchist Banker (Pessoa The Selected Prose 93, 167). Writing fluently in English, French and Portuguese throughout his life, Pessoa surely deserves to be counted as a translator, though he did relatively little translation of poetry into Portuguese. He translated several poems by Edgar Allen Poe, including “The Raven” in 1918 (Sadleir 24, 55).

19 Gelman translated professionally from English. His books Composiciones (1986) and Dibaxu (1995) consist of creative re-translations from English translations of poetry originally in Hebrew and Balkan Ladino.

20 Argentine poet Bernardo Schiavetta, a translator between French and Spanish, has written poetry under various heteronyms. In “Comment j’ai trouvé les auteurs de mes textes” Schiavetta describes the “appearance in him” of his first heteronym, a nun whose poetry combines the influences of Saint John of the Cross, Ovid’s Héroïdes and the Portuguese Letters of Guilleragues (255). He speaks of the “unexpected eruption of numerous heteronyms” (“le surgissement imprévu de plusieurs hétéronymes”) (255). Schiavetta’s description of possession by individual heteronyms is strikingly similar to Fernando Pessoa’a account in his letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3007). In his creations under the name Bruno Gonzalvi, Schiavetta combines the use of a heteronym with Rousselian constraints. Bruno Gonzalvi also begins to write his poetry in French. As Schiavetta notes, “to write in a foreign language permits the poet to gain a little more distance from his subjectivity” (“Écrire dans une langue étrangère permet au poète de s’éloigner un peu plus de sa subjectivité.”) (262).

21 One advantage of heteronyms is their ability to neutralize the anxiety of influence. Working with influences from outside one’s own language, as occurs with the “fusion poets” typical of heteronyms, distances the poet from influences within their own poetry that might be overpowering. It is noticeable that poets generally seem freer to play with poetry in a different language and from a different tradition. This can be seen if we contrast the fruitful influence of Vallejo on North American poets like Robert Bly and James Wright with the widespread need to avoid his influence within contemporary Latin America – or, alternately, the lack of English-language poetry that takes up Eliot’s The Waste Land compared with its impact (via Angel Flores’ 1930 translation) on Lorca’s Poeta en Nueva York. For a Spanish or Latin American poet, working with The Waste Land is unthreatening while for an American or English poet it poses the risk of writing poetry that will only ever be Eliot-minus.

22 Gideon Toury argues that decisions as to which authors to translate reflect felt gaps within the culture of the target language rather than any intrinsic merit of those texts within their original language and culture (21-23). Likewise George Steiner describes the translator as importing “conventions, modes of sensibility, expressive genres which his own language and culture have not yet reached,” thus creating “new and alternative options of being” (370-371). Toury and Steiner see as part of the raison d’être of translations that they should disrupt and bring about change in the target language’s culture. It is, accordingly, not surprising that there should be a strong affinity between the translation of poetry and the heteronym tradition.
than most autobiographic poetry, less cerebral, more autobiographic and charged with strong emotions than most experimental poetry. Both poetry translation and heteronymous poetry aim at effecting change and enriching one's poetic culture, for example, in the case of translating José Kozer, showing how qualities habitually opposed in one culture can actually be combined (as they are elsewhere). Heteronyms could also be compared to pseudo-translations, such as the 1889 *Papa Hamlet*, a work that, under the guise of translation, enabled its creators, Arno Holz and Johannes Schlaf, to use new Scandinavian models for fiction within German literature.\textsuperscript{23}

The extent to which heteronyms resemble translations in wishing to shift the paradigms for poetry within a given culture helps explain one key role of the auxiliary writing that frequently surrounds a heteronym.\textsuperscript{24} Pessoa's creation of letters, prefaces and commentaries in the voice of his various heteronyms, Jabès' commentary on *Le livre des questions* both within the work itself and in subsequent books, and the biographies and other writings surrounding the heteronyms in *Ghostspeaking*, all serve to suggest that the creator of heteronyms is attempting an intervention in their own poetic, or literary, culture. Jabès, for example, in *From the desert to the book* expresses reservations about contemporary French poetry, the novel and the concept of "literature" that lead him to the open form of the book and the turn towards Jewish traditions both real and imagined (50-51, 101-102, 105, 112). Pessoa creates a movement he calls "Sensationism" and imagines a poetic lineage that includes Blake, Shelley, Whitman and Marinetti as well as a small selection of Portuguese poets.\textsuperscript{25} Alongside being a fictive anthology, *Ghostspeaking* creates,

\textsuperscript{23} Presented as originally by Bjarne Holmsen and translated by Dr Bruno Franzius, this pseudo-translation resembles a heteronym in several ways. Unlike a hoax it did not aim at debunking the then current fad for the works of Ibsen, Bjørnsen and Strindberg, nor was it designed to catch anyone out. Holz and Schlaf supplied a brief biography for Holmsen. Most importantly of all, the pretence of being a translation authorized the two to write in the new Scandinavian style. Within Germany at that time a translation from Norwegian enjoyed greater licence to deviate from the norm than either publishers or critics would have granted a novel in German (Toury 55-59).

\textsuperscript{24} The other important role of the auxiliary writing (letters, interviews, prefaces etc) is to give the heteronym a biography that offers a context for the poems and can, in turn, generate new poems.

\textsuperscript{25} Originally Pessoa used the term “intercessionismo” for this movement, imagining it as a combination of traditional Portuguese literary aesthetics, particularly the *saudade*, and international trends including Futurism. This was the term he associated with the first issue of *Orpheu* in March 1915 which included Sá-Carneiro’s “16”, his own *O Marinheiro* and Campos’ “Ode Triunfal” (Sadleir 38).
in a digital age, a virtual anthology of real Latin American, French, Spanish and Catalan poets whose names are mentioned across the book. The reader is, in effect, being invited to sample those poets or, if already familiar with them, to look at them again in the light of their placement here. Given that a sizable proportion of the readers of any poetry book are themselves poets (and, of an Australian poetry book, Australian poets), Ghostspeaking implicitly acts as a way of encouraging a broader engagement with the poetries of the world.

There are places within the heteronym tradition where heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry come particularly close. Some heteronyms, or at least some poems by some heteronyms, could be considered “translation by other means” or “a creative alternative to translation.” There are times when a particular poet or poem may seem “untranslatable” for poetic, linguistic or purely pragmatic reasons (or all of these combined). The poet-translator may be unable to catch the tone, elegance, emotional power of the original, or the language itself with its dense obscurities, especially in the absence of a local informant, may defeat them, or it may be that the time required, the inability to obtain permissions, the lack of interest from publishers, seem to rule out translation. While writing Apocrypha I was trying to translate a selection of poems from Cuban Eliseo Diego’s Veintiseis poemas recientes but soon gave up, considering his poems for me at that time “untranslatable.” Like Antonio Machado or Montejo, Diego’s poetry is easy enough to understand with reasonable Spanish, but very hard to bring successfully into poetry in English. Its sparse simplicity and directness, absence of unusual imagery and emotional openness can, when translated into contemporary English, easily

26 Pragmatic considerations are of great importance. A poet-translator may easily have thirty poets they would like to translate and make more prominent within the target culture. Translating a substantial proportion of thirty new poets is likely to be an unrealistic project, especially if the translator also wants to write poems of their own.

27 By “untranslatable” I do not mean untranslatable in any absolute sense. A poem or body of poems may be untranslatable for a given translator at a given time for any mix of linguistic, poetic or pragmatic reasons. Thus Gerardo Deniz was “untranslatable” for me for a mix of linguistic and pragmatic reasons (his very complex Spanish and the lack of a local informant combined with the inability to make contact with the author, obtain permissions etc), while Eliseo Diego was “untranslatable” for a mix of poetic and pragmatic reasons (making his poems work as poems in English was the difficulty, combined also with the problem of obtaining permissions and – later, after I had developed the heteronym – the discovery of translations by Mark Weiss in The Whole Island (2009) made the creation of new translations seem redundant).
slip into a thin nothingness. In *Apocrypha* the heteronym Omeros Eliseo with his book “Nineteen poems of life and an ode to calm temporarily confused ghosts” writes poems modeled on the tone and general aesthetic of Eliseo Diego, though Omeros Eliseo’s poems are neither translation nor pastiche. Likewise in *Ghostspeaking* my abandoned efforts to translate Gerardo Deniz’s *Picos pardos* helped generate the heteronym Lazlo Thalassa and his long poem “Of Fate and Other Inconveniences”. Lazlo’s poem has the general form of Deniz’s poem – a long sequence of numbered poems, each with a heading in brackets in prose that reads like a brief news flash – and something of the humorous, ironic tone of Deniz, but with darker, more political content than *Picos pardos* and, again, Lazlo’s poem sequence is neither translation nor pastiche.

I had thought this use of heteronyms as a form of “translation by other means” was a personal aberration. However, an examination of Pessoa suggests this practice is far more widespread. The heteronym Álvaro de Campos’s poems, especially “Maritime Ode” and “Salute to Walt Whitman”,

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28 One feature of heteronymous poetry, evident in all three of the poets I examine, is the frequency with which it leads their inventors to engage with no longer fashionable poetry. Thus Pessoa turns not to the French surrealists of his day, or even the English poetry fashionable in the early 20th Century, but to Blake, Shelley and Whitman; Gelman in 1968 turns to Edgar Lee Masters’ decidedly old-fashioned *Spoon River Anthology* of 1915, and Jabès to medieval traditions of Talmud and Kabbalah. Charles Simic and Mark Strand in their introduction to the re-issue of *Another Republic*, an anthology which includes Pessoa as one of its 17 poets, comment on the value for poets of keeping “their distance from literary fashions of the day” (17). Heteronymous poetry may seek to bend the poetry and language of its creator’s country but not necessarily in any given direction. By its nature heteronymous poetry, with its “fusion” poets, rejects the idea of poetry having a single direction, whether “experimental”, national or socio-political. Adam Morris links Pessoa to Deleuze and Guattari as a writer who shares many features typical of post-modernism, so that, very much in keeping with Pessoa’s frequent statements about himself, his true contemporaries inhabit the future (126-139). The idea that there is no pre-given forward trajectory in poetry and no approach that in itself ceases to be possible finds its echo in Merleau-Ponty’s comments in “Eye and Mind”: “[…] there are no separated, distinct ‘problems’ in painting, no really opposed paths, no partial ‘solution’, no cumulative progress, no irretrievable options. There is nothing to prevent the painter from going back to one of the emblems he has shied away from – making it, of course, speak differently. […] For the same reason nothing is ever finally acquired and possessed for good” (148).

29 Omeros Eliseo’s poems are found in *Apocrypha*, pp. 87, 99, 128, 129, 141, 158-159, 190-191, 223, in addition to a biography pp. 83-86. With the multiplicity of reference typical of heteronyms, the title “Nineteen poems of life and an ode to calm temporarily confused ghosts” alludes to Neruda’s famous second collection of poems *Veinte poemas de amor y un canción desesperada*. Perhaps there are also traces of early Neruda in Omeros Eliseo.

30 “Of Fate and Other Inconveniences” is in *Ghostspeaking*, pp. 71-87. *Picos pardos*, originally published in 1987 and 1992, can be found in Gerardo Deniz, *Erdera* pp. 215-264. Deniz’s own name is a pseudonym – it is Turkish for “sea”. Lazlo Thalassa’s surname is Greek for “sea”. The real Gerardo Deniz and the heteronym Lazlo Thalassa both use pseudonyms, made their living in the field of science and came to Mexico at a young age.
could be considered a form of “translation by other means”. Instead of translating *Leaves of Grass* into Portuguese, Pessoa seems to be suggesting that, had Whitman lived in Portugal in the early 20th century and written Portuguese, this is what he might have written. The North American content has gone; the long lines, the “yawp”, have gone; the highly detailed descriptions within Whitman’s catalogues of reality have disappeared. What we do have is a certain tone towards the world, an immense openness, a delight in bald statements put down one after another, a largeness of scale, a rejection of conventional morality or cant, a universal, almost impersonal, welcoming of the modern world. The playful distance involved in heteronyms encourages Pessoa to take identification with Whitman to the extreme. In “Salute to Walt Whitman” Álvaro de Campos, strolling down Lisbon’s Rua do Ouro, claims to be Walt Whitman and to be unclear whether his true location is in Lisbon or in Whitman’s verses. Yet even these highly Whitmanesque poems are not exactly pastiche and, in “Tobacco Shop”, Campos twists some of Whitman’s stylistic features towards a darker, existential questioning of his own reality. As in translation, Pessoa is performing an intervention in the poetry of his own language and culture. He does this not by translating but by creating poems of his own invention that nevertheless convey powerful elements of Whitman’s tone, style and ethical-philosophic outlook. By drawing attention to the nature of poetry as a blending of pre-existing traditions from many languages and cultures, heteronymous poetry performs a function analogous to translation. It does this by playing with and extending elements of the original rather than by attempting to reproduce the original in a new language.

Heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry share the assumption that

31 The complete *Leaves of Grass* was translated into French by Léon Bazalgette in 1891-92 and into Spanish in 1912 by Álvarez Armando Vasseur. The literary elite of Portugal generally read French and Spanish as well as Portuguese, which may have worked against the need for a Portuguese translation. Portuguese translations of individual poems by Whitman first appeared in Brazil in the 1920s. Substantial selections of Whitman in Portuguese translation only appeared in the 1940s and 1960s (*The Walt Whitman Archive* http://whitmanarchive.org/published/foreign/portuguese/introduction)

32 “Walt, my beloved old man, my great Comrade, I evoke you! [. . . ] Look at me: you know that I, Álvaro de Campos, engineer, Sensationist poet, Am not your disciple, am not your friend, am not your singer, You know that I am You, and you are happy about it! [. . . ] I don’t know if my actual place is in the world or in your verse.” (“Salute to Walt Whitman”, translation by Edwin Honig, in Simic and Strand 95)
a poet need not be confined to a single voice but can write powerful poetry in quite different voices. The translation of poetry into poetry and the tradition of heteronymous poetry raise the possibility that the same poet may validly “contradict” themself through the creation of works whose styles and aesthetic assumptions are opposite to each other. Both as translator and as writer of heteronyms I rely on the assumption that fully alive poems need not come out of a single poetic self, need not be generated by a single underlying style or voice whose task is to articulate a unique vision of the world. Heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry depend on a poet’s ability to bend their style, to step away from their voice sufficiently to give another voice space, but without being merely imitative, without producing only a pale replica of another’s poetry. I am assuming that a poet’s personality inevitably leaves a trace in a poem, but that fixing such a trace of oneself in the poems one writes need not be a concern of the poet. Likewise, a unique vision of the world probably does inscribe itself in the poetry that endures, but, for many poets, aiming consciously at that may not be a good thing. Poetry often benefits from, sometimes requires, a certain loss of control, a measure of surrender to more aleatory, playful or unconscious impulses.

Fusion, dispersal and expanding the culture: heteronymous poetry and the “born translated”

Heteronymous poetry is of particular interest for its cultural and political implications. Though originating in a markedly peripheral language and country in the early 20th century, the heteronym tradition anticipates intellectual currents more associated with the early 21st century. Challenging notions of periphery and centre, heteronymous poetry as practised by Pessoa uses to full advantage the outsider’s ability to reimagine poetic and literary lineages, disrupting settled genres and expectations. Opting for fusion, dispersal and cultural expansion, heteronymous poetry rejects any closure  

33 For example, comparing my translations of Eugenio Montejo’s “Los árboles” (Montejo The Trees, 3) and of José Kozer’s “Devastación”, it is crucial that the two poems-in-translation reflect Montejo’s and Kozer’s radically different visions of what poetry should be. A similar dichotomy is evident in Ghostspeaking where the experimental, wilder, poetics of Lazlo Thalassa or Ricardo Xavier Bousoño contrast with the quieter, more “romantic” or conservative, Machado-, Montejo-inflected poetry of Federico Silva or Antonio Almeida.
into a purely national literature as much as the claims of any single cultural centre, whether in England, France or the United States. It assumes for the Portuguese, Salvadoran, Argentine, Egyptian (or Australian) writer a right to access world literature on their own terms and a freedom to tackle any topic without restricting themselves to “local colour” or fitting into the dominant aesthetics of a metropolitan cultural centre.\(^{34}\)

The heteronymous tradition fits well within the category of work Rebecca Walkowitz describes as “born translated.” For Walkowitz a “born translated” work is one where translation is the premise of its existence, not simply a process that may happen later (3-4).\(^ {35}\) The act of translating between languages and between literatures is highlighted as a major thematic, conceptual, structural, at times comic, element within the heteronymous work of Pessoa and Gelman, as in my own *Apocrypha* and *Ghostspeaking*. A large portion of Jabès’ *Le livre des questions* is given over to imaginary rabbis whose aphorisms, we must imagine, were originally in Hebrew, Yiddish or Ladino, while Jabès treats French as if it were Hebrew, a sacred language whose words, fractured, rearranged or analysed, bear an immediate relationship to sacred (and human) truths. In Walkowitz’s words, in all these heteronymous (or, for Jabès, quasi-heteronymous) works, translation is the “engine” driving the work forward (5). Walkowitz writes: “Refusing to match languages to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time” (6). Gelman’s *Los poemas de Sidney West* and my *Ghostspeaking* emphasise the porous nature of national literatures. The English of North America leaches into the Argentine Spanish of Gelman’s Sidney West, while the Spanish of Latin America and European and Canadian French leave their traces in the English of *Ghostspeaking*. At the same time both works

\(^{34}\) In its openness to world literature and willingness to adapt aspects of many historically and geographically separated traditions, Pessoa’s invention of heteronymous poetry exemplifies many of the observations Borges makes in his 1951 lecture “The Argentine writer and tradition” (420-427). Particularly apposite is Borges’ observation that writers from Latin America (and, by implication, from the periphery in general), as outsiders, are in an ideal position to take on traditions and make innovations “without superstition and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences” (426).

\(^{35}\) Walkowitz’s concept of a work that is ‘born translated’ is explained initially on pages 3-6 and 44-48. Often such a work is written as if it were a translation (4); it may play with multiple languages or multiple locations (6, 35-44).
suggest the global reach of political and economic systems, eroding the notion of stable national literatures or narratives.

As an alternate account of a “born translated” work, Walkowitz suggests “a work of fiction that attributes its aesthetic and spatial origins to planetary circulation rather than to national, regional, or urban geographies associated with one language” (47). Rather than following the tradition of the stand-alone lyric poem, heteronymous poetry takes on the status of fiction and explicitly incorporates movement across national and linguistic frontiers. Pessoa’s Ricardo Reis has just returned from Brazil, Álvaro de Campos spent time in Glasgow and the Orient before returning to Portugal and Pessoa himself engaged in lengthy correspondence in the effort to bring out his work in England. Migration from Egypt to France is a significant thematic element in Jabès’ Le livre des questions, while the use of a structure and setting borrowed from North America, distancing devices resembling Brecht’s alienation effect and parody of early 20th-century Spanish-language poets like Lorca and Vallejo produce the humour and many-layered complexity of Gelman’s Los poemas de Sidney West. Ghostspeaking locates itself in a world of migrations, translations and electronic communication, accompanied by the associated errors and misunderstandings. Thus these various heteronymous

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36 For example ‘Carta a um editor inglês - 1916’ [http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/1899] where Pessoa links Portuguese Sensationism to Browning, Matthew Arnold, Wordsworth, Shelley, Shakespeare and Milton. In a letter to W.A. Bentley of 31 October 1924 he seeks understanding of his poetry in England, citing the difficulties of an adequate reception in his own country due to its “provincialism” - [http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/1382]. Pessoa wrote fluently in English, French and Spanish and could aptly be described as a poet of “planetary circulation”. Apart from his early poetry in English, there is a letter to Marinetti in English - [http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/1437] and correspondence concerning the possibility of his publishing self-translations of selected poems and an introductory article in English (Letter to Frank Palmer, 1915: [http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/1381]). Significantly, across the range of letters, biographies, prefaces and other ancillary writing, Pessoa devotes more space to establishing his heteronymous poetry within English and North American poetry traditions than within a Portuguese tradition. His work, one could convincingly argue, starts out by positioning itself as, in Walkowitz’s words, ‘already translated’.

37 Argentine novelist and critic César Aira argues that misunderstanding has a crucial role to play in granting a book the “incomprehensibility” needed to rescue it from becoming the merely obvious (Aira, “Lo incomprendible”, [http://www.paniko.cl/2016/04/cesar-aira-lo-incomprensible/]). The passage of books through space and time, across languages and societies, constitutes, for Aira, “an endless journey towards incomprehensibility” (“un viaje sin fin hacia lo incomprensible”). Books, then, if they are to satisfy us as literature, need to escape the incomprehensibility that leaves them merely “obvious” within one point in time, one language, one culture. In this journey “the boat that carries them is misunderstanding” (“El barco que los transporta es el malentendido”). The dislocation of heteronyms, their placement, at the time of creation, as not truly within their own national literature, in a sense launches them as already not quite comprehensible, subject to error and misunderstanding.
works invoke “planetary circulation”, refusing to limit their location or aesthetic origin to a single pays natal with one language and literary tradition.

In broad terms, the heteronym tradition, like the works Walkowitz describes as “born translated”, operates against singularities and universalisms in favour of plurality and multiplicities. It is not so much fragmented (as in much modern and post-modern literature) as playfully or alarmingly, variously, but always unexpectedly, finding new connections. Significantly, the heteronym tradition originated on the periphery with the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa and remains largely a tradition of peripheries, flourishing especially in Latin America. Based on hybridity and recombination, heteronyms place peripheries in dialogue with each other as much as with metropolitan centres.\footnote{Thus in Pessoa, 19th-century English and American poetry enters into dialogue with Marinetti and classical Latin authors as well as with Portuguese poets. For Jabès, the outsider most conscious of being an outsider at the point when he turns towards his quasi-heteronymous work Le livre des questions, Talmud and Kabbalah speak to his own experiences in Egypt and to modern French poetry in an unexpected synthesis, while in Gelman’s Los poemas de Sidney West 20th-century North American and German models combine with Argentine and Spanish poetic traditions.}

The varied benefits of fiction and expanding the “I”: different strands in the heteronym tradition

Heteronymous poetry operates in two main ways. As a form of literary-historical creative speculation, it can aim to shift a language’s poetics, much as Pound attempted through version-style translation in Personae (1909) and Cathay (1915).\footnote{Version-style translation could be characterised as a looser type of translation or adaptation that aims, above all, at capturing the stylistics, tone and aesthetic approach of a poet from a different language and culture in the translator’s own language without necessarily producing phrase-by-phrase accuracy. Frequently, as was the case with Ezra Pound’s Chinese versions, such translations rely on previous literal translations that the poet-translator uses, lacking knowledge of the original language.} It also serves to introduce fiction into poetry, liberating the creative process by replacing fixation on one’s biographic self with a dramatist’s ability to invent and inhabit fictional selves. Although the creators of heteronymous poetry most discussed in this exegesis were consciously experimenting with styles and traditions outside their own culture and

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\textit{Gelman’s Los poemas de Sidney West, for example, plays with error and misunderstanding, as can be seen in the final poem “Fe de erratas” (Gelman, 2012: 146-147).}
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language, there is a second strand within the heteronym tradition not especially concerned with such experimentation. For some the device has served more as a way to cross barriers of gender, social class or geography. Thus Poveda writes as the woman Alma Rubens, Mutis as the itinerant outsider Maqroll el Gaviero and Gelman living in the safety of Rome writes as Julio Grecco and José Gavilán, both political activists inside Argentina under the military dictatorship. In each of these cases, although there are no obvious major stylistic differences between the heteronymic and autonymic work, the device of a fictive author helps the heteronym’s creator speak from within another’s imagined experience. Pessoa’s situation was an extremely unusual one, both psychologically and culturally. It is not surprising that others have not adopted his style of heteronyms precisely, though significant aspects of his use of heteronyms, with or without that name, can be found in the poetry of Poveda, Montejo, Mutis, Gelman, Valéry Larbaud and Edmond Jabès. I am not implying that these poets all consciously modelled their turn towards fictive voices on the work of Pessoa. Whilst Montejo, Mutis and Gelman were very aware of Pessoa, Larbaud’s invention of A.O. Barnabooth predates most of Pessoa’s work, as does much of Poveda’s heteronymous

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40 Poveda’s work is discussed in Theumer (27-40). Theumer also sees in Poveda’s Alma Rubens poems an experiment with the themes, and to some extent the style, of prominent South American feminist poets of the time, particularly Delmira Agustini, Alfonso Storni, Gabriela Mistral and Juana de Ibarbourou (28). Poveda accompanied Alma’s poems with a three-part chronicle of her life published in 1912, 1915 and 1917.

41 Mutis was not particularly drawn to experimentation in itself. In an interview with Jacobo Sefamí, for example, when asked if his idea of poetry has changed replies “Not at all. Poetry remains what it was when I wrote the first poem: an act of persistence, the sign of a useless attempt, but an attempt, to ensure the survival of a series of images, memories, perceptions that I consider essential in my life.” (“No, para nada. La poesía sigue siendo lo que fue cuando escribí el primer poema: un acto de persistencia y de manifestación de tratar, vanamente, pero de intentar, que perduren una serie de imágenes, de recuerdos, de percepciones, que considero esenciales en mi vida.”) (Sefamí De la imaginación 203).

42 This use of heteronyms need not be merely a facile way to claim an identity not one’s own. Strong personal forces, at least in the case of Mutis and Gelman, prompted the emergence of a distinct character with a distinct voice within them. For Mutis there was the shock of his fifteen months in Lecumberri prison and his daily encounters with many who resembled Maqroll in their life stories and their strong outsider morality. The murder of Gelman’s son and daughter-in-law, the kidnapping of his granddaughter and his relative powerlessness in exile underlie his turn to the heteronyms of Grecco and Gavilán.

43 In 1908 Valéry Larbaud (1881-1957) self-published the poems and a short story of A.O Barnabooth accompanied by a biographical note by the fictitious X.M. Tournier de Zamble. Following a favourable critical reception Larbaud’s work, with various additions and amendments, was published as A.Ô. Barnabooth, ses œuvres complètes in 1913. The invented Barnabooth with his larger-than-life biography and quite specific, at times humorous, at times lyrical, style is best seen as “not a pseudonym but a highly developed persona” or “mask”, enabling Larbaud to produce work quite unlike any he produced before or after (Padgett xi-xvi). As such it could well be described as a heteronym.
output. Jabès is most unlikely to have been influenced in any way by Pessoa and, quite possibly, never read him. My concern is with the use of heteronyms or fictive authors as a distancing and energizing device in poetry rather than with establishing any direct influence. In any case, as we will see, Pessoa was not nearly as consistent in his views as his varied writings about heteronymous poetry at times make out.

Whether concerned with “translation by other means” or not, heteronymous writing is built on the creation of a separate personality in whose voice something new is expressed. The author may establish this separate personality through a fictional biography or, as Gelman does with Sidney West, by giving their heteronym a foreign country and language, presenting the resultant poems as “translations”. Personality may be embodied in a different style (the formal odes of Pessoa’s heteronym Ricardo Reis, for example) or content outside the author’s direct experience (as in Pessoa’s Álvaro de Campos’ voyage to the orient). A range of factors might draw a poet to create such separate personalities. Psychological taboos may make it difficult for an author to explore certain emotions or experiences (or to explore them often) when writing in one’s own name. Pessoa’s profound sense of unreality, of being no one, his detachment from feeling, I would take to be an example of such a psychological taboo. Since heteronymous poetry is not presented as a true personal account but as fiction, the poet is freer to include aspects of themselves embedded within the fiction, enjoying a degree of protection from feelings of embarrassment, worthlessness, fear, insignificance or inadequacy that may block them when attempting to write about their own life. For some poets, the chief value of heteronyms may lie in the energizing freedom that can appear when stepping out from under the debilitating weight of the autobiographic “I”.

Equally heteronyms may help in the creation of poems that involve exotic experiences, granting the poet an authority to enter imaginatively into the unfamiliar. Pessoa’s heteronym Álvaro de Campos’ return from the orient in “Opiario” or Sidney West’s lament for the dead of Melody Springs, Ohio, exemplify this. The fiction of heteronyms may also offer a way to approach large daunting themes that a poet may feel compelled to address yet blocked
from approaching for a range of reasons. Here the heteronym, or the use of diffuse spokespeople resembling heteronyms, might enable the author to express what he “does not or cannot” express left to himself.\textsuperscript{44} Jabès’ proliferation of voices in \textit{Le livre des questions} functions in this way, providing an indirect way to speak of writing, of Judaism and of God after the Holocaust as a non-practising Jew who lived in relative safety outside Europe in the 1930s and 40s. For Gelman, the heteronym Sidney West enables the resolution of an aesthetic challenge: how to write about the systemic evil of 20th century capitalism in a way that will be alive and engaging as poetry. Elsewhere in his work Gelman focuses on the individual victims or perpetrators of evil rather than the underlying system in itself. Finally heteronyms with their very multiplicity and diversity can increase the quantity and range of what is written. This certainly applies to Pessoa, but arguably also to Jabès and Gelman. The invention of fresh heteronyms in itself sparks new poems. This may be because of the biographies the fictive poets bring with them and the possibility of writing poems out of those imagined lives. It may be because of the stylistic diversity promoted.

Heteronyms can be seen as a way for a poet to move beyond the personal lyric and extend the range of their writing. For Pessoa, the creation of a coterie of heteronyms with their lives, incidental writings and poems, opened up a way to develop his own dramatic-lyric poetry, an invention he sees as exploring a lineage going back to Shakespeare. For French poet Edmond Jabès, the turn away from the individual lyric poem towards the creation of a single polyvocal book, \textit{Le livre des questions}, delivered by numerous spokespeople or heteronyms, enabled a new type of vast, self-reflective poem that incorporates elements of story and religio-philosophic meditation, a type of post-modern epic. The heteronym-like element can be seen most noticeably in the use of Yukel as a writer rather than simply a character and in the large portion of the first three books delivered in the voices of imaginary rabbis.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Interestingly I have so far not been able to find an example of a woman poet using heteronyms. The closest approximation would be Gwen Harwood’s Professor Eisenbart poems but arguably these poems are better seen as a sequence of dramatic monologues (Brooks 220—232).

\textsuperscript{45} All of the rabbis’ sayings are written by Jabès. There are no excerpts from actual Kabbalah or Talmud, leaving Jabès free to invent rather than re-contextualize. This is quite unlike the practice of those poets or “unoriginal geniuses” Marjorie Perloff discusses. Jabès is working,
The attribution of different names for the rabbis, their sheer multiplicity, their interruption of reader expectations, the presence of so many voices, all shift our reading of the text. Argentinian poet Juan Gelman employed the heteronym Sidney West to create the book-length Brechtian remake of a North American classic, Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*. The use of a heteronym helped Gelman create a playful, often moving dramatization of what might be called a Marxist critique of the capitalist system. Stylistically *Los poemas de Sidney West* is very different from the rest of Gelman’s poetry.

There is a further paradoxical advantage offered by heteronyms. The multiple authors may enable a poet to write more of the same without inducing tedium or a sense of empty repetition. If there is a state, a situation that is most fruitful for a poet in terms of writing poetry, heteronyms with their imagined lives may offer a way for a poet to return to that state. In “The tobacconist’s shop” (attributed to Álvaro de Campos), “Oblique rain” (presented in Pessoa’s own name), and “The keeper of sheep” (attributed to Alberto Caeiro), Pessoa returns over and over to the moment of realisation when the poet sees that his life is nothing, that he is nothing, that reality is something he can observe but not be part of. In retrospect, in *Ghostspeaking* over and over poets at the end of their lives, facing death, facing their own disappearance, are attempting to make sense of it. Whether it is Maria Zafarelli Strega in her papers sent from Mexico City or Antonio Almeida’s “Conversation while waiting”, Ernesto Ray’s “Meditation” or Bousoño’s “Threads”, the same moment is returned to. The multiplication of oneself into heteronyms may well be a way to reproduce a given moment. Using different

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46 Likewise the invention of the rabbis helps Jabès in his creative process. The use of heteronyms drives the creative process, by encouraging and establishing a variety of voices, as well as shaping the reader’s experience of the book as a work that comes, in an imaginative sense, no longer from one author but from an extended chorus of voices. The heteronyms provide a wider, impersonal or multi-personal, frame.  

47 This experience of personal unreality is reiterated throughout *The Book of Disquiet*, as for example when Pessoa (or Bernardo Soares?) speaks of “my factless autobiography, my lifeless history” or states “Who am I behind this unreality? I don’t know. I must be someone” or confesses “I never learned how to exist” (21, 106, 191). Beneath the fanfare of a coterie of diverse, at times squabbling, heteronyms lies an immense emotional and thematic sameness marked by a sense of numbness and self-rejection. Pessoa’s achievement was to make an extraordinary amount of strangely moving art out of such unpromising material.
styles, against the backdrop of different life stories, the poet attempts a variation on the same speech.

K. David Jackson describes the key functions of heteronyms as “to subvert genres” and to “question the role of personal experience in literature” (13). While these functions are important, even more important is the way heteronyms release creative energy by extending poetry beyond the personal lyric and encourage experimentation with “fusion poetry” – the merger of lineages that in reality remained separate, exploring paths literature did not take but might have taken. (Subverting genres is part of this merging of lineages, but the “fusion” of several real poets into one imagined poet is not limited to genre-subversion.) Most of all, the fictional-dramatic element within heteronyms and the invention of “fusion poets” help explain the appeal of heteronymous poetry beyond the highly individual circumstances of Pessoa.48

The heteronymous world of Fernando Pessoa

Heteronymous poetry owes its origins to Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the origins and nature of his heteronymous practice.

Evidence for the motivation behind Pessoa’s heteronyms and their creative advantages for him can be found in the many letters he wrote, a wide sample of which are available online in the Pessoa archive managed by Richard Zenith in Lisbon. Pessoa was painfully aware of himself as a psychologically damaged individual, linking the early death of his father, his mother’s hasty remarriage, the family’s move to South Africa, and his awareness of the strain of insanity in his family background to his very early habit of creating

48 Without using the term “fusion poets” Adam Morris makes a very similar point about the creative power of Pessoa’s heteronymous practice: “Loosening the constraints of hereditary influence, the heteronymic machine allows Pessoa to reinterpret and recombine poetic figures, histories, registers, influences, voices, and the like, to achieve new aesthetic possibilities . . .”(138).
imaginary friends, a habit that continued uninterruptedly into adult life. In the letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, 13 January 1935, Pessoa provides a detailed account of the origins of his heteronyms. Near the opening of this letter he states quite simply, “The origin of my heteronyms is the profound trace of hysteria that exists in me. . . Whatever it may be, the mental origin of my heteronyms lies in my constant organic tendency towards depersonalization and simulation (feigning/pretending).” He then describes his childhood practice of surrounding himself with imaginary friends and acquaintances without whom his own reality was problematic. His language suggests that this practice went beyond the average case of childhood imaginary friends and that, right through his life, he had a haunted sense of his own lack of reality.

From childhood I had the tendency to create around me a fictive world, to surround myself with friends and acquaintances who never existed. (I don’t know, of course, if they really didn’t exist, or if it was me who didn’t exist. In these matters, as in everything, we shouldn’t be dogmatic). From when I understood myself as being what I call “me”, I remember mentally needing, as shapes, motions, character, story, various unreal figures that were for me as visible and my own as those things we, perhaps mistakenly, call real life.

Pessoa recounts his childhood creation of an author, the Chevalier de Pas,
followed by a large number of other heteronyms. Later in the letter, he gives a rather different account of the arrival of the key heteronyms of his maturity: Alberto Caeiro, Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis and the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares, as well as the problematization of himself when writing in his own name but as a member of a coterie of equally real, or equally imaginary, poets. Pessoa’s account suggests a qualitative leap from the compulsive, quasi-infantile generation of imaginary friends to the appearance of coherent “fusion” poets, that is imaginary poets who embody in a unified way tendencies and aesthetic choices that historically belonged to quite different poets from very different contexts. In his comments we can see the shift from a deeply entrenched psychological habit to the appearance of a literary device or strategy that empowers and enriches his poetry. In broad outline Pessoa’s account, with its sense of possession, spontaneity and recognition of others writing through him, carries an aura of conviction.

Pessoa also suggests a special connection between poetry itself and the heteronym tradition he is creating, contrasting the ease of writing true heteronyms in poetry and the difficulty of doing so in prose. Elsewhere Pessoa writes "In prose it is harder to other oneself" (The Book of Disquiet 489).

Pessoa begins by noting that around 1912 he had the idea of writing poems of a pagan kind. He remembers a year or two later wanting to play a practical joke on his friend Sá-Carneiro by inventing a bucolic poet. For days he tried unsuccessfully. He recounts what happened next:

On the day when I finally desisted – it was March 8 1914 – I approached a tall chest of drawers and, taking a sheet of paper, began to write, standing up, as I write when I can. And I wrote thirty something poems in one shot, in a kind of ecstasy whose nature I can’t define. I began with a title, The Keeper of Sheep. And what followed was the appearance of someone in me, to whom I immediately gave the name of Alberto

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52 Pessoa’s Álvaro de Campos is a good example of a fusion poet, uniting as he does elements of Whitman and Marinetti. Historically Whitman and Marinetti do not belong together, but in Campos Pessoa creates a fusion of the two along with other “unrelated” poets. I also use the term “fusion” poet to avoid the pejorative connotations of a word like “hybrid”.

53 Manuscript evidence shows The Keeper of Sheep was written over several weeks and not in one sitting (Frow 217). Close to thirty poems of the sequence were written in two weeks in March 1914 (Zenith Introduction, xx). To write such a substantial, highly original, volume so rapidly is, surely, a remarkable enough achievement.
Caeiro. Forgive me the absurdity of the phrase: my master appeared in me. That was the immediate sensation I had. And so much so that, once these thirty something poems were written, I immediately took another sheet of paper and wrote, in one shot, also, the six poems that form Oblique Rain, by Fernando Pessoa. Immediately and completely . . . It was the return of Fernando Pessoa Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or, better, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his non-existence as Alberto Caeiro.\(^{54}\)

Pessoa’s account highlights the speed and “given quality” of the Caeiro poems, his deep sense of Caeiro being someone other than him. The subsequent writing of “Oblique Rain” in his own name appears like a reassertion of his psyche. Pessoa describes how Caeiro “instinctively” led to the creation of disciples for Caeiro – Ricardo Reis born from Caeiro’s “false paganism” and Álvaro de Campos with his “Triumphal Ode”. Pessoa calls this central group of heteronyms “a non-existent coterie” (“uma coterie inexistente”). One sentence that stands out most strongly is: “It seems that everything happened independently of me” (“Parece que tudo se passou independentemente de mim”). There is a sense of wonder in this, a sense of immense energy being liberated, along with the surrender to the autonomy of multiple personae.

Pessoa then elaborates the physical appearances, life stories and aesthetic outlooks of the three main poets: Ricardo Reis, a doctor, presently in Brazil, born in 1887, Jesuit-educated and a Latinist; Alberto Caeiro born in 1889 and died in 1915, a primary school teacher with limited education; Alvaro de Campos born in Tavira 15 October 1890 at 1:30 in the afternoon, a naval engineer, completed studies in Glasgow, traveled to the Orient on several

\(^{54}\) “Num dia em que finalmente desistira — foi em 8 de Março de 1914 — acerquei-me de uma cómoda alta, e, tomando um papel, comecei a escrever, de pé, como escrevo sempre que posso. E escrevi trinta e tantos poemas a fio, numa espécie de êxtase cuja natureza não conseguirei definir. Foi o dia triunfal da minha vida, e nunca poderei ter outro assim. Abri com um título, O Guardador de Rebanhos. E o que se seguiu foi o aparecimento de alguém em mim, a quem dei desde logo o nome de Alberto Caeiro. Desculp-me o absurdo da frase: aparecera em mim o meu mestre. Foi essa a sensação imediata que tive. E tanto assim que, escritos que foram esses trinta e tantos poemas, imediatamente peguei noutro papel e escrevi, a fio, também, os seis poemas que constituem a Chhua Obliqua, de Fernando Pessoa. Imediatamente e totalmente... Foi o regresso de Fernando Pessoa Alberto Caeiro a Fernando Pessoa ele só. Ou, melhor, foi a reacção de Fernando Pessoa contra a sua inexistência como Alberto Caeiro.” (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3007).
mercantile voyages. The names Pessoa chooses for his heteronyms are significant, revealing his cryptic playful side. “Caeiro” can be seen as a variation on Carneiro, meaning “sheep”, but without “rn” (and so without the element of “carne”/”flesh”), a reference to his friend Mario de Sá-Carneiro who committed suicide. Caeiro’s disciple, Campos, has a name that means “from the fields”, whilst the monarchist Ricardo Reis’ surname means “kings” (Frow 216). Later in the letter Pessoa further reflects on his process of writing these three main heteronyms as well as the “semi-heteronym” prose-writer Bernardo Soares, a “semi-heteronym” because his prose is indistinguishable from Pessoa’s and his personality extremely close.55 In this letter, written late in life at a point when he had had ample time to reflect on his poetic output, Pessoa describes a kind of possession that is felt as an immense artistic liberation. Several times Pessoa mentions the sensation of not being in control, of being at the mercy of characters who make their own decisions. Caeiro, in particular, reads like a fusion of several tendencies within literature: the pastoral tradition associated with Theocritus, the Romantic movement and its cult of Nature to be found in Wordsworth and Coleridge, the quasi-pantheism and celebration of this world in all its particularity to be found in Whitman. To this needs to be added a strain of anti-clericalism and hostility

55 Letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro 13 Jan. 1935: “How do I write in the name of these three? . . . Caeiro through pure unhoped-for inspiration, without knowing or even calculating that I am going to write. Ricardo Reis, after some abstract deliberation, that suddenly takes concrete form in an ode. Campos, when I feel a sudden impulse to write and don’t know what. (My semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares, who incidentally resembles Álvaro de Campos in many ways, appears always when I’m tired or half asleep, so that he has the qualities of reasoning and inhibition slightly suspended; the prose is a constant daydream. He is a semi-heteronym because his personality, not being mine, is no different from mine, but a simple mutilation of it. It’s me less the reasoning and the affection. The prose, apart from the tenuous quality that reasoning gives to mine, is the same as mine, and the Portuguese exactly the same; whereas Caeiro writes Portuguese badly, Campos reasonably well but with lapses like saying “eu próprio” instead of “eu mesmo”, etc. Reis better than me, but with a purity I consider exaggerated. The difficult thing for me is to write the prose of Reis – still unpublished – or of Campos. Simulation is easier, most of all because it’s more spontaneous, in verse).” (Como esravo em nome desses três?... Caeiro por pura e inesperada inspiração, sem saber ou sequer calcular que iria escrever. Ricardo Reis, depois de uma deliberação abstracta, que subitamente se concretiza numa ode. Campos, quando sinto um súbito impulso para escrever e não sei o quê. (O meu semi-heterônimo Bernardo Soares, que aliás em muitas coisas se parece com Álvaro de Campos, aparece sempre que estou cansado ou sonolento, de sorte que tenha um pouco suspensas as qualidades de raciocínio e de inibição; aquela prosa é um constante devaneio. É um semi-heterônimo porque, não sendo a personalidade a minha, é, não diferente da minha, mas uma simples mutilação dela. Sou eu menos o raciocínio e a afectividade. A prosa, salvo o que o raciocínio dá de tênue à minha, é igual a esta, e o português perfeitamente igual; ao passo que Caeiro escrevia mal o português, Campos razoavelmente mas com lapsos como dizer “eu próprio” em vez de “eu mesmo”, etc., Reis melhor do que eu, mas com um purismo que considero exagerado. O difícil para mim é escrever a prosa de Reis — ainda inédita — ou de Campos. A simulação é mais fácil, até porque é mais espontânea, em verso”) (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3007).
to Christianity not otherwise evident in the conservative Pessoa.56 Poem VIII of the sequence (“Num meio-dia de fim de Primavera” / “Once at midday in late spring”) in particular develops an unorthodox fable of Christ and the Trinity, concluding with the lines:

This is the story of my Child Jesus.
For what conceivable reason
Should it be any less true
Than all that philosophers think of
And all that religions teach?57

By writing as a heteronym, then, Pessoa gives voice to views of an originality and energy different from what was accessible to him in his own person.

For Pessoa’s heteronymous poetry to work as poetry it needs to come with the kind of psychic energy that the fictional selves bring, and there seems no reason to doubt at least the broad outlines of his story of the origin of his main heteronyms. The quality of sudden appearance, of quasi-dictation from a voice or poet present inside oneself who is not oneself, to me rings true.58 I say this in part because my own work with heteronyms teaches me that they can appear quite rapidly with a fleshed-out biography and their own poem or string of poems, and with the sensation of someone else, at least sometimes, taking charge of the writing. Pessoa’s own account of the appearance of the heteronyms (allowing for a strong degree of flamboyance) is consistent with the archival evidence.59 If heteronyms are reduced to a kind of game, an amusement, or a variant of the pastiche designed to send up poetry or prose one dislikes (or, alternately, to replicate uncritically poets one admires), they risk becoming an uninteresting, minor activity. Caeiro’s The Keeper of Sheep,

56 The title, O Guardador de Rebanhos (“The Guardian of Flocks” / “The Keeper of Sheep”) suggests an ironic reference to the clergy of the Catholic Church, where “flock” routinely designates the congregation of a parish.
57 Pessoa The Keeper of Sheep, Translation by Edwin Honig and Susan Brown. 33
58 It is also very similar to Bernardo Schiavetta’s account of his experience of the first emergence of a heteronym and of the ongoing “unexpected eruption” of heteronyms (Schiavetta 255).
59 Not that thirty poems from The Keeper of Sheep, “Oblique Rain”, the odes by Reis and Campos’ “Triumphal Ode” were all written in one setting on one day but that they were composed rapidly in the space of only a few weeks, with nearly 30 poems from The Keeper of Sheep written in two weeks (Frow 217; Kotowicz 41, Zenith Introduction, xx).
Pessoa’s “Oblique Rain” and Campos’ “Tobacco Shop” are all extraordinary poems. Differences exist between the poetries of Reis, Caeiro, Campos and Pessoa but they are not, for the most part, as extreme as critics like Octavio Paz would suggest. The received wisdom is that heteronyms need to contradict each other, but for the most part – if we leave aside Campos’ two odes with their strong elements of Whitman pastiche, sadomasochism and homoeroticism – there is a remarkable similarity in Pessoa’s finest poetry. I would argue that, far more important than heteronyms’ ability to contradict each other, is their role in generating creativity through their very multiplicity.

A second thread which can be traced from Pessoa’s letters concerns the relationship between his heteronymous practice and the poet as dramatist in the tradition of Shakespeare. Pessoa writes of himself “What I am essentially – from behind the involuntary masks of poet, of reasoner and of whatever else there may be – is a dramatist.” He expresses his impatience with those who “make art for various inferior reasons, like someone joking, or like someone amusing themselves, or as if they were someone decorating a room” and stresses the sincerity of his art. Referring to the work of Caeiro, Reis and Campos, he describes it as “sincere because it is felt”, but “felt in the person of

60 Differentiating Pessoa’s heteronyms from Machado’s heteronyms Abel Martín and Juan Mairena, Paz rejects Machado’s heteronyms as “masks, but transparent masks” since they do not “contradict [Machado] or deny [Machado]” (9). On my reading of the three major poems mentioned, one by Pessoa himself, one by Caeiro, one by Campos, they also do not contradict or deny each other.

61 If one focuses on the poems alone and disregards the surrounding commentary created by Pessoa through Introductions and letters, there is surely far more consistency in style, theme and tone between The Keeper of Sheep, “Oblique Rain” and “Tobacco Shop” than there is, for example, between “Frost at Midnight”, “This lime tree bower my prison”, “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.

62 Letter 20th January 1935 to Adolfo Casais Monteiro (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3014) “O que sou essencialmente — por trás das máscaras involuntárias do poeta, do raciocinador e do que mais haja — é dramaturgo.”

63 In the letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues 19 January 1915, Pessoa writes, “I call insincere those things made to shock, also – note this, which is important – that don’t contain any fundamental metaphysical idea, that is, though which doesn’t pass, even if like a breeze some sense of seriousness and of life’s mystery. Therefore everything I wrote under the names of Caeiro, Reis, Álvaro de Campos is serious. In each of these I placed a profound conception of life, different in all three, but in all of them seriously attentive to the mysterious importance of existing.” (“Chamo insinceras às coisas feitas para fazer pasmar, e às coisas, também — repare nisto, que é importante — que não contém uma fundamental ideia metafísica, isto é, por onde não passa, ainda que como um vento uma noção da gravidade e do mistério da Vida. Por isso é sério tudo o que escrevi sob os nomes de Caeiro, Reis, Álvaro de Campos. Em qualquer destes pus um profundo conceito da vida, diverso em todos três, mas em todos gravemente atento à importância misteriosa de existir.”) (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3510)
another” and “written dramatically”, adding that it is “sincere as what King Lear said is sincere, who is not Shakespeare, but a creature of his.”64 His imaginary poets give expressions to feelings they experience even though Pessoa himself may not. As Lear does for Shakespeare, they represent dramatic extensions of his being. Pessoa’s heteronyms, in short, extend the experiences, ideas and feelings presented in his poetry beyond the confines of his biographical self.

In his essay “Dividiu Aristóteles a poesia em lírica, elegíaca, épica y dramática” Pessoa speaks of the final step in poetry where a poet becomes various poets, “a dramatic poet writing in lyric poetry”, likening this situation to Shakespeare writing Hamlet as a “prolonged analytic monologue” instead of Hamlet being part of a play.65 Unlike the characters in Shakespearian drama, heteronyms are by definition all writers and poets. This is a stimulating innovation as it invites the creation of contradictory voices, of different poets within the one poet, each with their own aesthetics, their own projects and obsessions. It locates the releasing otherness, the strangeness that can generate art, not in action or plot or storyline but in the very endeavour of writing.

The idea that heteronyms may be a way to explore lines of poetic heritage that never in fact took place is foreshadowed in Pessoa’s 1916 letter to an English publisher.66 Seeking to interest the editor in an anthology of Sensationist poetry – a name Pessoa coined for his coterie of imaginary poets – Pessoa suggests the movement derived from French symbolism, “Portuguese transcendental pantheism” and such contemporary European movements as futurism. Pessoa then proceeds to differentiate Sensationism from French symbolism, rejecting what he sees as symbolism’s “religious attitude”, but even more its “inability to write long poems.” Pessoa can be seen as having an underlying urge to get beyond the detached lyric poem in order to create a larger art – in the sense of not merely individual short poems but an entire literature. In this letter Pessoa highlights the French symbolists and English

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64 Letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues 19 January 1915 (arquivopessoa.net/textos/3510)
65 “um poeta dramático escrevendo em poesia lírica” [..] “um monólogo prolongado e analítico” (arquivopessoa.net/textos/4306)
66 arquivopessoa.net/textos/1899
romantics as precursors of Sensationism. Interestingly he sketches out an ancestry for the Sensationist poets that involves a development that English poetry never took.⁶⁷

Even more important for Pessoa than the English Romantics or the French symbolists was the impact of Whitman, as Zenith argues in “Pessoa and Walt Whitman Revisited”. The evidence suggests Pessoa first read Whitman around 1906 or 1907 and was profoundly inspired by what he read. The most obvious aspect of Whitman’s work that seems embodied in Pessoa’s heteronyms is summed up in the lines:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself.
(I am large. I contain multitudes.) ⁶⁸

Zenith argues that this granting of permission to contradict oneself was of immense importance in leading to the breakthrough that happened in 1914 with the rapid creation of Caeiro, Campos and Reis. Yet Whitman’s influence is not generally of an overt, obvious kind, apart from a few of Campos’ poems that can read, in places, as close to Whitman pastiche.⁶⁹ Besides the celebration of being contradictory, Whitman’s non-judgmental acceptance of all creation, his paganism and his strong element of homoeroticism had a powerful liberating effect on Pessoa. In Caeiro’s pastoral sequence Pessoa processed Whitman into a very different poetry.⁷⁰ Whitman’s long incantatory lines become the crisp shorter lines of The Keeper of Sheep; the vast lists of Whitman

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⁶⁷ “Suppose English romanticism had, instead of retrograding to the Tennysonian-Rossetti-Browning level, progressed right onward from Shelley, spiritualising his already spiritualistic pantheism. You would arrive at the conception of Nature (our transcendentalist pantheists are essentially poets of Nature) in which flesh and spirit are entirely mingled in something which transcends both. If you can conceive a William Blake put into the soul of Shelley and writing through that, you will perhaps have a nearer idea of what I mean.” (Pessoa: arquivopessoa.net/textos/1899)

⁶⁸ “Song of Myself”, section 51 (Whitman, 123).

⁶⁹ A good example of Whitman pastiche can be found in “Triumphal Ode” stanzas 10 to 13: “Fertilisers, steam threshing machines, advances in agriculture! . . . And a parliament as beautiful as a butterfly” (Pessoa A Centennial Pessoa, 84-85).

⁷⁰ Commenting on the influence of Whitman on Caeiro and Campos, Zenith writes, “neither heteronym is a mere derivative, for they could not have existed without numerous other inputs from Pessoa’s rich literary background” (Introduction, xxiv). In particular Pessoa’s own stylistic tastes lead him to prefer poetry that would always be quite different in form and aesthetics from Whitman’s, however close some of their ideas were.
with their very specific details disappear to be replaced by a far more abstract style that builds its energy on a fundamental simplicity; the democratic, pro-American sweep of Whitman is replaced by a non-Christian, purely earth-bound mysticism. In an undated fragment reproduced by Zenith, Pessoa summarizes the differences between Caeiro and Whitman:

- Caeiro is clear. Whitman is confused, muddled.
- Caeiro is a subtler rhythmist than Whitman.
- Caeiro is far more of an intellectual than Whitman.
- We are convinced there is no influence at all. Caeiro is so like and so different from Whitman, he is so near and so far from him, that if he knew him he would [n]either come nearer [n]or go farther away.
- Whitman rarely has the tender emotion that is constantly characteristic of Caeiro. Caeiro is an atheist St Francis of Assisi. Whitman can neither be called an atheist nor a St Francis of Assisi. (49)

Later in the same note Pessoa summarizes what the two poets have in common as “the opposition to civilisation, to convention and to pure thoughts qua pure thoughts” (50). Pessoa’s creation of the heteronym Alberto Caeiro is not pastiche or parody of Whitman but a thorough re-working and re-imagining. It is as if Pessoa has taken what he feels are Whitman’s strengths, eliminated aspects of Whitman that troubled him – such as the undisciplined sprawl of the poetry and Whitman’s uncritical welcoming of all creeds – and developed the poetry in a different direction. Caeiro’s poems in their spirit of innocence read more like Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience” than Whitman.71 It is this fusion of poetic forebears not normally associated with each other that forms a powerful innovative strength in Pessoa’s use of heteronyms.

This is one of the outstanding elements of the heteronym tradition: its capacity to explore hybrid genealogies of poetry, where, for example,

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71 Sadleir also comments on the resemblances between Caeiro’s poetry and that of Cesário Verde (87). Undoubtedly Pessoa was influenced by his extensive reading of Portuguese poetry, including folk poetry and Renaissance poetry, but English and American poetry were also crucial. Among the most important Portuguese influences, Sadleir lists Antero de Quental, António Nobre, Camilo Pessanha, Cesário Verde and Teixeira de Pascoaes (3, 32).
Whitman, Marinetti and Shakespeare can interact with Blake and the English Romantics as well as with several late 19th Century Portuguese poets to produce new imaginary poets. Pessoa’s heteronyms also gave him permission for a close referencing of other poets that, in places, had he written the particular poem in English, would perhaps border on plagiarism – or, at the least, would probably have been repressed as either exposing him to attack as a plagiarist or bearing an uncomfortable excess of echo. In *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-century Anglo-American Literature* George Monteiro examines several poems and prose passages of Pessoa’s that have very strong imitative links to works by English and American writers and poets. Thus “Ela canta, pobre ceifera” reworks Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” (21-29), several of Campos’ poems heavily imitate – if not parody – Whitman, and poems nine and ten from *The Keeper of Sheep* contain direct borrowings from two poems by the once very popular Victorian poet, Alice Meynell: “The Shepherdess” and “The Two Poets” (79-82). “The Shepherdess” begins: “She walks – the lady of my delight – /A shepherdess of sheep./Her flocks are thoughts.” Caeiro’s Poem nine begins “Sou um guardador de rebanhos. / O rebanho é os meus pensamentos” (“I’m a keeper of sheep./The sheep are my thoughts.”) Where Meynell’s poem treats the shepherdess as third-person object and is all about keeping the self, the “soul”, “white” and safe, in Caeiro’s poem the shepherd is the speaker who seeks to merge into nature in a Whitmanesque way:

And stretch out on the grass,
Closing my warm eyes,
I feel my whole body lying full length in reality,
I know the truth and I’m happy.73

Caeiro’s poem can be read, then, as a refutation of Meynell: certainly of the kind of “poeticizing” her poem typifies.

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72 While acknowledging the connection to Wordsworth, Sadleir cites, as “equally important” sources for this poem, Portuguese traditions of folk poetry and *quadras* (61). Sadleir sees as an important function of the heteronyms Pessoa’s need to satisfy two largely contradictory impulses – an attraction to international modernism and an equal attraction to Portuguese medieval and Renaissance poetic traditions (42-47).
73 Pessoa *The Keeper of Sheep* 35.
One further question concerns the purpose of Pessoa’s immense heteronymous productivity. Writing on the margins in a marginal language gave Pessoa a unique opportunity to recombine and synthesize in a way difficult for an American, English or French poet, trapped as they often are in one poetic culture and dominated by the literary developments that actually took place. If we imagine how Whitman’s universalist celebration of life might sound if held within the tighter poetic lines of English romanticism but a romanticism that developed more from Blake and Shelley and that also merged with French symbolism and with a Freudian critique of religion, then we can better see the innovation of Caeiro. On this reading Pessoa is not so much cannibalizing previous literature to produce a totalizing fiction as intuitively (and interestingly) recombining aspects of previous literature into shapes it never had. Overall, in this account, Pessoa is, beneath the surface bravado, far more respectful of Whitman, the English Romantics and past literature than critic K. David Jackson suggests (6-7, 15-16). Also, in those few places where there are direct borrowings or pastiche, Pessoa’s writing represents a considered critique rather than mere copying or tongue-in-cheek send-up.

Heteronyms do not operate in a uniform way in Pessoa’s work. Campos often acts as a mask for sadomasochistic and homoerotic aspects of Pessoa, as in such poems as "Triumphal Ode" and "Maritime Ode". Reis, as a conservative Jesuit-educated classicist, facilitates a conscious imitation of Latin models,

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74 Thus Jackson describes Pessoa as attempting an “omnivorous” consumption of all previous literature to replace it with his own heterogeneous literature (6).

75 The practice of heteronyms and “fusion poets” is very different from sampling, collaging or other forms of post-modern intertextuality. Pessoa does not insert actual lines by other poets or writers into his poems. There is not even the limited degree of intertextual citation Eliot uses in The Waste Land. Pessoa’s aim, and the aim of other poets in the heteronym tradition, is to create new poetry, not to recycle or re-contextualize existing material. It is a very different project from the various late 20th-century and early 21st-century “unoriginal” poets Perloff discusses in Unoriginal Genius. While heteronym practice is intertextual and there is a “dialogue with earlier texts”, it is an “inventio” in Perloff’s terms, not an “appropriation”, and does not generally rely on “elaborate constraints, visual or sound compositions” or intertextuality in the sense of sampling, collage or montage (11). Intertextuality, or “palimpsests” in the general sense that Genette uses, is very common throughout Western poetry and Western literature, going back to Roman poets who borrowed from Greek models - indeed, as Pierre Joris comments, “any text is intertextual to begin with” (A Nomad Poetics 111). Pessoa’s heteronymous poetry is more “expressive” than “conceptual”, using the heteronyms to escape blockage and address the concerns that mattered to him. Likewise the heteronymous or quasi-heteronymous work of Jabês and Gelman remains within an expressive aesthetics.

76 "Triumphal Ode” and “Maritime Ode” are in Pessoa A Little Larger Than 153-165, 166-196.
offering Pessoa a framework for stylistic experimentation. Caeiro in *The Keeper of Sheep* is not a mask of any sort. Nor is his key role to introduce a new style. As "an atheist St Francis of Assisi" he seems to come from elsewhere, erupting with the force of a master, producing poetry marked by a spiritual depth and a provocative simplicity that set it apart from the rest of Pessoa’s work. Caeiro channels something unprecedented for Pessoa.

In short, while the heteronym as used by Pessoa had its roots in his own psychic make up, there are several important functions performed by heteronyms that articulate wider politics and poetics. The examples of Montejo, Mutis, Gelman, Schiavetta and the special case of Jabès with his heteronym-like spokespeople, all demonstrate this. None of these poets suggest any psychological flaw or breakdown as the explanation for their turn to heteronymous writing – nor do they offer their heteronyms as purely games or hoaxes. A liberating distance from the biographic self, the powerful energy generated by multiple voices, the exploration of alternate lineages for poetry and the opening up of one’s native poetry to influences from other cultures, languages and times, are among the common traits that mark the poetic power of heteronyms.

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77 Like the rabbis in Jabès’ *Le livre des questions*, Alberto Caeiro illustrates how a heteronym can be about much more than the case of a poet finding a mask to explore aspects of themselves. Caeiro, like Jabès’ imaginary rabbis, comes from much further off and has a far deeper alterity than the word “mask” suggests.
Chapter Two

Heteronyms and fusion poetry: the work of Edmond Jabès and Juan Gelman

The previous chapter examined the factors behind the use of heteronyms in the poetry of Pessoa and, less extensively, in my own *Apocrypha* and *Ghostspeaking*. Heteronyms were seen as typically looking in two directions – towards fiction in their creation of imaginary poets with imaginary lives; and towards translation in their experimentation with styles, voices and forms inflected by poetry outside the traditions of their creator’s own culture and language. For Pessoa heteronymous poetry involved the creation of “fusion poets”, imagined poets who combine the style and content of several poets from different languages and cultures, enabling a literary exploration of imaginary lineages. It was argued that, despite significant differences, there are important connections between the heteronym tradition established by Pessoa and the translation of poetry. Both are ways of intervening in a poetic culture; both rely on the ability of a poet (or poet-translator) to bend their style or voice to accommodate other styles and voices; both practices destabilise the solidity of a single underlying poetic self.

This chapter will examine Jabès’ *Le livre des questions* and Gelman’s *Los poemas de Sidney West*. It will be argued that, while there are significant continuities with Pessoa, each takes the heteronym tradition in a different direction. Unlike Pessoa, their turn to heteronyms (or, for Jabès, a vast array of fictive spokespersons) is motivated more by aesthetic and ethical considerations than psychological factors. For Jabès and Gelman, the heteronym as fusion poet, as a way of introducing something from outside, becomes more important than the purely fictional element. Gelman’s Sidney West, for example, lacks any significant biography and accordingly the use of a heteronym’s life story as a source of material for poetry is not especially important. While in *Le livre des questions* the characters Yukel and Sarah do provide fictional material for Jabès, the imaginary rabbis appear only as
voices, lacking any semblance of individual biography. Rather the main creative opportunities concern connections to poetry and traditions outside one’s own language and culture, and the permission to experiment granted by fusion poets. Jabès’ quasi-heteronyms help in the creation of a work that, in many respects, stands outside poetry. *Le livre des questions* blurs the lines between poetry, fiction and philosophic reflection in order to create a single book, a post-Holocaust analogy to the Book. 78 Gelman presents his heteronymous *Los poemas de Sidney West* as a translation, developing the potential of heteronymous writing for parody and pastiche. In different ways Gelman and Jabès expand the possibilities of poetry through turning to heteronyms or, in Jabès’ case, quasi-heteronyms – voices distinct from their creator, often with implicit life stories quite unlike his, who seem to take charge of the writing independently of him. For both of them the turn to heteronyms answered ethical-aesthetic needs and produced a body of poetry different in kind from what they had previously been writing.

**Edmond Jabès and *Le livre des questions***

*Le livre des questions*, Jabès’ massive work, begun shortly after his exile from Egypt in 1956 and completed in 1973, is a profoundly serious meditation on life and writing in the shadow of the Holocaust. Written largely in the voices of imaginary rabbis and fictional characters – Yukel79, Sarah, Yaël, Elya, Aely – it resembles Pessoa’s heteronymous work in that the styles and voices of these imaginary writers mark something radically new for their creator. The sheer multiplicity of voices used is remarkable.80 The importance of the

78 I am using the title to refer to the seven-volume work published between 1963 and 1973, of which the first volume is also titled *Le livre des questions*, which I will refer to as “the first book”. The edition I am using is the two-volume Gallimard edition, volume I (the first three books) published in 1988 and volume II (the last four books) in 1989. Where it is clear that *Le livre des questions* is being referred to I will use I or II to designate the first or second volume.

79 Contradictory accounts are given of Yukel. As narrator he resembles Jabès and we are told he lived outside of Europe during the Holocaust (I, 341) but we are also told that, a few months after Sarah’s arrest by the Gestapo, he was captured while sheltering with a friend who betrayed him (I, 424). The central love story requires him to be in Europe with Sarah at the time of the German invasion but, as alter-ego for Jabès, he lives those years in Egypt. Early in *Le livre de Yukel* (I, 222) Yukel suicides by taking poison but immediately afterwards he seems to take possession of the narrator, becoming the writer of *Le livre des questions*. At this point Jabès includes Reb Hod’s definition of a writer as “a shadow carrying a man” and says “You were that man, Yukel, the hero and the martyr” (I, 223).

80 In the first book of *Le livre des questions* alone there are some 182 different rabbis named and similar numbers are added in the second and third book. The names of the imaginary
imaginary rabbis is evident if we consider the immense space given to them.\textsuperscript{81} Richard Stamelman suggests that the imaginary rabbis and other characters in \textit{Le livre des questions} offer a necessary combination of “distance and intimacy”, creating a many-layered text capable of exploring Judaism, the Holocaust and the writer’s task in the deepest, most respectful way (“The Strangeness”, xv-xix).

For Jabès the shift to the use of personae who, on my reading, border on heteronyms, represented the turning from the self-contained surrealist poems written in Egypt to the sustained reflection on the creation of a Book, a reflection that becomes the Book.\textsuperscript{82} The use of fictitious rabbis involves a deliberate play with a pre-existing literature, the vast literature of the Talmud. In their style of utterance the rabbis sound as if they have come from the re\textsuperscript{,} but Jabès is not quoting any real Talmud. Unlike in the Talmud his sages do not debate the implications of Torah and its applications to everyday life. Their concerns are Jabès’ post-Holocaust concerns: the book, writing, God and God’s absence, what it is to be Jewish, human meaning in the face of death. In \textit{Le livre des marges} Jabès explains his turn to multiple voices in terms of the need to achieve a certain type of anonymity:

> Perhaps, in my books, all I’ve done is attempt to get rid of the burdensome “I” in favor of the almost anonymous “We”.

> To write would mean nothing but little by little, through words, to

\textsuperscript{81} In the first book of \textit{Le livre des questions}, of some 188 pages, 44 are in the voice of the author, 16 in Yukel’s voice, 5 in Sarah’s, 13 are general narrative and 85 are given to rabbis. Of the 137 pages in the second book, \textit{Le livre de Yukel}, Jabès’ own voice accounts for only 12 pages, Sarah writes 12 pages, Yukel 8, dialogues involving anonymous sages account for 21 pages, while there are 47 pages where rabbis predominate. Although a strong impression is created that we are on the edge of a novel, only 23 pages of \textit{Le livre de Yukel} read as if they could belong to that genre. Of the 93 pages in the third book, \textit{Le retour au livre}, at most 20 are predominantly in the author’s voice, 1 (a letter) in Yukel’s voice, 4 are dialogues between Yukel and anonymous sages, 25 are formed by rabbis in dialogue with Yukel, and 43 pages are predominantly the rabbis’ voices alone. In this book two or three pages at most could be read as if they might be part of a novel.

\textsuperscript{82} Stamelman describes the imaginary rabbis and other characters, such as Yukel and Sarah, as “personae” and “spokespersons” (“The Graven Silence” xv, xvii).
reach this anonymity.
To be the other and permit him to be me: dark road of anonymity.  

Jabès’ quest for anonymity reads, in part, as a response to the difficulty of writing ethically about the Holocaust and the meaning of being Jewish when one is a non-practicing, non-believing Jew who lived outside Europe during that time. Anonymity provides a respectful way to engage in a dialogue with realities much larger than oneself, but this stance also resonates with the Jewish mystical tradition contained in the Kabbalah. Jabès uses his multitude of voices to create a quasi-philosophic concentration on a network of inter-related puzzles – the nature of writing and the book, the millennial identity of the Jewish people who remain the bearers of the book, God as absence and as a presence in the book, our mortality, our death, our continuity. Near the very beginning of Le livre des questions, in one of the comparatively rare moments where Jabès writes in his own voice, we find what looks like a preliminary definition of his project:

The novel of Sarah and Yukel, through diverse dialogues and meditations attributed to imaginary rabbis, is the story of a love destroyed by men and by words. It has the dimensions of the book and the bitter stubbornness of a wandering question.

These sentences suggest three layers to Jabès’ project: a love story of two individuals, Sarah and Yukel; commentary through the reflections and discussions of the “imaginary rabbis”; and “the bitter stubbornness of a wandering question”, a persistent interrogation large and uncompromising.

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83 "Peut-être n’ai-je, dans mes livres, que tenté de me défaire du « Je » encombrant au profit du « Nous » presque anonyme. Écrire ne serait, à travers les mots, qu’accéder peu à peu à cet anonymat. Être l’autre et permettre à celui-ci d’être soi : voie obscure de l’anonymat” (Le livre des marges 130). The translation is my own as are other passages where the translation is unattributed. Quotations from From the Desert to the Book are in the translation by Pierre Joris.

84 Blanchot in his essay “Gog and Magog” writes “There is in the whole Jewish mystical production a striking search for anonymity […] The need to be an author is obviously not nearly as strong as the need to be the impersonal place in which the tradition is affirmed par excellence” (Friendship, 230-231). In terms that read like a description of Jabès’ own practice Blanchot writes of the masters of the Kabbalah “Anonymity is here the cloak of invisibility. An incognito of sorts hides the mastery and makes it more essential” (Friendship, 231).

85 “Le roman de Sarah et de Yukel, à travers divers dialogues et méditations attribués à des rabbins imaginaires, est le récit d’un amour détruit par les hommes et par les mots. Il a la dimension du livre et l’amère obstination d’une question errante”(I, 30).
enough to generate the in-principle limitless space of a book that would match “the Book”. The anonymity provided by heteronyms is the underlying structure that weaves these layers together.

It might be argued that Jabès could have achieved the same anonymity without the imaginary rabbis. There are, after all, places where the speakers are simply “sages” or where aphorisms and commentaries are inserted without attribution. Although it is impossible to know what an author might have been able to achieve writing otherwise than they did, it is worth examining the role of the imaginary rabbis more closely. For example, do the aphorisms attributed to rabbis differ in style or content from Jabès’ own aphorisms in the same book? Beyond the effect of predisposing the reader to see diversity and opposition, are there any differences in the sections attributed to rabbis? If we compare a sample of aphorisms given to rabbis with those that have no attribution and so presumably are simply Jabès’, it is hard to tell which is which:

(1) You are the one who writes and who is written.

(2) God rests in man
as man at the foot of the tree
and the shadow, through God’s will is man
in the tree and the tree in man.

(3) You believe in reason, as if it was reasonable.

(4) Misfortune saves us and shatters us, for it is the key of which we are the inheritors.

(5) Death and life are perverted flowers. Their roots are in the mud of

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86 Immediately one notices the use of the definite article, “the book”, not “a book”, recalling the great sacred book of Torah.

87 Tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit. (I, 13)

88 Dieu se repose dans l’homme/ comme l’homme aux pieds de l’arbre/ et l’ombre, par la volonté de Dieu est homme/ dans l’arbre et arbre dans l’homme. (I, 86)

89 Tu crois à la raison, comme si elle était raisonable. (I, 100)

90 Le malheur nous sauve et nous brise, car il est la clé dont nous sommes les héritiers. (I, 119)
the sky and of being.91

(6) Our flower, whose corolla is ash, has as many petals as the cries we utter.92

(7) Your knowledge is great. You love.93

(8) Colours are the shadow’s cries.94

(9) Certainty is death’s territory; uncertainty life’s valley.95

Of these nine aphorisms (1), (2), (5), and (8) are unattributed and so, presumably, should be read as by Jabès, while (3), (4), (6), (7) and (9) are ascribed to various rabbis. Although there is little to differentiate the aphorisms in Jabès’ voice from those by the rabbis, (3) and especially (7) have a direct, very simple, non-literary quality that is far more evident when the rabbis speak. It is as if the device of the imaginary rabbis authorizes Jabès to name truths directly without seeking the literary panache of unusual images or such features as alliteration and rhythmic patterning (though such sound devices are common in the rabbis’ sayings.) The imaginary rabbis’ lack of concern for the “literary” can be seen in an aphorism of Reb Mander: “You look for life as a dog looks for a bone.”96 The commonplace image of a dog seeking a bone is the opposite of what is generally expected of poetry.97 Such examples highlight the distance between Jabès’ endeavour in Le livre des

91 La mort et la vie sont des fleurs pervertis. Leurs racines sont dans la boue du ciel et de l’être. (I, 145)
92 Notre fleur, dont la corolle est de cendres, a autant de pétales que nous avons poussé de cris. (I, 150)
93 Ton savoir est grand. Tu aimes. (I, 152)
94 Les couleurs sont les cris de l’ombre. (I, 303)
95 La certitude est région de mort; l’incertitude vallée de vie. (I, 305)
96 “Tu cherches à vivre, comme le chien, l’os” (I, 263)
97 One explanation of the simplicity often given to the rabbis’ speech is that unselfconscious directness marks their distance in time. In conversation with Marcel Cohen, Jabès suggests: “How could one distinguish a character from the past from a contemporary one, without highlighting it? I have tried to create that distinction through writing itself. The ‘ancient ones’ say the simplest things, what today seems banal to us for having been repeated so often, while his desire for newness makes the contemporary character appear more original.” (From the desert 44). Jabès makes the same point in his interview with Paul Auster: “The most ancient rabbis are the ones who say the simplest things” (Gould 14).
questions and his earlier poetry.

Although there is no consistent divide between the rabbis' aphorisms and Jabès', the rabbis, who, after all, deliver the vast majority of the aphoristic commentary, help develop a style of aphorism noticeably different from that found in Jabès' earlier work or in such contemporaries as René Char. The vast chorus of heteronyms offers Jabès a way to reinvent himself and his vision of what writing might be. It re-orientates him both towards his more oriental (Jewish and Egyptian) self and towards a daring vision of the book that would speak to the long history of Jewish self-reflection and commentary. The focus of the imaginary rabbis on spiritual or human truths and their lack of concern for poetic originality as an aim in itself mark a shift in Jabès' attitude to writing. This aesthetic shift between Le livre des questions and Jabès' earlier work suggests, following Scaratino Jones' test, that we are dealing with heteronyms. Most importantly, by their vast numbers and the traditions they summon, the imaginary rabbis help create a composite imaginary world that is both contemporary and millennial.

For Jabès, Le livre des questions involved an imaginative encounter with a Judaism he had never studied closely till his arrival in France – the literature of the Bible, the Talmud and the Kabbalah, a tradition built around constant

98 Notable examples of Char's aphorism-poems include “La bibliothèque est en feu”, “Les dentelles de Montmirail” and “Contre une maison sèche” (Furor and Mystery 383, 421, 441). With Char all the aphorisms arrive from the same speaker, the poet himself, and so, as readers, we are conditioned to harmonizing the statements. In Jabès' Le livre des questions the aphorisms arrive from an abundance of different characters so that we are conditioned to look for contradictions and ask: which of these speakers is most to be trusted? There is also a consistently poetic tone to Char's aphorisms which Jabès' often lack.

99 In conversation with Marcel Cohen Jabès comments on the profound change that happened to him within a few weeks when forced into exile in 1957. In Egypt he had felt completely at home in French culture but, in Paris, cut off from Egypt, suddenly his Jewishness, the desert of Egypt, his life there, stood like a barrier between him and the familiar landmarks of French culture and poetry – Baudelaire, Mallarmé, the surrealists (From the Desert 51).

100 Jabès' hard-won willingness to include in his writing what might seem banal or platitudinous is captured when he says to Marcel Cohen, "Banality is a vehicle and as such it can help us get closer to the ground of things. Without it, how could we know that we are getting closer to the ground? Banality is a surface that has to be explored and then punctured" (From the Desert 43). There is a connection here to the views of Max Jacob. The idea that truth, rather than any decoration, is the driving force of poetry is captured in a saying of Jacob's that Jabès quotes in Le livre des marges "Le puits de la vérité est toute une esthétique" ("The well of truth is an entire aesthetics") (156).
questioning and revisioning.\textsuperscript{101} There is also implicit in \textit{Le livre des questions}, as \textit{Le livre des marges} makes clear, an engagement with other French thinkers, notably Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. If we think of heteronyms in terms of the release of creative energy through the exploration of alternate literary pathways whereby radically different traditions enter into dialogue, then Jabès fits within this tradition. Jabès’ work from \textit{Le livre des questions} onwards could be seen as the creation of a previously unimagined dialogue between French surrealism – or, at least, French poetry from Mallarmé onwards – and the Talmudic tradition. For both Pessoa and Jabès, seeing their work as in part concerned with the creation of alternate literary pathways helps underscore the profound seriousness of their task and the ultimate respectfulness they bring to the reworking of past authors (Whitman and Blake, for example, for Pessoa; Talmud and Kabbalah, above all, for Jabès). The quest for a certain kind of creative objectivity, a turn away from the self that ends up expressing the self, though it can be seen in many forms of writing, is especially prominent in the heteronym tradition of poetry. In Jabès’ words, “To express, with luck, something that is not oneself but which expresses something of oneself, that’s the aim of all creation.”\textsuperscript{102}

A second aspect of Jabès’ shift from “poetry” to “writing” concerns the question of what happens to epic poetry following the progressive fragmentation of poetry in the modern era. Viewed through a certain lens \textit{Le livre des questions} could be said to resemble an epic such as \textit{The Aeneid}.\textsuperscript{103} There is a narrative line with two main characters – Sarah and Yukel – and their tragedy, as well as the presence of other characters, such as Nathan Seichell,\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Kaplan analyses the affinities between Jabès’ work and the Jewish thinker Abraham Heschel, both concerned with the void, “the experience of nothingness”, as the starting point for a dialogue with a Judaism that rejects all “illusory certitudes” (“Edmond Jabès : un prophétisme,” 224-229). According to Kaplan, Jabès’ books are built on traditional faith without affirming any such faith though equally without destroying it – “Il n’est pas évident que Jabès méprise la foi traditionelle ; au contraire. Ses livres bâtissent sur elle – sans l’affirmer, il est vrai – mais aussi sans la détruire” (223).

\textsuperscript{102} “Exprimer avec chance quelque chose qui n’est pas soi mais qui exprime quelque chose de soi, voilà le but de toute création” (\textit{Le livre des marges} 160).

\textsuperscript{103} As well as the elements outlined in the next sentence, \textit{Le livre des questions} could be seen as having several proems, a feature that resembles \textit{The Aeneid} (Perkell 29-30).

\textsuperscript{104} Interestingly Yukel Serafi introduces the story of Nathan Seichell when asked about his shadow. “Yukel, parle-nous des exploits de ton ombre.

-- Je vous conterai l’histoire de Nathan Seichell” (I, 88). It is as if Yukel is Jabès’ shadow and now creates a further “shadow” in the form of Nathan Seichell.
the Jewish tailor and the Schwall family; there is an historic event that resonates throughout the work – the Holocaust; there is an ongoing examination of what could be called the dominant myths of a civilization – God and the Book. There is a poetic style of high seriousness – if, for the late 20th century, poetic style is understood not as any traditional verse form but rather an enriched texture in which the aural dimension of spoken language is highlighted and a slow, highly attentive manner of reading is encouraged. More traditional markers of poetry are also present – such as passages with verse line-breaks, alliteration, wordplay and striking imagery. As Helena Shillony analyses, many of Jabès’ aphorisms and titles consist of concealed alexandrines, a conscious or unconscious rhythmic and syllabic regularity that heightens the poetic quality of the writing and deepens its impact (6). Storyline and characters disappear far too often for *Le livre des questions* to seem like a novel.105 Most of all, Jabès is conscious of seeking to create his own form. Poetry, understood as attentiveness to rhythm and to all the visual and aural features of language, is a crucial component of that form.

Jabès is at pains to explain that his turn away from direct authorial presence towards a depersonalized ever-expanding coterie of fictive speakers represents an increase, not a diminution, in seriousness and philosophical reach. Conscious of the immense rupture that exile from Egypt meant to him and of the profound break in Western culture presented by the Holocaust, he set about the creation of "a book outside of time [. . .] that would integrate the break on all levels; a book in which the very words would be confronted by the infinite that undermines them" (From the Desert 51).106 Jabès’ turn away

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105 In *Le livre des questions* the first book of the series, for example, Yukel mainly appears as the writer of the book, a participant in dialogues with rabbis and interrogations. Apart from very brief mentions of her name, Sarah first appears in “Le Temps des Amants” (152-155), then again in pages 163-169, 175-181, 185-188, 193-197. Of the 197 pages in the book at most 25 could plausibly be regarded as fitting within the broad concept of a novel. In contrast about 80 pages are given over to the voices of the imaginary rabbis and much of the remainder is either in the form of commentaries or sections in the voice of either Yukel or the imagined writer of the book, presumably Jabès. For these reasons and considering its consistently strong poetic qualities, if one was to nominate a traditional genre for Jabès’ work, it fits more readily into the category of poetry than of novel.

106 In his essay “Edmond Jabès and the question of the book” Derrida sees the continuity between *Le livre des questions* and Jabès’ earlier poems in *Je bâtis ma demeure*. However, Derrida writes in response to the publication of only the first book of the seven-book sequence and before the publication of *Du désert au livre*. Accordingly he reads Jabès’ main work (the first volume of it) in terms defined by his previous close reading of the preceding poetry. For myself, as for many readers now, the order of experience is reversed. The earlier
from the individual poems gathered in *Je bâtis ma demeure* towards the polyvocal structure of *Le livre des questions* embodies a recognition that the old poetic-aesthetic culture he had previously relied on could no longer serve to articulate reality after the Holocaust.\(^{107}\) Jabès’ choice of strategies in the creation of a constantly open book, a book that resists any single analysis, viewpoint or spokesperson, has less to do with post-modernist theory than with Jewish traditions of commentary as the perpetual opening up of the Torah.\(^{108}\) According to Jabès, commentary and questioning are how the dialogue with God is kept going: “Isn’t to make a commentary a way to force God to speak even in his silence or, rather, to sound the word in such a way that the dialogue never gets interrupted?” (From the Desert 72) Jabès claims that the “false - true - rabbis” of his books undertake this same kind of rapport with the text, adding that they would be “only apparently fictive” (From the Desert 72). Jabès identifies Talmud and Kabbalah as the models for his book – both in the technical sense of reliance on an in-principle infinite process of commentaries on commentaries, and in an underlying philosophical or spiritual sense in that the model of what he means by “writing” derives from Jewish tradition.\(^{109}\)

Although the last four books of *Le livre des questions* are very different from the first three, heteronym-like devices remain important, while the fusion of French poetic-philosophic traditions with Jewish traditions of Talmud and Kabbalah becomes even more prominent. Imaginary rabbis identified by

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\(^{107}\) “As I started to write *The Book of Questions* I got the impression that the culture I had relied on so far was violently cracking up. At any rate, I felt that it was no longer able to channel the anxieties I was harboring.” (From the Desert, 50)

\(^{108}\) Susan Handelman analyses how Jabès’ concept of the Book within the Book mirrors the rabbinical concept of the Talmud as Oral Torah endlessly opening up Torah, creating “the Book at once closed and open, already finished yet still to be begun, an open process and yet a graven law” (62). In general she sees the Talmud as providing Jabès with the model for the format of his book with its “seemingly displaced colloquy of disparate voices trying to create a story that never quite gets told and yet seems to already have been told” (59).

\(^{109}\) Miryam Laifer analyses the close connections between writing and Judaism for Jabès (48-52). In her view Jabès “takes up his Judaism through his writing, that is his books. The modernity of his Judaism lies in being open and questioning” (“assume son judaïsme à travers l’écriture c’est-à-dire ses livres. La modernité de son judaïsme demeure dans l’ouverture et l’interrogation”) (61). Likewise Gabriel Bounoure links Jabès’ interrogation of suffering and the cry of martyred innocence to Jewish scripture: “The first *Book of Questions* was written on this subject long ago: it is the book of Job” (“Le premier *Livre des Questions* a été écrit sur ce sujet il y a longtemps : c’est le livre de Job”) (40).
name disappear and the story of Sarah and Yukel, focused as it is on the world of the death camps, moves into the background though never disappearing completely. At the same time the content becomes more explicitly unorthodox – Yaël is written as in the time of the death of God. This elusive female character who at times seems like a counter-Eve in a reworking of Genesis, at times like the doomed lover in a cinematic love triangle, says “I am Yaël [. . .] I have only one concern: to live the absence of God.”110 Probably naming rabbis in these sections would be too problematic as the material clearly reveals Jabès’ own highly problematic, unorthodox understanding of God.111 Nevertheless, voices continue to proliferate. At times aphorisms are introduced by “a sage said” or “he said”, while the narrator and the characters Yaël, Elya, Aely speak in their own right. Sections introduce critics of the book itself. Thus “La première soirée rue Ben-Yehouda Bethseba à Jerusalem” in Aely introduces imaginary Israeli critics of Le livre des questions. Their first speaker Pinhas, addressing Jabès, remarks that Jabès is “not a practicing Jew” (II, 358). Only one spokesperson, Bethseba, shows much sympathy for Jabès, commenting on the ancientness of the author of Le livre des questions “in this unchanging today that has been ours for millennia.”112

The final word is given to Oury – a name recalling “Our” or “Er”, the place from which Abraham set out and so perhaps, by implication, a self-styled spokesperson for traditional Judaism – who concludes, speaking presumably of both Jabès and his book, “Acidic fruit [. . .] we reject you” (“Fruit acide [. . .] nous te rejetons”) (II, 360). Discussing a similar passage of self-criticism from the first book, Derrida comments “Jabès is not a defendant in this dialogue, for he carries both it and the charges within him” (92). In other words Jabès is both accuser and defender, split between different characters in a way that is

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110 “Je suis Yaël [. . .] Je n’ai qu’un souci : vivre l’absence de Dieu” (II, 129)

111 In an interview with Paul Auster published in Gould’s The Sin of the Book, Jabès states, “I find it impossible to rid myself of the word ‘Jew’, for example, or the word ‘God’ [. . .] What I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless. It is a distance . . . the distance that is always between things . . . We get to where we are going, and then there is still this distance to cover. And a moment comes when you can no longer cover the distance; you get there and you say to yourself, it’s finished, there are no more words. God is perhaps a word without words.” (19). In a sense Jabès, then, does believe in God but not a recognisable, orthodox God. Likewise in this interview Jabès distances himself from the “materialist” who is afraid of saying the word “God”, stating “I am not afraid of the word ‘God’ because I am not afraid of this God” (19). In Handelman’s formulation Jabès is “precariously balanced between faith and heresy, probing the heresy within faith, and the faith within heresy” (64).

112 “dans cet immuable aujourd’hui qui, depuis des millénaires, est le nôtre” (II, 359)
typical of the heteronym tradition.

New devices of depersonalization are introduced in the last four books of *Le livre des questions*. Jabès turns increasingly to the fragmentation of words (most notably in the final book *El*) and proliferates short texts in varying genres that each function like the beginning of a new book. However, throughout *Le livre des questions* heteronymous voices are strongly present and any reading that ignores them would be a distortion.

Jabès’ central work, *Le livre des questions*, can be seen as fitting within the heteronymic tradition in three fundamental ways. It is throughout a polyvocal dialogic work where large parts of the text are given over to personae and characters with voices and stances distinct from Jabès’. As in Pessoa, fusions take place between previously unassociated poetic lineages—in Jabès’ case, between key movements within French poetry and Jewish traditions of Talmud and Kabbalah. Finally, David K. Jackson’s insight that heteronymous poetry is concerned with the subversion of genres, though only partially true of Pessoa, is a major component of Jabès’ project. Jabès’ concern to invent the nature of his book as he goes along is one of the recurrent tropes of the book:

[. . .] I dreamt of a work that would not fit into any category, which would not belong to any genre but would contain them all [. . .] a book in short that would only be given in fragments, each of which would be

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113 The distinct polyvocal nature of *Le livre des questions* can be seen if we contrast *Le livre des questions* with Pound’s *Cantos*. Pound’s method relies on collaging, inserting, juxtaposing fragments of others either quoted directly or paraphrased. As the assembler Pound never relinquishes control, deciding who to include, what excerpts from their works or poems to take, using them like snippets of raw material to construct his own canvas. As Nicholls notes, in *The Cantos* “a radical fragmentation of syntax belies the drive towards ideational coherence” (143). Paradoxically using the words of “real” others directly, as Pound does, creates a work ultimately univocal in the sense that it all conforms to its creator’s views and a mostly pre-existing range of styles. Kenneth Goldsmith, for example, compares Pound as assembler and collagist to Picasso. Though the component parts all come from elsewhere, there is a powerful sense of a synthesizing centre that chooses everything “with distinctive and carefully cultivated taste” (112-113). In contrast the imagined others of Jabès have much more a life of their own, an ability to disrupt and reject what Jabès might think or write purely from himself. It is hard to imagine Pound creating others within his work who would denounce him and his very project—yet Jabès does precisely that when he invents critics of himself both within *Le livre des questions* and in the various trial scenes in *Le livre des ressemblances*. The imagined others of *Le livre des questions* operate largely in defiance of any pre-existing aesthetic.
the beginning of a book.  

In the previous chapter it was noted how one aspect of the heteronym tradition as started by Pessoa was the move away from the stand-alone lyric poem to the creation of an assemblage of work where a heteronym’s body of poems, his biography, letters, the works of fellow poets within his coterie, all form a single ongoing project. Jabès’ *Le livre des questions* takes this tendency to an extreme. Although there are section titles and titles for individual books, Jabès’ seven-book *Le livre des questions* needs to be read as a single work. Titles like "La mort de Dieu" from *Yaël* or “Les commentaires” from *Aely* do not announce separate poems or chapters in a novel but rather already-polyvocal fragments to be read in dialogue with all the other fragments.

Marked by the Holocaust, *Le livre des questions* is tilted towards death, the void, non-being. As Gary Mole notes, “loss is the starting point for Jabès’ whole poetic enterprise from 1963 onwards” (11). Rejecting both poetry and the novel as inadequate for his post-Holocaust writing, Jabès turns to a multi-layered tradition of the Book, understood not as fixed revelation but as ongoing dialogue, as commentary on commentary and as perpetual openness. By its nature the Book is polyvocal. While Jabès seeks to distance his work from traditional (or experimental) literature, it is not traditional

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114 “[…] j’ai rêvé d’une œuvre qui n’entrerait dans aucune catégorie, qui n’appartiendrait à aucun genre mais qui les contiendrait tous […] un livre enfin qui ne se livrerait que par fragments dont chacun serait le commencement d’un livre.” (II, 343)

115 In a section in *Yaël* titled, as if in response to Proust, “La peur du temps” (“Fear of time”) Jabès comments on the kind of book he seeks to write and his reasons for rejecting the novel as a possible form (II, 49-56). Jabès cites the need for an “angoisse d’écrire . . . au temps d’écrire” – an anxiety to write, an agony in writing experienced at the time of writing, and that at the core of this agony or anxiety is a “going into oneself” or “going into the word” that requires finding “the void”, finding “absence”. He implies that this is not what happens in the novel “as it is generally understood” where storytelling and plot usurp inwardness. A simpler reason for Jabès’ rejection of the novel concerns his view that the elaboration required to build a novel is unnecessary and inappropriate in the case of the Shoah. He recounts his experience of a man telling him “My whole family was deported. Only my son and I escaped” and at once realising the whole story was in those words. “It is enough simply to tell the thing in order to reveal the whole drama,” Jabès comments (Interview with Paul Auster, Gould 18). Accordingly the narrative component, the Sarah-Yukel story, is an interrupted story, lacking the kind of detail or clarification associated with a novel. The story exists as if either waiting to be told or having already been told implicitly, forever becoming the pretext for the commentaries and questions that surround it. In conversation with Marcel Cohen, Jabès states that, in the context of the murder of six million men, women and children, “one needs only a few markers to recognize a path” (*From the Desert* 48).
Jewish exegesis either.\textsuperscript{116} In a passage in \textit{Elya} Jabès makes explicit the distance between his endeavour and traditional Judaism, though also underscoring its continuity as the most serious form of persistent questioning. He states that “no roll of parchment”, presumably Torah roll, contains any phrase of his, since he writes on “what is thinnest, least faithful” and also “what suits perfectly the words relieved from my death.”\textsuperscript{117} Shortly afterwards he writes:

This Judaism after God, which is mine, is the lake over which my questions hang like peaks, some of which remain inaccessible.\textsuperscript{118}

Later, also in \textit{Elya}, Jabès sums up the entire concern of his work as: “To write as if addressing God.” \textsuperscript{119} In \textit{Yaël} Jabès outlines his ideal for the writer:

To write the book is to join one’s voice to the virtual voice of the margins, is to listen to the signs swimming in the ink – like twenty-six blind fish – before being born for our sight, that is to say, before they die by being fixed in their last cry of love; then, as far as what matters most, I will have said what I had to say and what each page knew already; that’s why the form of the aphorism is the book’s deep expression, for it permits the margins to breathe, since it bears in itself the breathing of the book and expresses the universe at the same time.\textsuperscript{120}

Here Jabès’ reveals his desire for anonymity, for the greatest possible depersonalization, a longing to be the almost impersonal place where the universe inscribes itself rather than the individual poet giving voice to the

\textsuperscript{116} Marcel Cohen notes the paradox of using the word “literature” in connection with Jabès’ writing from \textit{Le livre des questions} onwards. It is a word he says he never heard Jabès use that betrays the aim of Jabès’ project – to get beyond literature (252-253).

\textsuperscript{117} The complete passage reads (italicised and in brackets in the original): “(\textit{Aucun rouleau de parchemin ne contient une phrase, reproduite à la main, de mon oeuvre. J’écris sur ce qu’il y a de plus mince, de moins fidèle et qui convient parfaitement aux mots allégés de ma mort.})” (II, 201)

\textsuperscript{118} “Ce judaïsme après Dieu, le mien, est le lac que surplombent mes interrogations, comme des crêtes dont quelques-unes restent inaccessibles.” (II, 201)

\textsuperscript{119} “Écrire, comme si l’on s’adressait à Dieu.” (Le livre des questions II, 217)

\textsuperscript{120} “Écrire le livre, c’est associer sa voix à celle, virtuelle, des marges, c’est écouter les signes nager dans l’encre – tels vingt-six poissons aveugles – avant de naître au regard, c’est-à-dire de mourir en se fixant dans leur dernier cri d’amour ; alors, dans l’essentiel, j’aurai dit ce que j’avais à dire et que chaque page savait déjà ; c’est pourquoi la forme aphoristique est l’expression profonde du livre, car elle permet aux marges de respirer, car elle porte en soi la respiration du livre et exprime l’univers en une fois.” (II, 55)
self. To achieve this anonymity, which is also to reach towards the depths he is seeking, multiple voices are crucial. These voices are not collage, for Jabès is not gathering what already exists. He is not cut-and-pasting any static, pre-given literary or scriptural "fragments to shore against" his or the world’s "ruin". Nor are the voices masks for the self or any repressed portions of the self - as, much of the time, Campos is a mask for aspects of Pessoa’s personality (though, admittedly, Caeiro is not that kind of a mask either). Rather the fictional voices summon what lies much further back, an attentiveness that seeks to channel an extreme alterity. To describe the imaginary rabbis - and such characters as Yaël, Ely or Aely - as quasi-heteronyms is to highlight their independence both from Jabès and from any pre-existing texts.

The connection between Jabès’ vision of “the book” (and so of writing) and Jewish tradition – rather than purely modernist, post-modernist or other literary models – can be seen in several ways. Both Le livre des questions and the Talmud are polyvocal, dialogic open texts with no single viewpoint or all-controlling author but instead a vast array of authors – in Jabès multiple fictive authors, in the Talmud multiple real authors. Most fundamental is the absolute commitment Jabès brings to the book and his sense that it must try to answer to an impossible standard. In a speech to the Foundation for French Judaism included in Le livre des marges, Jabès links his writing to that of the Talmudist or Kabbalist. Speaking of them he writes, “Both have the same thirst to learn, to know, to decipher their fate engraved in each letter from which God has withdrawn. And what does it matter if their truth differs. It is the truth of their being. It is the truth of their language” and “The roads of the book are roads of instinct, of listening, of attention, of reserve, of daring, mapped out by words, sustained by questions. Roads of openness.” What Jabès sees as the stance of the Kabbalist or Talmudist, commenting, questioning, continuing an always-open dialogue, he identifies as the nature

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121 T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land (line 430) "These fragments I have shored against my ruin" (Eliot 75). Pierre Joris likewise suggests that collage, with its static nature, as used in Pound’s Cantos and in Eliot’s The Waste Land, may be inadequate for 21st-century poetry (A Nomad Poetics 5, 25, 38).

122 “Tous deux ont même soif d’apprendre, de connaître, de décrypter leur destin gravé dans chaque lettre où Dieu s’est retiré”; “Les voies du livre sont voies d’instinct, d’écoute, d’attente, de réserve, d’audace, tracées par le vocable, soutenues par la question. Chemins d’ouverture.” (Le livre des marges 181, 183)
of his own book. Notions of the book “breathing” and of the book containing several books are commonplaces within Talmudic and Kabbalistic traditions, in part as Hebrew contains only consonants to which the reader adds the vowels in the act of reading, hence breathing the book into life. At the same time each group of consonants could be combined with different vowels, giving rise to alternate “books”. Derrida in “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” goes so far as to say that the entire “thematic structure” of Le livre des questions comes from the Kabbalah: “Negativity in God, exile as writing, the life of the letter are all already in the Cabala” (91). Likewise in the last four books of Le livre des questions Jabès frequently employs the mode of reading known as Tsérouf – the practice of reading for the words contained within the words of scripture (Cahen 135-136). Thus the titles of the last four books: Yaël, Elya, Aely and El: are connected by the principle of Tsérouf. More generally, in the last four books Jabès treats the French language as talmudists and students of Kabbalah had traditionally treated Hebrew, for example, connecting such words as “L’un” and “Nul” (II, 521), “fin” and

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123 Jabès’ various mentions of “an absent God”, “a God who has withdrawn”, “God in his absence”, might seem to place him in the context of the tradition of negative theology. However, negative theology, for all its complex and varied strains (Frank, 10 – 27), is itself a product of that fusion between Greek philosophy and early Christianity that generated the God of reason, the first mover, original cause, a principle both aetiological and moral behind the Universe and reached by reason. Jabès seems to belong much more to those like Shestov and Levinas who oppose the relational God, a process of ongoing revelation known through Torah and Talmud, to the fixed God of reason who, since he can be reached through reasoning, does not really need the burning bush, Mount Sinai and all the personal encounters that form Jewish scripture. For Jabès, as for Levinas or Shestov, the Book is the “nourishing terrain” that calls us towards an infinite dialogue (Levinas “Revelation”, 210). It may well be that for Jabès the notion of the Book, a summons to enter into dialogue, the intuition of an incompletable task to make sense, is more fundamental than the notion of God who is there as a presence, a voice within the Book. It might also be that Jabès believes in the Book but withhold, or brackets, belief in God. Levinas reflects on such a paradoxical belief in Torah accompanied by disbelief in God in his essay “Loving the Torah more than God” (Difficult Freedom, 142-145). Handelman links Jabès, Shestov and Levinas, commenting that in all three “One does not attempt to transcend the realm of language to a vision of being, but rather probes the inner world of the word to find the key to reality. The movement, therefore [...]. ] not to theophany, but to textuality” (88). (72 and 73)

124 One of many examples of the inclusion of Talmudic or Kabbalistic material concerns the several references across Jabès’ work to the question of what was on the tablets that Moses broke. One example is the following passage: “Et Reb Lima : « La liberté fut, à l’origine, gravée dix fois dans les tables de la Loi, mais nous la méritons si peu que le Prophète les brisa dans sa colère. »” (“And Reb Lima: “Freedom was, originally, engraved ten times in the tablets of the Law, but we deserved it so little the Prophet broke them in his anger”) (I, 128). Myriam Laifer cites various passages in Le livre des questions where Jabès references the idea of God as a totality split in two between presence and absence, light and shadow, black writing and white space, as being Kabbalistic in origin (99-102).

125 Gabriel Bounoure connects Jabès’ turn to letters as “signs endowed with a strange creative fertility” (“signes doués d’une étrange fécondité créatrice”) to his experience of the desert where letters carved on stones survive from antiquity, suggesting that his experimentation with words might have more to do with Middle Eastern than Western traditions (29-30).
“faim” (II, 465) or “poisson”, “son” and “poison” (II, 531) to explore what these interrelationships suggest. There are also antecedents for this practice within the tradition of French surrealism, as for example Michel Leiris’ *Glossaire j’y serre mes gloses*. Thus Jabès could be seen as working with a largely unexplored area of confluence between surrealist practice and tradition Jewish exegetical scholarship. Such “fusions” between previously unrelated traditions (or lineages) are, as I have argued, one of the strengths of the heteronym tradition.

For Jabès, the transition from poetry (“la poésie”) to “writing” (“l’écriture”), corresponding to the shift from his pre-exilic poetry gathered in *Je bâtis ma demeure* (1957) to the construction of “the book” in *Le livre des questions* (1963-1973), carries several inter-related implications. 20th-century French poetry traces its lineage to Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé and, despite the disruptions of the surrealists, there is a powerful sense of continuity around such often unstated aims as beauty and conciseness. Thematic content and poetic vocabulary tend to narrow. Arguably, there is a strongly inward turn in much 20th-century French poetry, a sense that poetry’s ultimate aim is poetry. In large measure, even the early 20th-century avant-gardes, such as

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126 Helena Shillony also describes Jabès as treating French as if it was the Hebrew of his ancestors (“Jabès traite le texte français comme s’il était écrit dans l’hébreu ancestral . .”) – an intrinsically perilous procedure that she sees Jabès as making credible through the force of his poetic craft (4).

127 There has also been a French academic tradition, as exemplified by Derrida, Levinas and Lévi-Strauss among others, that treats French much as Tsérouf treats Hebrew, seeing in the words buried within words, verbal echoes and word play in general a legitimate procedure for unearthing truth. Much of this work was written around the same time as Jabès’ *Le livre des questions* or later, whilst surrealism had dominated in the 1920s and 30s. It is probably anachronistic to see Jabès’ post-exilic project as being devised in response to post-modernist theory. The first three volumes of *Le livre des questions*, for example, were published before Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*.

128 Shillony uses the metaphor of a graft (“une greffe”) between the Hebrew of Talmud and Torah and the French of surrealist poetry to characterize Jabès’ work (4). Paul Auster, in similar vein, summarises Jabès’ work as follows: “What Jabès has done is to fuse this tradition [the French poetic tradition going back to Mallarmé] with a certain type of Jewish discourse, and he has done so with such conviction that the marriage between the two is almost imperceptible” (in Gould, 8). Kaplan also sees Jabès’ work as a “unique combination of Talmudic and post-modern discourse” (“The Problematic Humanism”, 116). Although Kaplan highlights the post-modern aspect of Jabès’ work rather than its connections to French poetry, he still places the emphasis on fusion or combination and on the importance of Talmudic elements.

129 This narrowing of thematic content and vocabulary is already evident in a comparison of Mallarmé with his predecessors Baudelaire and Rimbaud.

130 A rebellion against this type of self-centredness or self-absorption within poetry can also be seen in Henri Michaux and Francis Ponge. For Raymond Bellour, Michaux can be seen as
Dadaism and Surrealism, despite their political rhetoric, in practice tended to close poetry down even more into self-absorption. In the 1924 Manifesto of Surrealism, for example, Breton’s demarcation of poetry from prose in terms of what is "worthy" of poetry and what is "unworthy" risks excluding vast portions of life. The rejection of "description" and of "the empty moments of life" risks unduly limiting poetry, closing it in on itself. Jabès writes in "Portes de Secours", originally published in *Les mots tracent 1945-1951*. Yet there come times when, whether at the social or personal level, self-enclosed poetry no longer feels adequate.

Jabès may also have felt it necessary to differentiate his style of word play from that of the surrealists, exemplified in Leiris’ *Glossaire j’y serre mes gloses*. Clever and frequently illuminating as Leiris’ experiments are, they might be seen as remaining all too often at the level of game playing. The humorous side of Leiris’ pseudo-definitions is apparent in such examples as “académie : macadam pour les mites” (“academy: macadam for mites”) (43), “ambigu : entre l’ambre et le ciguë” (“ambiguous: between amber and...”)

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131 Discussing a passage from Dostoyevski describing a room, Breton writes, “I refuse to go into his room. Others’ laziness or fatigue does not interest me... I am only saying that I do not take particular note of the empty moments of my life, that it may be unworthy for any man to crystallize those which seem to him to be so” (8). The condescension of Breton towards the novel is captured in his remark “only the marvellous is capable of fecundating works which belong to an inferior category such as the novel, and generally speaking, anything that involves storytelling” (14). The danger is that by relying heavily on binary oppositions, such as reason/emotion, logic/the marvellous, prose/poetry, Breton limits the freedom and scope of poetry and risks confining it to a small portion of reality presumed worthy of aestheticization. Philippe Forest points out that Breton’s position defending the “purity” of poetry against the “inferiority” of the novel Ironically marks a profound continuity with the Symbolists and other tendencies in fin-de-siècle French literature (136).

132 “La poésie n’a qu’un amour : La poésie.” (Jabès Le Seuil le Sable, 165).

133 *Glossaire j’y serre mes gloses* was published in revised and expanded editions from 1925 till Leiris’ death in 1992.
hemlock") (44) or "antinomie : la tentation homicide qui tyrannise les amants" ("antinomie : the homicidal temptation that tyrannizes lovers") (45). Leiris privileges the subjective and individual, as indicated by his comments in the 1926 edition of La Révolution surréaliste where selections from Glossaire j’y serre mes gloses appeared. "The true meaning of a word", Leiris writes, "is the individual, personal meaning each person assigns to it himself" and, though "language is transformed into an oracle", it happens "in the Babel of our mind" (10).134 Tsérouf involved the teasing out of highly significant secondary meanings or threads within a tradition held to be sacred. The authority for seeing the different layers of meaning, the words hidden within words, came from tradition, not from an inner Babel of the mind. It is not surprising that Jabès should seek to distance his word play from the word play of the surrealists.135 However, writing in French, Jabès cannot claim the traditional authority of Tsérouf in Hebrew. There is often a fancifulness to his wordplays with their sound echoes and puns that recalls surrealism. The following is a typical example:


I read laughs in the abyss of cries, he said again. Cries and laughs – of children? of adults? – intersect in our writings.136

Surrealist practice is perhaps particularly evident in the reiterated, criss-crossing wordplay, both visual and aural, of the following passage later in El. The near identity in sound of “Dieu” (“God”) and “d’yeux” (“of eyes”), the visual and sound resemblance of “Cieux” (“heavens” or “skies”) and “Dieu” or its potential plural “Dieux”, the similarity of “vide” (“empty”) and “vie” (“life”) form the basis for a transformative series.

134 “ [. . . ] le sens véritable d’un mot, c’est-à-dire la signification particulière, personelle, que chacun se doit de lui assigner, selon le bon plaisir de son esprit [ . . . ] Alors le langage se transforme en oracle et nous avons là (si tenu qu’il soit) un fil pour nous guider, dans le Babel de notre esprit” (Leiris Glossaire, 10).

135 The book of Jabès that Max Jacob tore up in the 1930s as unworthy of Jabès’ potential was a collection of “calembours” (“puns”, “wordgames”) (Jabès Du désert 136).

136 Le livre des questions II, 532
Dieu = Vide = Vie d’yeux.
Il disait : « Dieu est vide du vide. Dieu est vie du vide. Il est vide d’une vie d’yeux. La mort est l’œil du deuil. »

Cieux, mot pluriel composé d’yeux et de ciel.

Dieu est également dans le mot Cieux, comme un unique silence – D, dans le miroir de la page, se transformant en C au premier frottement de la gomme.

Cieux, pluriel silencieux de Dieu.137

It is not surprising, given the highly-charged religious and ethical material Jabès deals with, that he should wish to distance himself from the game playing of pre-war surrealism. And yet resemblances are there, so that the approach to writing he is developing here does seem best understood as a “fusion” of Jewish traditions and surrealism, as Shillony contends.138

In his post-exilic work Jabès explicitly claims the lineage of “the Book”, meaning Torah, Talmud and Kabbalah. Yet Jabès is someone identifying as non-religious with a profoundly unorthodox approach to God and the Book, and the placing of his work within that lineage is highly problematic, as he is extremely aware. The various trial scenes that close each of the three books in Le livre des ressemblances testify to Jabès’ acceptance of the problematic nature of his endeavour. The trial scenes, especially “Le procès”, dramatize the ambiguity of Jabès’ undertaking and his awareness that his reading of Judaism will offend some (143-147). Implicitly he identifies Judaism after the Holocaust neither with the maintenance of rituals and practices nor with the return to the land of Israel but with the Book, with “l’écriture”, the millennial

137 (II, 542) “God = Emptiness = Life of eyes. He said: ‘God is empty of emptiness. God is emptiness’ life. He is empty of a life of eyes. Death is the eye of mourning.’ // Skies, plural word made of eyes and sky. // God is equally in the word Skies (Heaven), as a unique silence – D, in the mirror of the page, transforming into C at the first scratch of the eraser. // Skies (Heaven), silent plural of God.”

138 Shillony sees Jabès as belonging to both a Jewish and a Surrealist lineage in his obsession with the letters and sounds that make up words and the habit of seeking meaning in their arrangements and rearrangements (21).
tradition of dialogue and questioning.\textsuperscript{139} On the other hand, while Jabès’ conception of Judaism is unorthodox, a reading of Gershom Scholem would suggest it has close parallels in Kabbalistic thinking and connects to powerful traditions within Judaism.\textsuperscript{140}

The significance of the development of multiple voices or heteronyms for Jabès can be seen if we examine the shift between his pre-exilic poetry of the 1950s\textsuperscript{141} and \textit{Le livre des questions}. The most dramatic innovation concerns the invention of the rabbis and the inclusion of Sarah, Yukel and their story, accompanied by a profound transformation in Jabès’ view of himself as a writer.\textsuperscript{142} This transformation is marked by a shift in vocabulary. In \textit{Du blanc des mots et du noir des signes} (1953-1956)\textsuperscript{143}, for example, the words “le poème”, “le poète”, “les mots” occur repeatedly, frequently as the subject of aphorisms, while rarely (or never) does one find the key words of Jabès’ later work: “l’écrivain”, “les vocables”\textsuperscript{144}, “le livre”, “le Juif”, “Dieu”, “le vide”, “le

\textsuperscript{139} Shmuel Trigano and Henri Meshonnic have attacked Jabès for reducing Judaism to an aesthetic posture where “rabbis go round in circles in a bourgeois sitting room” (Trigano quoted in Mole, 64). As Gary Mole argues, much of this criticism misses the distance Jabès acknowledges between his own Judaism and traditional Judaism (65). It also misses the very specific meaning Jabès gives to “l’écriture” and “l’écrivain” (as opposed to “poésie” or “le romancier”), a meaning that connects writing and the Book to the broader traditions of Judaism.

\textsuperscript{140} Among the several ideas to be found in Jabès that can also be found referenced in Gershom Scholem are that “the pre-existent Torah was written in black fire on white fire” (Scholem 48), that the true book is “hidden in white light” (Scholem 49), and that the Book includes not only the written Book but the oral Torah which is “the sum total of everything that has been said by scholars or sages in explanation of this written corpus, by the Talmudic commentators on the Law and all others who have interpreted the text” (Scholem 47), making the Book in principle infinite. Likewise the Book is conceived of as the “names of God” capable of being read in different ways (Scholem 38). There is also the tradition that Moses’ original tablets contained 600,000 letters, capable of being read and assembled in 600,000 ways (Scholem 64-65). Accordingly Jabès’ apparent post-modernism is best seen as, in his words, a “return to the book”.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{141} Jabès pre-exilic poetry, along with three later collections of poetry, is gathered in the volume \textit{Le seuil le sable}. Page numbers refer to this work.

\textsuperscript{142} It might be thought that the use of the aphorism is another major innovation but in fact its importance to Jabès pre-dates his post-exilic writing. The aphorism is already a dominant form in poems like “Érigées sur nos fables”, “Les danseurs et les cimes” or “Les rames et les voiles” from \textit{Du Blanc des mots et du noir des signes} (1953-1956) or “Les clés de la ville” from \textit{L’Écorce du monde} (1953-1954), itself dedicated to René Char, a master of the aphorism.

\textsuperscript{143} Jabès, \textit{Le seuil}, 279-310.

\textsuperscript{144} Jabès uses this archaic word to draw attention to the auditory quality of words as used in a book: “The book’s speech, \textit{that speech of silence}, I have called it vocable” (“La parole du livre, \textit{cette parole du silence}, je l’ai appelée vocable”) (cited in Shillony, 12, Jabès’ italics). Jabès also links this word to the experience of nomads in the desert who listen with such attention to hear sounds that emerge only much later, using “vocable” to differentiate words as they function in a book, where they require deep listening, from words in everyday discourse.
néant”, “le désert”. In one aphorism where poet and writer are contrasted it is to place the writer at a lower level: “To protect it the writer stretches below the word the net that the poet rejects.” Elsewhere the value of poetry as freedom is stated in terms reminiscent of the surrealists: “The word’s freedom is measured by the poem’s freedom. Just as the dancer by the dance which writes him.”

Although there is the occasional aphorism similar in style and tone to what Jabès will write in *Le livre des questions* (for example, “The word carries in itself the book, just as man carries in himself the universe”), there is a strong presence of pre-war surrealism where the predominant concern of poetry is poetry itself. “Je vous écris d’un pays pesant” from *L’Écorce du monde*, for example, seeks to articulate the new-found heaviness of the world, perhaps of Egypt for a French-speaking Jew after the Second World War, yet the addressee of the emotions, the “heavy country” of the title (“pays pesant”), and indeed the whole world beyond the self, never quite become real, as witnessed in the closing lines:

I owe to words the joy and the tears of my schoolboy exercise books, of my adult notebooks.

And also my solitude.

I owe to words my anxiety. I force myself to answer their questions which are my burning interrogations.

Up to the mid-1950s, Jabès’ poetic rhetoric tended in part to aestheticize experience, dressing it up, like “the linen robe of exodus” in “Les clés de la...”

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145 “Pour le protéger, l’écrivain tend, sous le mot, le filet que le poète le refuse” ("Le sel noir", Le seuil, 192)
146 “La liberté du mot se mesure à la liberté du poème. Ainsi le danseur à la danse qui l’écrit.” ("Le danseur et les cimes", Le seuil, 300)
147 “Le mot porte en soi le livre, comme l’homme l’univers” (Le seuil, 304).
148 “Je dois aux mots la joie et les larmes de mes cahiers d’Écolier, de mes carnets d’adulte. Et aussi ma solitude. Je dois aux mots mon inquiétude. Je m’efforce de répondre à leurs questions qui sont mes brûlantes interrogations.” (Le seuil, 204)
ville”¹⁴⁹, in a way that sits uncomfortably with the very real fate of those fleeing the Holocaust or, like Jabès’ own family, going into exile. The turn to fictive voices, personae that function strongly like heteronyms, the most obvious innovation in his post-exilic work, offered Jabès a way out of what he had come to perceive as an aesthetic dead-end, making possible his main achievement as a writer, *Le livre des questions.*¹⁵⁰

One other parallel between Jabès’ work and that of Pessoa’s concerns the paradoxical way in which heteronyms can encourage the inclusion of personal material. Thus in *Le livre des questions* the reader learns of the death of Jabès’ sister¹⁵¹, of his life in Egypt and exile from there¹⁵², of his father’s error in recording his date of birth¹⁵³, of his experience of seeing anti-semitic graffiti on his first night in exile in Paris¹⁵⁴, and of his method of writing the short texts that make up *Le livre des questions* while traveling to and from work in the Metro.¹⁵⁵ There is far more of Jabès in his “depersonalized” or “anonymous” *Le livre des questions* than there ever was in the poetry written in his own voice before his exile from Egypt in 1956. For many writers, I have argued, the degree of protection and the stimulus offered by fictive voices facilitate the inclusion of personal material. Thus the sense of freedom to create inspired by fictive voices can enable a writer to bring into the open difficult material and to move back and forth without self-consciousness from

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¹⁴⁹ “Je te regardais comme si tu tissais sur toi la robe de lin d’exode que j’allais déchirer, sitôt terminée. Tu le compris et pour faciliter à mes mains leur tâche, tu t’appliquas à les enivrer. De quel fils fut tissé ce vêtement? Le désir des hommes, le rire du démon, la chevelure changeante du jour, tu ne négligeas aucune arme pour en faire la plus redoubtable des parures.” ("I looked at you as if you were weaving above you the linen robe of exodus that I was going to rip up, as soon as it was finished. You understood this and to make the task easier for my hands you set about making them intoxicated.

Of what threads was this clothing spun? The desire of men, the demon’s laughter, the day’s changing hair, you neglected no weapon to make it the most formidable of adornments.") (*Le seuil*, 245) For me the language of this passage with its Mallarméan echoes (“tisser”, “déchirais”, “enivrer”, “chevelure”, “parure”) sets up a severe disconnect from the 20th century realities prompted by the word “exode”.

¹⁵⁰ Apart from being based on a sample (by no means all) of Jabès’ early poems, support for this view of Jabès’ pre-exilic poetry comes especially from Jabès’ own *Du désert au livre*.

¹⁵¹ I, 191 (very briefly), 343; more indirectly (in Yukel’s voice) I, 283.

¹⁵² for example I, 353; II, 40-41

¹⁵³ II, 254-255

¹⁵⁴ I, 53-57

¹⁵⁵ II, 352
invented to factual material. 156

Juan Gelman and *Los poemas de Sidney West*

A different set of issues is raised by the heteronymous work of Argentine poet, Juan Gelman. Gelman used heteronyms extensively in his poetry, ranging from *Los poemas de Sidney West* (1969)157 and poems by John Wendell and Yamanokuchi Ando158 to fictional Argentine poets José Galvan and Julio Grecco included in *Hacia el sur* (1982). 159 Apart from Galvan’s and Grecco’s poems, Gelman presents his heteronymous poems as “translations”. 160 Gelman’s style in both the West and Wendell poems is inflected at times by a deliberate clumsiness, a kind of “translationese”, and exploits surreal effects, as well as irony, parody and humour in ways quite unlike his poetry either before or after this period of heteronymous experimentation. Unlike Jabès, Gelman turned to heteronyms only temporarily, returning later to an unironic, direct style. 161 I will focus on *Los poemas de Sidney West*, the longest and arguably most successful of Gelman’s heteronymous works.

*Los poemas de Sidney West*, a supposed translation of North American poet, Sidney West, is modeled on Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* of 1915, a book that has been immensely popular in Latin America and in Italy long

156 In a similar vein in a study of modernist fragmentation in poetry and the current practice of creating fictional on-line identities Meghan Nolan argues that both practices can be seen as offering ways to avoid or side-step identity traps that would block or paralyze the writer. Antonieta Villanueva as a heteronym in *Ghostspeaking* operates in this way, facilitating the inclusion of much personal material from my childhood, adolescence and later adult life that I had previously found no way to explore.


158 Gelman *Poesía reunida*, 212-236 and 250-263.

159 Gelman *Poesía reunida*, 545-572 and 573-603.

160 Galvan and Grecco represent a different type of heteronym compared to West, Wendell and the other heteronyms examined in this exegesis. They operate as fictional personae that enabled Gelman in exile to write of the experiences of those carrying on the political struggle within Argentina. Stylistically the poetry in their names does not differ from Gelman’s autonomic poetry. They exemplify one strand within the heteronym tradition – the use of heteronyms to cross barriers of gender, social class or other major divides, without engaging with poetry outside one’s own language and culture. In this they resemble the heteronymous work of José Manuel Poveda and Álvaro Mutis, both of whom used heteronyms to write across gender or social-class barriers but not particularly to experiment stylistically or to explore poetries outside Spanish.

161 His later work includes experiments with intertextuality, such as *Citas y comentarios* (1982) and *Dibaxu* (1995), but irony and humour are not significant in these works.
after it dropped out of the mainstream of “serious” high-brow North American poetry. Both books are set in a small town cemetery somewhere in the American Midwest. Each poem details the fate of one of the town’s former inhabitants now resting in the cemetery on the hill. While in Master’s book each poem is in the voice of the dead individual, Gelman writes in the voice of the poet Sidney West, an inhabitant of the town, Melody Springs. Gelman’s choice of third-person narration, writing about the dead townspeople from the outside, enables a profound shift. Spoon River Anthology presents speakers who are highly conventional in language and social-political vision, embodying a very North American individualist world-view. Suffering, fate, individual lives are all the result of personal choices. Evil is purely individual. Many people are cruel to others but there is no sense of any systemic, ultimately political, dimension to their fates. Even John M. Church, the lawyer for a mining corporation who has pulled strings “to beat the claims/Of the crippled, the widow and orphan” is little more than a caricature villain (Masters 76). In contrast, from the start of his book Gelman introduces a systemic political level so that the tragedy concerns society and is not merely a matter of individual choices. In place of Masters’ realism, Gelman substitutes a surreal approach that delivers its own chilling sense of horror. Irony and humour are also present. While Masters’ vignettes all too often reduce human lives to rather sentimental formulae, Gelman adopts an almost objective, external voice that forces the reader to “work” far more. The result is an intensified sense of horror and a disturbing complexity that, at least for me, reaches more deeply into the systemic nature of evil than the purely personal sadness of Spoon River Anthology.

Gelman is generally grouped with Ernesto Cardenal, Roque Dalton and Mario Benedetti as creating a popular, politicized poetry that avoids both the rhetorical excesses of Pablo Neruda and the hermeticism of Octavio Paz. Los  

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162 One example of its impact in Italy is the case of Cesare Pavese who wrote an essay on Masters’ book in the 1930s and whose own Lavorare Stanca (1936), with its focus on “everyday people” and its narratival structure, recalls aspects of Spoon River Anthology.

163 Genovese also notes the shift from the first person in Masters to the third person in Gelman, seeing it as one more distancing technique adding to the reader’s estrangement (20-21).

164 Gomes links these poets, as well as others such as Nicanor Parra (all of whom began their poetic careers in the mid 1950s), as rejecting Neruda’s “hegemony” and his tendency towards the “epic” and the “rhetorical”, privileging instead “clarity”, “the everyday”, “the emotional”
poemas de Sidney West was written in the years 1968-1969 during a period of great upheaval and violence in Argentina but before the military coup of 1976 and the full terror of the dirty war. Arguably the confusing, constantly shifting situation Gelman faced encouraged reflection and a certain distance. Miguel Gomes argues that Bertolt Brecht and his theory of the Verfremdungseffekt had a major influence on Gelman, shaping distinctive features of his style and influencing his overall strategy as a poet. In an article published in Benedetti’s Los poetas comunicantes (1972) Gelman cites Brecht when explaining his turn to heteronyms (first the Englishman John Wendell, then the American Sidney West) in order to “estrange himself” from a poetry that was becoming too narrowly “personal”. For Brecht a sentimental, individual-focused emphasis in drama and poetry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries undermined literature’s capacity to generate a wider understanding of how social-political processes shape individuals. In place of what he saw as a literature of instant emotion, Brecht advocated the deliberate “alienation” (Verfremdung) of reader or audience by blocking any too easy identification with the individual characters of a play or poem. In Mother Courage and Her Children, for example, Brecht deliberately thwarts our desire to empathize with the central character as a victim of war,
portraying her more as a businesswoman who participates in the system that destroys her own family. The choice of a historically distant setting, the Thirty Years War, the consistency with which Mother Courage, for all her moving grief at the play’s end, places immediate business interests ahead of guarding her family, and the constant interruption of the play’s action by songs, all serve to complicate the audience’s response to what might have been a straight-forward story of the sufferings of ordinary people in war. In a similar way, Gelman’s choice of a remote geographic location (the American Midwest)\textsuperscript{168}, the strange names of individuals, the address to body-parts, birds, trees, rather than people themselves, the inclusion of parody and humour, all serve to complicate and distance our response. In Gelman’s collection of poems, as in Brecht’s play, the audience or reader is being invited to step back and reflect rather than indulge in ready-made emotions. In both cases, systemic relationships rather than individual victim-narratives are the focus of the work.

Disruption and alienation can be seen on several levels in Gelman’s “translations” of laments for the dead of Melody Springs. The device of the heteronym itself creates a playful, distancing effect. The bizarre nature of the lives and deaths recorded, the choice of implausible names and eccentric titles for poems\textsuperscript{169}, the absence of punctuation, the inclusion of invented words and the occasional borrowing of lines or phrases from such poets as César Vallejo and Federico Garcia Lorca, all serve to remind the reader of the status of what they are reading as invention. Surrealism seems as strong an influence as Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt. The proliferation of creatures that become more “alive” than their owners, including toads, birds, plum trees, turtle doves and wallflowers, the independent status given to people’s hands, eyes, guts, feet, all fit within the estranging tradition of surrealism. Likewise the poems contain surreal metamorphoses, including the splitting of an individual into two beings corresponding to his two names (“lamento por el vuelo de bob

\textsuperscript{168} remote for an Argentine audience – for an Australian reader, like myself, the American mid-west is probably less remote or “exotic” than Argentina.

\textsuperscript{169} for example “Lamento por la muerte de Parsifal Hoolig” (“Lament for the death of Parsifal Hoolig”), “Lamento por la tórtola de Butch Butchanam” (“Lament for Butch Butchanam’s turtledove”), “Lamento por los alelíes de Ost Maloney” (“Lament for Ost Maloney’s wallflowers”), “Lamento por los pies de Andrew Sinclair” (“Lament for the feet of Andrew Sinclair”), “Lamento por la tripa de Helen Carmody” (“Lament for the intestines of Helen Carmody”) (Gelman Poesía reunida: 97, 102, 114, 116, 122).
chambers”) (Poesía reunida, 119-120). Surreal horror is strongly present, as when a mother sees her seven children beheaded on the rooftop in “lamento por el pelo de bright morgan” (123-124). Paradoxically, Gelman’s laments for the dead of Melody Springs are both more and less “realistic” than Masters’ elegies in Spoon River Anthology. References across the poems to such real places as Carville in Louisiana, Toledo and Cincinnati in Ohio, Chicago, Dakota, Alabama or Santa Monica, give a feel of factuality, as does the occasional precise date.\footnote{Within the poems Gelman capitalizes the first letters of place names (“Dakota”, “Alabama” etc) but uses only lower case for people’s names (“cab calloway”, “johnny petsum” etc) as if to mark the gap between the reality of his places and the fanciful fiction of his people.} In “lamento por el pájaro de chester carmichael” we are told that Carmichael died in the autumn of 1962 (103). The surreal elements contrast sharply with the elements of realism. As readers we are both anchored in an imagined North American reality and placed outside it.

The opening poem of Los poemas de Sidney West, “lamento por la muerte de parsifal hoolig”, establishes the style and tone of the collection (97-98).\footnote{The mixing of registers in the opening stanzas of this first poem from formal to colloquial, from the language of the social sciences to the linguistically bizarre, also helps develop an ironic distance, as Genovese analyses (21).} In the first line the note of surrealism is sounded: “it began to rain cows” (“empezó a llover vacas”). Several references in the poem act to downplay Parsifal Hoolig as a stand-alone character and instead set him in a wider US political context. We are told, for example, that Hoolig’s loss of his “scrambled” (“revueltas”) hips “tossed into” or “thrown into” (“tiradas”) the street is connected to “the events in Chicago” (“los sucesos de Chicago”). The mention of Chicago suggests that Hoolig’s fate is part of a wider socio-political framework. It may be over-interpreting to read Gelman’s reference to “the events in Chicago” as referring to the August 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and the accompanying police violence but the date of publication (1969) certainly make this possible. Later in the poem references to the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune add to the sense of realism, yet the first name Gelman gives his non-hero (Parsifal) is itself humorous and ironic in its Wagnerian and Arthurian overtones. The surname, two letters short of “hooligan” and otherwise oddly Germanic, compounds the humour. The close of the poem rejects sadness as a response since this is simply
“exactly what happened” (“exactamente lo que pasó”), as Gelman notes in deliberately flat language. Being found dead in the street, one’s hips “disordered” (“desordenados”) by “the events in Chicago”, being soaked by rain, left in the street to be gathered by “a municipal garbage truck” (“un camión del servicio municipal”) is simply something to be accepted as “what happens.” Gelman’s rejection of sadness is a call to look deeper – to the nature of capitalism, to the socio-political roots of evil.

“Lamento por la muerte de parsifal hoolig” sounds a note that continues throughout the collection: the passivity of Melody Spring’s anti-heroes in the face of extraordinary violence. Hoolig “preserved his custom of not protesting” (“conservó la costumbre de no protestar”), “he was courageously deceased” (“fue un difunto valiente”), “he did not complain” (“no se quejó”) despite his extraordinary death and the system’s treatment of him as merely something to be cleaned up. The second poem in the book, “lamento por el arbolito de philip”, repeats both the idea that sadness as a response is to be avoided and the anti-hero’s lifelong inability to protest or rebel in any open way (99-100). Philip offers his small shows of rebellion behind others’ backs only to receive tokens of mourning after his death from those same individuals and institutions, likewise “behind his back”. Helen Carmody (“lamento por la tripa de helen carmody”) “knows nothing nothing/ but how to be silent and unmake herself like/ her father’s voice at the set table” (122-123). Repeatedly Gelman creates the image of lives stunted by internalized repression.

Several of the characters are portrayed as living in the deepest isolation, itself an extension of silence and passivity. Stanley Hook, alone in his room with the toad he loved more than anything, “dies”, presumably suicides, after slashing the walls of his room as if to mirror self-mutilation (104-106). Before his death he addresses the toad in a language charged with romanticism, using words typical of love poetry, such as “roses” and “twilight”, and alluding to Sappho (“that woman of Lesbos” / “esa mujer de Lesbos”). There is a humorous excess in Gelman’s language that delivers both satire and

172 “no sabe nada nada/ sino callar y deshacerse como/ la voz del padre en mesa puesta.” (123)
tenderness. As Hook sings his love and extols the beauty of his toad he touches his throat “as if scratching the twilight that entered and came forward and turned his chest grey.” The comic elements in Hook’s love for his toad resonate against the emotional poverty in the community around him. Gelman lifts us beyond any purely ironic reading of Hook as the misplaced romantic poet by crossing to the loveless, untalking family in the floor below with their “enormous sadness” (“qué bárbara tristeza”). “Lamento por el sapo de stanley hook” exemplifies the power of Gelman’s writing in this book. Strangeness, dislocation, a bizarreness that still resonates with reality, simplicity of diction, and understatement can all be seen here, as captured in the poem’s closing lines:

that night Stanley hook died of course
before that he slashed terribly at the walls of his room in
representation of himself
while the toad only the toad all of the toad
continued with Thursday

all this is true:
some live as if they were immortal
others look after themselves as if they were worth the trouble
and Stanley hook’s toad stayed on alone

The choice of Thursday as the day when Stanley Hook dies and the reiteration of that fact could well be seen as an allusion to Vallejo’s famous poem “Piedra negra sobre piedra blanca” where Vallejo insists he will die on a Thursday. (Gelman also refers to this poem explicitly in “Lament for the wallflowers of ost maloney”. Part of Gelman’s achievement lies in the transitions between irony towards Hook as the extravagant embodiment of the suffering romantic poet and a tone of genuine sadness towards the world surrounding his

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173 “como raspándose el crepúsculo que entraba y avanzaba y le ponía el pecho gris” (105)
174 “esa noche naturalmente stanley hook se murrió/ antes dio terribles puñetazos a las paredes de su cuarto en representación de sí mismo/mientras el sapo sólo el sapo todo el sapo/seguió con el jueves
todo esto es verdad:/ hay quien vive como si fuera inmortal/otros se cuidan como si valieran la pena/y el sapo de stanley hook se quedó solo” (Poesía reunida 105-106)
175 Genovese makes this suggestion, citing also the repeated allusions to Vallejo across Gelman’s poetry (21).
Gelman’s style in this collection has a restless quality that disrupts easy reading. The absence of punctuation or (for the most part) capital letters, combined with clipped grammatical structures and a disparate mix of formal and colloquial registers, all highlight the disruptive nature of the work. In contrast to the vignettes of *Spoon River Anthology* with their highly conventional language, Gelman chooses brief, wildly implausible stories presented in surreal mode but embedded within the codes of real time and place. There is an insistence throughout that sadness as a response is not enough since systemic factors produce and then “normalize” the blighting of individual lives. Gelman’s experiment in *Los poemas de Sidney West* is to combine the American “realist” tradition of interconnected laments for the dead of a small town with Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* and surrealism to create a multiple-layered poetry. The fictive poet, Sidney West, binds the poems together but also serves to authorize Gelman, an Argentine, to write about the United States, a place where he had not lived himself. The use of a heteronym in combination with elements of surrealism opens up for Gelman the possibility of writing outside lived experience.

What is striking with Gelman’s heteronymous production in the poems of Wendell and West is the abundance of humour and irony. These qualities are not evident in Gelman’s poetry elsewhere. Whether in early poems like the personal “El caballo de la calesita” or the political “Llamamiento contra la preparación de una guerra atómica” from *Violín y otras cuestiones* (1956) or in later poems like “Hechos” from *Hechos y relaciones* (1980) or “Sé” from *De atrássalante en su porfía* (2009), Gelman’s poetry is marked by directness, simplicity of diction, and the virtual absence of irony, humour or any trace of

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176 Genovese reads this poem in terms of its 1968-69 Argentine political context where the leftist opposition, like the family below, are “divided and don’t even talk to each other” while the word “popular” is repeated twice – lastly as “silencio popular” (22). Genovese also points out that Gelman’s turn to heteronyms corresponds to the period when he left the Communist Party and distanced himself from any single leftist group. The distance – and the ironic dimension – opened by heteronyms correspond to a period when Gelman was without any clear way to act politically.
surreal imagery.\textsuperscript{177} Likewise in the intertextual poetry, in \textit{Comentarios y Citas} (1982), \textit{Com/posiciones} (1986) and \textit{Dibaxu} (1995), irony, humour and surrealism are absent.\textsuperscript{178} In \textit{Com/posiciones}, for example, where Gelman creatively retranslates English translations of Hebrew poetry to produce Spanish lyric poetry, what results, in its preference for clear directness, strongly resembles the rest of his work. In his intertextual poetry Gelman could be compared to a dedicated craftsman, rearranging and repositioning the language of others to shape a sparse Spanish that gives voice to experiences of love, exile and loss.\textsuperscript{179} In \textit{Comentarios y citas} Gelman reworks two poets from the Spanish Siglo de oro, Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross, while in \textit{Dibaxu} he uses Ladino poems by Clarisse Nikoidski via an English bilingual edition. Gelman’s approach to his material in these intertextual poems resembles that of a very loose “version” translator. There is an ongoing interest in the Spanish lyric tradition and in recovering the force of ancient layers of the Spanish language.\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Los poemas de Sidney West} is very different from these experiments. West is a fusion poet combining several previously unconnected lineages from outside the Spanish-speaking world. Not even a loose “version” translation (there is no original), it could be called a pseudo-translation, combining a range of disparate lineages to release an unprecedented creative freedom in Gelman. \textit{Los poemas de Sidney West} invites multiple readings and interpretations, escaping the author’s control far more than the rest of his poetry. This can be seen in the divergence between the Argentine political reading given by Genovese who views the North American setting as “cultural distancing” and my own more global political reading, coming from a 21st-century Australian context. Either way, Gelman’s collection of West’s poems is no mere work of fantasy. Implicitly it addresses a globalized loss of freedom and fulfillment in life, but in a way that neither preaches nor narrates.

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Poesía reunida} 12-13, 32-33, 357-358, 1106. Genovese cites as a key achievement of Gelman’s early poems a direct open “tenderness” (21). Such responses become complicated in \textit{Los poemas de Sidney West}.

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{Comentarios y Citas} is found on pages 443-522 of \textit{Poesía reunida}, \textit{Com/posiciones} pages 669-710, \textit{Dibaxu} pages 811-842.

\textsuperscript{179} Gelman’s intertextual poetry is a good illustration of how different the heteronymous tradition is from post-modernist intertextual practices. The Sidney West poems are a free-floating invention rather than a repositioning of existing material. Their connection to any original is far looser than in Gelman’s intertextual poetry.

\textsuperscript{180} As Balbuena argues, delight in the oral qualities of Ladino (and of medieval Spanish in general) is central to Gelman’s intertextual practices.
Surreal horror is central to many of these poems. “Lamento por el pelo de bright morgan”, for example, centers on the grief of two mothers. Bright Morgan’s mother grieves her inability to save him from death, while elsewhere a different mother climbs to the rooftop of her house to see her “seven sons” decapitated. This sudden violence follows two stanzas that seem to establish a cowboy setting with Bright Morgan riding from Alabama with a surrealily disparate posse of law-enforcement agents (123). In “lamento por los pies de andrew sinclair”, “the demons of the valley” eat Sinclair’s feet (116-118), and in “lamento por la tórtola de butch butchanan” the townspeople cut the throat of Butch’s beloved bird, then roast it and eat it, as if to destroy not just the bird itself but the very possibility of love (102-103). There is a powerful savagery in these poems that contrasts strongly with the rather sentimental feel of Spoon River Anthology.

As well as bizarre juxtapositions in “lamento por el pelo de bright morgan” Gelman uses invented words (“muererío” – “diesriver” or perhaps “deathriversflowing”) that compound the surreal nature of the poem, making it simultaneously chilling and distancing. The semi-folkloric line “ola que ola la maripola no pasa nadie nadie” repeated at the end of the poem as well as the mention of “7 hermanos” (“7 brothers”) on the road to Aragon reads like an allusion to Lorca’s The Gypsy Ballads.181 “Lamento por los alelíes de ost maloney” references Vallejo’s poetry, citing but reversing the title of one of his most famous poems “Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca” (114-115).182 Whilst Vallejo’s title suggests a balance between dark and light, Gelman insists on the darkness alone: “black stone on a black stone and no white” (“piedra negra sobre piedra negra y no blanca”). Gelman, then, can be seen as creating in Los poemas de Sidney West a complex “fused” poetry that combines a structure borrowed from North American realism with elements of Brecht’s aesthetics while referencing various canonical Spanish-language poets of the early 20th century. As was the case with Pessoa and Jabès, the use of a heteronym invites experimentation in the fusion of diverse, not previously associated, traditions or poetic lineages. This fusion works across languages –

181 Primer Romanceiro Gitano 1924-1927 in Lorca, 542-613
182 The Vallejo poem can be found in The Complete Posthumous Poetry, 56
the English of Edgar Lee Masters, the German tradition of Brecht and a range of famous Spanish and Latin American poets from the early 20th century, notably Lorca and Vallejo. In a way that resembles Pessoa’s critical use of 19th-century English and American poets, Gelman’s references to Lorca and Vallejo seem more in the spirit of a questioning transformation than pastiche designed as homage. The reversal of Vallejo’s famous title points towards the gap between Vallejo’s poetry of straightforward sympathy for the victims of poverty and oppression, including sympathy for himself as the victim of a fate already foreseen, and Gelman’s Brechtian position that understanding the social-political process is what is most needed.

At times Gelman works playfully with early 20th-century classics of Spanish poetry, notably Lorca, as if simply enjoying the game of it. In “lamento por la camisa de sam dale” the hero, no longer wanting to sleep alone with his sweaty shirt, asks his mother to find him a bride “among the hatreds of the day” (“entre los odios del día”) (125-127). The incongruous folkloric language Dale uses (“novia mia ¿por qué no venís? novia mia ¿qué suelo ató tus sienes?”/“my bride, why don’t you come? my bride, what floor has bound your forehead?”) heightens the anachronistic feel of his romanticism. There are echoes of Lorca in some of the images used and in the frequent repetitions: “and it sleeps beautiful beautiful/like the bride of the green fiestas”183 or “he asked his mother for the bride of the river/ the little bride was in the river dressed in yellow/ making a large bed from the waters/ curtains from the birds so that morning might enter singing/ and death too singing when it had to enter.”184 There are echoes of lines from the Gypsy Ballads and The Poet in New York.185 The most obvious example of Lorca pastiche occurs in the poem’s close:

ah sam dale they took your soul in the centre of the arena!
you won’t have to sleep badly now at three in the afternoon

183 “y duerme hermoso hermoso/como la novia de los yules verdes” (126)

184 “él pedía a la madre por la esposa del río/la esposa estaba en el río vestida de amarillo/ haciendo una cama grande con las aguas/ cortinas con los pájaros para que entre la mañana cantando/ y aún la muerte cantando cuando debiera entrar” (126)

185 Lorca echoes include the pattern of short one or two line statements. Also “cortinas con los pájaros para que entre la mañana cantando/ y aún la muerte cantando” resembles “Un rio que viene cantando/por los dormitorios de los arrebales” (Lorca, 716)
your funeral went by
she knelt at the foot of your portrait
poor with a single white cradle

“A las tres de la tarde” replaces the famous opening line of Lorca’s “Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías”, “A las cinco de la tarde”. As with Lorca’s bullfighter, Sam Dale’s death happens in the middle of the arena. The repetition of forms of “dormir” such as “duerme” or “duerma duerma duerma”, the folkloric “copia de vidrio” (“glass cup”) where they place Dale’s body, the inclusion of nightingales and golden apples, the repetition of “hermoso” (“beautiful”), all combine to give this poem a strong edge of Lorca parody. These verbal echoes also create a dialogue with Lorca, suggesting that the kind of pathos and grand gestures of heroism-in-defeat that Lorca placed centre-stage in his poem have lost credibility in a dehumanized world of global capitalism.

One feature of the heteronym tradition is the tendency to create, within the work, criticisms of its own author. In Le livre des questions and Le livre des resemblances there are passages where various spokespeople attack the author of the book with various charges. In the final poem of Gelman’s book “Fe de erratas” (“Errata”) Sidney West’s poetry is queried for its errors (146-147). This poem again makes fun of the rhetoric of Lorca with exaggerated repetitions of “que duerma duerma duerma/ que duerma duerma duerma sidney west” (“let him sleep sleep sleep/ let sidney west sleep sleep sleep”) and its closing lines “debe apagarse a la mañana sidney west/ que duerma duerma duerma” (sidney west should switch himself off in the morning/ let him sleep sleep sleep”). Humour adds to the distancing effect Gelman seeks in this book.

To conclude, both Jabès and Gelman use heteronyms or heteronym-like personae in ways that differ significantly from Pessoa’s practice. Neither Jabès nor Gelman are especially interested in accessing taboo personal material,

186 “ah sam dale te tomaron el alma en la mitad del arenal!/ no debiera dormir mal ahora a las tres de la tarde tu entierro paso/al pie de tu retrato ella se arrodillo/pobre con una cuna blanca sola” (127)
such as the homo-erotic or sado-masochistic elements Pessoa explores as Álvaro de Campos, nor do they use their heteronyms’ biographies to generate material for poetry. However, as was the case with Pessoa, heteronyms offer a way to move beyond personal lyric and extend the range of what their creator might produce. For Jabès, the turn towards multiple spokespeople or heteronyms produced a vast, self-reflective poem, a type of discontinuous, trans-genre epic. For Gelman, the heteronym Sidney West enabled the Brechtian remake of a North American classic, a playful and often moving dramatization of a Marxist critique of the capitalist system. Like Pessoa’s heteronymous work, *Le livre des questions* and *Los poemas de Sidney West* demonstrate the important connections between heteronymous poetry and translation. Both introduce styles, tones, forms and thematic concerns from outside their creators’ own language and literary community. In each case this “carrying across” of styles and voices from traditions outside a given poetic community is achieved by means of what could appropriately be called “fusion poets”. Jabès’ masterpiece *Le livre des questions* is built around the interaction between French poetry, including the aphorism poem as developed by Char, and Jewish traditions of Talmud and Kabbalah. In Gelman’s Sidney West, surrealism is combined with an overall Brechtian strategy tempered by humorous elements of parody. Although neither the rabbis of Jabès nor Gelman’s Sidney West have the developed biographies of Pessoa’s key heteronyms, they do strongly exemplify the connection between heteronymous poetry and experimentation with poetries outside one’s own traditions. Both reveal a desire to extend the range of what is possible in poetry.
Chapter Three

Translating poetry into poetry: the challenges of writing in another's voice

Heteronyms and translations raise questions about the notion of a stable poetic self, a “voice” that is one’s specific contribution and gives birth to a body of work. In the case of heteronyms it is natural to ask why poets would want to write in voices other than their own and what might be the advantages. One situation where poets certainly believe they can write successful poems that are not in their own voice is when translating, for a translation that was simply in one’s own voice, that never left one’s own repertoire as a poet, would be less a translation than a repetition of oneself.\(^{187}\)

It is easy to see why poets might want to translate poetry, bringing previously unavailable poetry that excites them into their own language. What is more controversial is whether the translation of poetry into poetry in a new language is truly possible and how it might be achieved. Can a poet capture a voice that was embedded in a different language, conveying not just the meaning of the original poem but its poetic timbre, its voice? The concept of “voice” in poetry, however, risks dissolving into vagueness, as it can mean many things – from tone to content, from stylistics to personality. Voice, so Nowell Smith argues, “can only ever be grasped” by paying close attention to those factors which shape it, such as apostrophe and interjection, onomatopoeia, cadence and inflection (137). Accordingly, in this Chapter I will focus on the extent to which one can translate for the sound qualities of the original poem. To examine sound patterning is a concrete way of talking about voice in translation, offering a manageable way to discuss the possibilities and strategies for writing poetry that is and is not one’s own. A discussion of sound patterning, as one of the threads that constitute voice,

\(^{187}\) It may well be that frequently, in the case of versions of already translated poems, poets do stay within their own voice or stylistic range. The desire to leave one’s own voice and attempt to approximate the voice of another may well be a distinguishing feature of translations in the strong sense as opposed to looser “version” translations.
inevitably leads to other aspects of voice, such as interiority and the notion of a poetic self, since “voice […] is never not both sound and sense” (Nowell Smith 8).

The analysis of sound patterning in the translation of poetry sits within the context of the ongoing debate as to whether, or to what extent, the translation of poetry is possible. There is a strong tradition that poetry is untranslatable, that it is “what is lost in translation” in Robert Frost’s often quoted saying. Equally, translations of poetry abound and always have done so. The value given to classic authors such as Virgil, Homer or Dante, the confident judgement that Baudelaire, Rilke, Akhmatova or Lorca are great poets, hinge in large measure on the willingness of those who have no Latin or Greek, no French, German, Russian, Italian or Spanish to accept that translation can give the essence of a poet. A reflection on this paradox, the apparent contradiction between two widely held beliefs, leads to a series of questions about what it is to translate poetry.

Why might someone like Frost feel that “poetry is what gets lost in translation”? Sound elements, including alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and verbal echoes, are central to nearly all poetry and will never be exactly the same in a translated version of the poem. Cultural-specific associations, values and assumptions are also often crucial in a poem, making translation difficult. A poem that is highly valued in one country and one language may not “work” in another, just as a highly successful 1920s American comedy may no longer “work” as a film for a 21st-century Australian audience, regardless of the language being the same. Shifts in cultural values and subsequent loss of meaning affect many texts whether or not they are in a different language. David Bellos argues that poetry is no more and no less translatable than any other cultural or literary genre (150-152). In what follows I will argue that this response is not altogether adequate.

Much of the difficulty in translating poetry arises from the key role of such features as sound effects, sequencing of words and information, rhythm and

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188 The remark by Frost is quoted by Donald Davie, Mark Richardson and The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations, ed. Elizabeth Knowles, all cited in Robinson, 23; Bellos 149, 152. Though Frost repeated the remark several times in talks and interviews it does not appear in his writing. Robinson and Bellos both discuss the saying and what Frost presumably meant by it.
rhyme. Many texts – news stories, scientific papers, for example – we can reword without any great loss, but poems, like jokes or song lyrics, are not readily captured by paraphrase. As Forrest Gander suggests, "In a poem, the terms are unique, irreplaceable; they can only be quoted [. . . ] Poetry is perhaps the ultimate challenge to any language of substitution as well as to the newspaper’s language of managed reality" (9). If translation involves both the retention of semantic content in all its details and a strong parallelism in the impact on readers, then the barriers to success are very high. Nikita Khruschev’s interpreters, faced with the Soviet leader’s love of Russian proverbs and jokes, would often translate by saying “the General Secretary of the CPSU just made a joke”(Bellos 204). At times with poetry, especially where the poem is deeply embedded in sound-play (as with a Goethe poem to be analysed later), someone who loves the poem in its original language and has been asked to translate might be tempted to say, ”It’s about sunset – everything goes to rest – it’s very beautiful. Goethe has written a poem.”

If we think of the translator as aiming to produce a poem in its own right in the new language, what strategies can they, or should they, employ to try to bring over not merely semantic content but some sense of how sound operates in the original? Clearly translations can have different purposes, ranging from the rough paraphrase given above, to the word-for-word crib aiming to assist a student to read the poem in the original language, to a prose version at the foot of a page, to the stand-alone poem appearing in a literary magazine, generally unaccompanied by the original. However, there is a not unreasonable expectation that a translation should be of the same text-type as the original: a crime thriller in Swedish ought to be translated into a crime thriller in English. In that sense the translation of a poem by another poem has a position of central interest and importance.\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{189} By speaking of the translation of a poem by another poem I mean that the aim is not to paraphrase or explicate the original but to produce a variant with a high degree of semantic, stylistic, aesthetic, tonal and emotional similarity that acts as what Clive Scott, summarizing Merleau-Ponty, describes as “a continuation of the ST [Source Text], something which picks up directly, without mediation (interpretation), the creative impulse (gesture) performed by the ST” (Translating the Perception 39). If we look at the poem-in-translation in this way the most important question would not be whether the translation meets some narrow standard of “fidelity” but the extent to which the variant increases or diminishes the original, whether it captures important strengths and powers within it and re-performs them in the altered context of a different language, moving the original work forward to let it speak afresh.
The sound qualities operating in poetry include not only metre, rhythm, rhyme, and the linking or contrasting of words through alliteration and assonance, but also the qualities of the sounds themselves, their sequencing in a poem and the variety of subtle ways in which sound enhances or complicates meaning. It will be argued that, though the manner in which sound qualities operate varies enormously from poem to poem, the heightened role sound plays in poetry should be seen as a defining feature of the form itself. At one extreme there are poems with relatively little content (in the sense of paraphrasable content) where sound qualities alone establish meaning and tone and give the poem its impact. There are also many poems with a strong, largely paraphrasable content where sound enhances, dramatizes, gives authority to or complicates its messages. In both cases sound qualities pose extreme difficulties for translators. Even with relatively close languages, such as French and English, the sound structures are markedly different. If sounds tinged with meaning are the raw material from which poetry is made, poets in different languages resemble painters working with fundamentally different colours. These difficulties do not in themselves make poems untranslatable but help explain both the shortcomings of some translations and the tendency for many fine translations to be powerful poems themselves but slightly different in message or tone from the original. The different ways in which sound operates in poetry, the varying problems they present translators and their impact on translation will be examined through a close analysis of poems by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, César Vallejo, Charles Baudelaire and Marosa di Giorgio. The translators of these poems – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Clayton Eshleman, Michael Smith, John Ashbery, and Adam Giannelli – themselves represent a wide diversity of approaches.

Where I disagree with Scott’s formulation is in viewing the process of translation as one that inevitably involves a degree of mediation or interpretation. Simon West argues that poetry, with its interplay between semantic content and sound qualities, is as Dante suggested in Convivio, I, vii, 14, untranslatable (pp. xxvii – xxxiv). I would argue that in discussing the translatability of poetry a fine-tuned approach is necessary and a great deal depends on the individual poem, poet, cultures concerned, and the language into which it is being translated. Significantly the passage from Dante speaks of the “musical links of harmony” and the fact that transforming the poem’s speech will destroy its “sweetness and harmony.” Not all poetry aims at the creation of “sweetness and harmony” or depends in the same way on “musical links”.

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190 Simon West argues that poetry, with its interplay between semantic content and sound qualities, is as Dante suggested in Convivio, I, vii, 14, untranslatable (pp. xxvii – xxxiv). I would argue that in discussing the translatability of poetry a fine-tuned approach is necessary and a great deal depends on the individual poem, poet, cultures concerned, and the language into which it is being translated. Significantly the passage from Dante speaks of the “musical links of harmony” and the fact that transforming the poem’s speech will destroy its “sweetness and harmony.” Not all poetry aims at the creation of “sweetness and harmony” or depends in the same way on “musical links”.
Tom Jones argues that, while poetry can be conceived in terms of its formal properties, there is also a shaping energy that goes beyond any list of such devices (70-71).\footnote{These formal properties would include verse form, metre, phonological repetitions and register as well as the use of metaphors, similes and apostrophe.} This serves as a reminder that, while specific stylistic features create the “poetry” in poems, reproducing a bundle of such devices alone will not guarantee that the finished translation will work as a poem. An overall grasp of the original poem’s energy and the discovery of some way to produce an analogue in English are also essential.\footnote{Rosmarie Waldrop, discussing her translations of Edmond Jabès, identifies what she serves in her translations as “the form in the large sense – not a rhyme scheme or anything else that could be detached from the work, but the way in which the work is inscribed into its language and tradition . . . Form in the sense of what could not have been written in English” (7).} In practice, I will argue, it is impossible to match all the stylistic features of a poem when translating it into a different language. The textures of languages are simply too different, making metrical schemes, rhythm and the music of precise words operate differently. Moreover, as Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet argue, much poetry depends on the simultaneous presence of more than one meaning, as when a poem literalizes an idiom or the echo of similar sounding words “ghosts” a particular word or phrase (23). Generally, without sacrificing the concision necessary to most poems, the translator will have to choose only one of the two meanings.\footnote{Rosmarie Waldrop cites Jabès’ “Récit” as a poem she could not translate despite Jabès’ repeated requests, because it hinges on an untranslatable pun (48). Like the Goethe poem to be discussed that hinges on sound, the poem that hinges on simultaneous multiple word-meanings would seem to be untranslatable. It can be explicated but not translated.} All of this is not to say that translating poetry is impossible, only that it is an art and not a precise science, a matter of poetic inspiration as well as the closest possible attention to detail at all levels.

In considering the ways in which sound operates in poetry, the work of the linguists Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh offers a powerful framework. Their views are in part mirrored (if in a more impressionistic, romantically-inflected way) by French poet and translator Yves Bonnefoy in his collection of essays L’autre langue à portée de voix. According to Jakobson and Waugh, “in poetry speech sounds spontaneously and immediately display their proper semantic functions”\footnote{This is part mirrored (if in a more impressionistic, romantically-inflected way) by French poet and translator Yves Bonnefoy in his collection of essays L’autre langue à portée de voix. According to Jakobson and Waugh, “in poetry speech sounds spontaneously and immediately display their proper semantic functions”.} (225). Relying on a wealth of empirical data they argue that, alongside the “ordinary” usage of language for purposes of social communication, there is a “poetic” usage where the sounds of a language,
instead of being purely arbitrary symbols, generate a sense of meaning and are experienced as sources of pleasure in themselves. This “poetic” function of language is not limited to poetry but shows itself to be deeply embedded in human language acquisition and use, as exemplified by its role in children’s play with the sounds they make as they acquire language, as well as in jokes, riddles, song lyrics and a variety of word play.¹⁹⁴

In the poetical use of language, such features as the duration and pitch of vowel sounds, the repetition of consonant sounds, the rhythm of a group of words, word stress and the consequent rising or falling metrical cadence, acquire a semantic value or, at the least, greatly enhance the semantic content already there. In a detailed analysis of e.e. cummings’ “love is more thicker” Jakobson and Waugh show how, in the absence of grammatical structure, sound qualities alone in poetry can generate meaning (225 – 233). In the case of this poem, and at least to a very high degree in many other poems, “sound qualities acquire or enhance a semantic propinquity and […] act as kindred submorphemes upheld by a mysteriously complex and cohesive network of metrical, strophic and compositional means” (232). The implications of these findings for the translation of poetry are significant. The work of linguists Vinay and Darbelnet already shows how even the apparently simplest tasks of translation, such as the translation of road signs and business or government documents, involve major adjustments between divergent linguistic systems, even for such close languages as French and English, demonstrating how problematic the notion of any simple “literal” translation is (1 – 48, 287 – 289). They also refer to the way words in poetry often have several meanings superimposed on each other in an “accumulation of meanings” while the translator will often be forced to choose one meaning only, citing this as “the reason why it is almost impossible to fully translate poetry” (21). Jakobson and Waugh reveal the crucial role of the sound system in shaping meaning in such texts as nursery rhymes and poems. The

¹⁹⁴ “Since both aspects of language, the ordinary and the poetic, are two copresent and coacting universals familiar to the human being from his first linguistic steps, one could with equal right and equal one-sidedness speak about poetry and its ‘ungrammaticality’ or on the contrary assail ordinary language for its casual, crude and retrograde grammatical organisation and character” (Jakobson and Waugh 225).
translator of poetry, where semantic content is typically present both in the “ordinary” sense of lexical-grammatical meaning and in the “semantic propinquity” of sound shapes, faces a double difficulty: the significant range of challenges outlined by Vinay and Darbelnet and the challenge of providing some analogue for the poem’s sound shape. This “double difficulty” in the face of texts that are often highly valued by communities, texts often felt to be the highest form of literature, goes a long way towards explaining the powerful reach of Frost’s aphorism.

Beyond traditional prosodic features the sound qualities that come into force in poetry include a range of sound and meaning associations at the level of morphemes and phonemes. Jakobson and Waugh outline the evidence for “an inmost, natural association between sound and meaning” (182), including for example the association of (i) with smaller, quicker, lighter compared to (u) or (a) (187 - 191, 196). Tests carried out by Fónagi in Hungary, for example, found that, for 94% of subjects, (i) was “quicker” than (u), “smaller” for 88%, whereas (u) was “thicker” for 98%, “hollower” and “darker” for 97% and “sadder” and “blunter” for 92% (191). Discussing Jespersen’s 1922 essay on the symbolic value of the vowel (i), Jakobson and Waugh comment: “The ready associability of (i) with small things is explained by the high pitch of the vowel” (187). The opposition between short, unprolongable vowels and long prolongable ones carries a range of powerful associations. Back vowels, for example, are generally perceived as “darker” than front vowels (192). The pitch and relative duration of the varying vowel sounds thus impacts on their semantic/emotional colouring. Likewise our awareness of a kind of “morse” in the long-short-long pattern of syllables plays a crucial role in the poetic usage of language (219). In the poetic function of language, sounds mirror sense, sounds link disparates, sounds offer their own reasons why X follows Y.

In poetry at its strongest, sound and musicality enter so powerfully one could say body and mind together produce the writing. This physical dimension of language, its dual nature as carrier of meaning and physical breath, what happens as phonemes are pronounced aloud, is what makes poetry possible. In L’autre langue à portée de voix Bonnefoy notes that one can hear a word just as one can see a stone on the road: without meaning, mute, withdrawn into
itself: the word then becomes an encounter with immediacy. Our own voice can gather the variety of a poem’s sounds inwardly, “sound and voice uniting beyond concepts.”\textsuperscript{195} This physicality of sound in poetry is also shown by the way we read poems: saying them inwardly rather than reading with our eyes alone.\textsuperscript{196} Subvocalisation, rarely done by competent readers of prose and generally decried as an obstacle to understanding, is precisely what the good reader of poetry does, for, as Bonnefoy comments, “the poem was first of all a listening to sound, an adherence to a rhythm, a rising of the voice within speech.”\textsuperscript{197}

As an important aspect of the poetic usage of language, Jakobson and Waugh discuss the connection between the ludic quality of poetry and the ludic nature of speech development in childhood. In poetry we typically gain pleasure from the sounds themselves very much as children will delight in sound for its own sake, as when a child repeats with a look of delight “Pink is bink, bink is pink” (28). If a long hominid dental evolution was required to develop the “best resonating chamber for linguistic use” (Sheets, 1977, cited by Jakobson and Waugh, 33), it is not surprising that humans might enjoy savouring the features of that resonating chamber. The ancientness of poetry is something that should give us pause. There is the significant period children spend experimenting with sound, including sounds “not only lacking in adults but which adults are sometimes even incapable of making” (66). There is also the long history of humanity’s acquisition and development of speech as something with as much power as any other raw material out of which art can be fashioned, yet, as Bonnefoy notes, unlike mud or rock it is drawn from within ourselves (L’autre langue, 35).

\textsuperscript{195} “Le son et la voix s’unissent par en dessous le concept” (Bonnefoy L’autre langue, 34 – 35).
\textsuperscript{196} Strictly speaking there are three ways we might approach the reading of a text: reading it out aloud to an audience; subvocalisation where without in fact speaking we inwardly hear the sounds; rapid reading for information or storyline. The first two of these strategies are especially suited to poetry, the last to the reading of most other texts, especially scientific or scholarly texts and lengthy works such as novels. For many poets, including Federico García Lorca for example, the direct oral performance by the poet of their poem is more the ‘real’ poem than its printed version.
\textsuperscript{197} “Car le poème, ce fut d’abord une écoute du son, une adhésion à un rythme, une montée de la voix dans la parole” (L’autre langue, 41).
The ways sound functions in poetry, and the corresponding difficulties facing the translator, can be clearly seen with the eight-line poem by Goethe “Wanderers Nachtlied II”, written in 1780.

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einem Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Rühest du auch.\(^{198}\)

Over all the mountain peaks/it is calm,/in all the treetops/you feel/hardly a breath;/the small birds are silent in the forest./Only wait, soon/you too will be at rest.\(^{199}\)

The poem’s force and energy rely almost entirely on sound-play. Stripped of that sound-play, as in my translation, the poem shrinks to very little and yet it has a secure place as a major achievement of German lyric poetry. In his Introduction to the selected poems of Goethe, David Luke describes it as “probably the most famous of all German lyrics” (xxvi). There are no metaphors, no unusual images, very little detail of any kind and the vocabulary is fairly conventional. Why does it work so well in German? An answer to that question may emerge from considering the use of contrasting sounds, their sequencing, the pacing of the poem, the inner logic that moves the reader forward, rhythm and the choices made with line breaks (functioning here to intensify how the sound-pattern works). This poem has been analysed in detail by Robert Hetzron who focuses on the semantic level (the movement from mountain to treetops, to birds, to man), the rhyme, rhythm and metrical pattern but devotes only two paragraphs to sound symbolism, largely contenting himself with the comment “the domain of sound symbolism is a delicate one” (17). In his analysis the poem’s content

\(^{198}\) Goethe Selected Verse 50
\(^{199}\) my own translation.
advances in two directions: downward from mountain peaks in line one to man at the close of the poem, but upward in the sense of from inanimate to animate, while the poem’s rhythm and rhyme scheme are “deliberately uneven” but “consistently accelerating” (17). In my reading of the poem I would see the poem as slowing down rather than accelerating and I would argue that sound symbolism, or at the least the combined suggestive qualities of sounds, their pitch and variety, are crucial to an understanding of the poem’s impact. It is important to stress that in the following analysis I do not wish to imply that Goethe deliberately chose words for their sound symbolism. My intention is to analyse the actual effects that occur within the poem as we have it, not to assess Goethe’s intentions or his creative process.

The opening three lines are dominated by short vowel sounds: (ɪ) (gipfeln, ist, in, Wipfeln), the reduced vowel (e) (Über), (ə) (allen), the syllabic “n” (fln) at the end of lines one and three. Although the first line contains two long vowel sounds (the initial (y:) in “Über” and (α) in “allen”), grammatical and rhythmic constraints work against the prolongation of these sounds. Likewise the long vowel (u:) in “Ruh” and (y) (“Spürest) and again (u:) (“du”) in line four are not lingered over: the comma and the rhythm of the poem move the reader quickly on from “Ruh” to the next line; enjambment leads line four into line five. Line five is the first moment at which the poem significantly slows down, but no longer with the (u:) sound but with the (au) diphthong repeated twice, separated by “einem” that introduces a new sound, the diphthong (aɪ) followed by another (α). Line six is the first stand-alone sentence in the poem and is dominated by the sound (aɪ) which occurs twice and this time, in “schweigen”, is really lingered over. There is an upward movement from the (aɪ) in “Vögelein” to the same sound in “Schweigen”, as following the initial (ʃv) the diphthong (ɑɪ) is pronounced at a higher pitch. The line progresses from the deeper sound of (fø:) in “Vögelein” to the far higher pitch of “Walde” with its open vowel sound (α). Notably in a poem about peace, rest and silence, the poem is more than half finished before, in mimetic fashion, it really slows down. The turning point

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200 In preparing this analysis I have relied for the phonetic transcription of German words on Mangold, Max, Duden Aussprachewörterbuch. Duden Band 6.
between forward movement and slowing down, if not complete stasis, is line five where the consonant sounds (m) and (x) in “Kaum” and “Hauch” further articulate the beauty of the (au) sound. Arguably they add a sense of mystery or perhaps foreboding, as with the similar sounding words “Traum” (dream) and “Rauch” (smoke). Significantly the poem’s final word “auch” contains this sound, arguably leaving the reader with an undercurrent of something with an edge of the sinister. The suggestion of death is never mentioned but the traditional associations of night, being at rest, resting in peace, are surely present in the closing two lines. Line seven uses the long vowel sound (ɑ) twice in “Warte” and “balde”. Whereas the opening three lines of the poem are dominated by the vowel sound (ɪ), in the last three lines (ɑ) occurs three times. Following Jakobson and Waugh’s comments on vowel sounds in poetry and the suggestive weight they carry (188), it seems clear that Goethe’s poem does indeed move from small/closed/timid/, regularly associated by speakers of European languages with the (ɪ) sound, to large/ open/expansive/restful, associated with long vowels but especially (ɑ), in such a way that sound performs meaning.

There is in this poem a physical quality of experiencing the texture of sound, enjoying sound for its texture, holding it in one’s mouth as one might pick up a stone to feel its weight, in Bonnefoy’s metaphor (L’autre langue 34 – 35). The poem can be used (I have often used it) as a dramatic refutation of the myth that German is an ugly language. There is a strongly ludic quality to the experience, a delight in sound reminiscent of a child’s period of trying out sounds and enjoying the physical process independently of any need to communicate. What is important is not merely the sounds themselves but their sequencing and the presence of a pattern that moves the reader through the poem. Equally important is the immense variety of sounds so there is no monotony or cloying obviousness. Lexically the shift from statements to command in line seven (“Warte nur”) indicates a further turn within the poem. It could be read as a caution or even a warning.

Finally it can be seen how Goethe uses lines of uneven length with a rhythmic pattern (x representing unstressed and / stressed, and ll a caesura break)
Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einem Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.

Warte nur, balde
Rühest du auch.

By the close of the poem the dominant rhythm emerges as / x x, yet it has a distinctly subtle feel. What stands out most in the rhythm pattern, as with the choice of vowel sounds, is its variety. An uneven, slightly jagged rhythm, emphasised by the uneven line lengths, acts against any danger of monotony and keeps the poem from any sing-song effect. It also drives the forward movement of the first five lines. The poem could easily have been written as a four or five line poem, joining lines one and two, three and four (perhaps also five), and lines seven and eight. Instead the line breaks urge a slower reading and indicate a slight pause between “du” in line four and “Kaum” in the next line. They encourage the reader to savour the sounds and off-set the forward movement dominant in the first five lines.

To give a sense of the importance in this poem of the dominance of short vowel sounds in the first four lines and the consequent delay in the moment of peace signalled by line five, consider the translation by Longfellow (1845):

O’er all the hill-tops
Is quiet now,
In all the tree-tops
Hearest thou
Hardly a breath;
The birds are asleep in the trees;
Wait, soon like these
Thou, too, shalt rest.  

In Longfellow’s translation the calm starts in line one with faint pauses between “o’er” and “all” and “hill-tops”, the initial “o” and the “a” of “all” are longer than the German equivalents and line two has two long syllables where the German has only one. The poem’s stillness begins so early there is little forward movement but rather a sense of merely repeating the one mood. The “trees” / “these” rhyme has a prominence that Goethe’s rhymes do not. (“Trees” is also very different from “forest” or “Walde” which has wider, possibly darker, suggestions.) Above all the harsher sounds of “Kaum”, “Hauch” and “auch” are missing, so the poem no longer carries an undertone of faint menace. Whereas the original has a wide range of long vowel sounds the Longfellow translation feels more dominated by the (i) of “asleep”, “trees”, “these” (partly because line seven is end-stopped in the English where it flows on to line eight in the German). In line six the German feels significantly longer, more drawn out, partly because of the longer vowel sounds in “Die” (di:) compared to “the” (ðe), “Vögelein” compared to “birds”, “schweigen” compared to “asleep”. The first syllables of “Vögelein” and “schweigen” are open vowels, where in the English the corresponding words have syllables closed by final consonants, “rds” and “p” respectively. By finishing with “rest” rather than “auch” (also/too) Longfellow’s translation also reinforces the sense of a poem with little movement and no particular ambiguity or sub-text. Nevertheless, the translation does in many ways mirror the sound patterning of the German. The pitch and echo effect in “Hearest thou/Hardly a breath,” for example, operate in a way analogous to the German with its sense of anticipation. The difficulties this poem poses for the translator do not lie especially in lexical or stylistic issues. Admittedly the diminutive “Vögelein” is not exactly the same as either “birds” or “little/small birds” or even “dear little birds” but somewhere between

201 Longfellow, 677
“birds” and the two alternatives, given how common the use of diminutives is in spoken German. The domain of “Ruhe”, as Hetzron points out, is wider than any single word in English, with at least three meanings: rest, peace, silence, to which could be added stillness (13). The anticipatory use of the present tense in German (“rühest du”) requires the future in English – since English only uses this structure in a few standard ways, such as “Are you coming to dinner tonight?” However, these types of stylistic adjustment are relatively few and, in Vinay and Darbelnet’s terminology, literal translation (41) is the dominant procedure used both in my own version and in Longfellow’s. It is the poem’s sound qualities which most explain its power and which are most resistant to translation. It is not only that the words with the right semantic meaning will usually have different sounds in the new language; poems may also gain much of their effect from sounds not even available in the translator’s language, as with the German (x), (y:) and the higher pitched German (au).

If Goethe’s “Wanderers Nachtlied II” seems to offer a good example of the ways language operates in poetry according to Jakobson and Waugh, it is worth pointing out that by no means all poetry operates predominantly in this manner. Particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries in Western literature the very notion of what counts as an interesting or exciting poem, or even what is a poem, becomes a matter of contention. Just by considering poetry in the United States at the opening of the 21st century it becomes clear how subjective judgements on these questions are. Charles Bernstein is a god of poetry for some people, insignificant for others; the same can be said for Charles Wright, Billy Collins, Lyn Hejinian, Robert Frost or Robert Lowell, John Ashbery or James Wright, Mary Oliver or Maya Angelou, to sample just a few names. It is no wonder, then, that what one reader will experience as a

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202 Gaston Bousquin’s “Evening, Scotland Island” in Ghostspeaking began as an experiment in imitating the changing sound pattern from closed to open vowels in Goethe’s poem. Like “Wanderers Nachtlied II”, “Evening, Scotland Island” is a very brief poem (seven lines to Goethe’s eight) about nightfall. No attempt was made to keep strictly to the sound pattern of the German. The shift from domination by the short vowel (i) to the longer diphthong (ai) occurs in the third line. Also traces of rhyme and a deliberate variety in vowel sounds provide some kind of analogue to Goethe’s poem. Of the eleven heteronyms in Ghostspeaking Bousquin stands out as the one who frequently writes homages (to Olga Orozco, Alejandra Pizarnik and William Cliff) as well as poems strongly marked by different styles (his “Michel Deguy” poem, “De celui qui luit”, for example). Thus it is in keeping with his character that he might try an Australian variant on Goethe’s famous poem.
moving, deeply satisfying poem-in-translation may strike another as too wordy, too dry, cloyingly sentimental or overly abstract in this or that section.

Opposite the example of poems where sound is everything lies the poem where the content is a very large part of the impact and sound-effects support the poem’s messages but do not take centre stage. Examples of such poems would include the work of Blaise Cendrars, politically engaged poets like Ernesto Cardenal and many of César Vallejo’s poems, including “Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro” (“A man walks by with a stick of bread on his shoulder”). The full text of Vallejo’s poem and of Eshleman’s 1978 translation\(^\text{203}\) read as follows:

Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro.
¿Voy a escribir, después, sobre mi doble?

Otro se sienta, ráscase, extrae un piojo de su axial, mátalo.
¿Con qué valor hablar del psicoanálisis?

Otro ha entrado a mi pecho con un palo en la mano.
¿Hablar luego de Sócrates al médico?

\(^\text{203}\) Eshleman revised his translations of the poems gathered in his 1978 César Vallejo - The Complete Posthumous Poetry for his 2007 The Complete Poems of César Vallejo. For this specific poem I prefer the 1978 version. Overall, when comparing a sample of the translations in their 1978 and 2007 versions, there seemed to me to be a mix of gains and losses, typically within the one poem, with a tendency for the losses to predominate. The 1978 translations have the advantage of being a canonical translation that has served a generation of readers of poetry in English well. Perhaps my reaction, in part, resembles the response of many readers to Auden’s attempts to rewrite his own poems. While the 2007 edition has the merit of benefiting from further scholarship and includes previously untranslated material, with “Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro”, no new scholarship is involved. There are five changes in the 2007 edition. In line 1 “a stick of bread” becomes “a baguette” (“A man walks by with a baguette on his shoulder”), in line 7 “a lame man” becomes “a cripple”, in line 10 “the profound I” becomes “the deep Self”, in line 17 “his foot on his back” becomes “his foot behind his back”, and in the last line “the not-i” becomes “the non-self”. The change in line 1 breaks the rhythmic structure of the first line, losing the parallel to Vallejo’s line. Also “baguette” is specifically French with associations of sophistication while “un pan” is everyday and could be of any shape, as much at home in Madrid and Lima as Paris. “A stick of bread” preserves that everydayness and keeps the word “bread” before us. “A lame man” carries Biblical suggestions very much in keeping with Vallejo’s interweaving of Biblical overtones across his work, an effect lost with “a cripple”. The original “the not-i” reproduces the strangeness of the original but also does not mean the same necessarily as “the non-self” – everything that is not oneself is “non-self” but Vallejo’s neologism suggests his visceral rejection of psychoanalysis and of the surrealists around Breton (The Complete Poems, 2007: 517).
Un cojo pasa dando el brazo a un niño.
¿Voy, después, a leer a André Breton?

Otro tiembla de frío, tose, escupe sangre.
¿Cabría aludir jamás al Yo profundo?

Otro busca en el fango huesos, cascaras.
¿Cómo escribir, después, del infinito?

Un albañil cae de un techo, muere y ya no almuerza.
¿Innovar, luego, el tropo, la metáfora?

Un comerciante roba un gramo en el peso a un cliente.
¿Hablar, después, de cuarta dimensión?

Un banquero falsea su balance.
Con qué cara llorar en el Teatro?

Un paria duerme con al pie a la espalda.
Hablar, después, a nadie de Picasso?

Alguien va en un entierro sollozando.
¿Cómo luego ingresar a la Academia?

Alguien limpia un fusil en su cocina.
¿Con qué valor hablar del más allá?

Alguien pasa contando con sus dedos.
¿Cómo hablar del no-yó sin dar un grito

*       *       *

A man walks by with a stick of bread on his shoulder.
Am I going to write, after that, about my double?
Another sits, scratches, extracts a louse from his armpit, kills it. How dare one speak about psychoanalysis?

Another has entered my chest with a stick in hand. To talk then about Socrates with the doctor?

A lame man passes by holding a child’s hand. After that am I going to read André Breton?

Another trembles from cold, coughs, spits blood. Will it ever be possible to allude to the profound I?

Another searches in the mud for bones, rinds. How write, after that, about the infinite?

A bricklayer falls from a roof, dies and no longer eats lunch. To innovate, then, the trope, the metaphor?

A banker falsifies his balance sheet. With what face to cry in the theatre?

An outcast sleeps with his foot on his back. To speak, after that, to anyone about Picasso?

Someone goes to a burial sobbing. How then become a member of the Academy?

Someone cleans a rifle in his kitchen. How dare one speak about the beyond?

Someone passes by counting with his fingers. How speak of the not-i without screaming?²⁰⁴

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²⁰⁴ Vallejo The Complete Posthumous Poetry, 176-177
The most obvious formal property of Vallejo’s poem is repetition: thirteen two-line stanzas each made up of a statement followed by a question. Sound devices of alliteration and assonance are used frequently in the opening lines of stanzas in ways that help focus and intensify the emotional charge: “pasa” . . “pan” / “pecho” . . “palo” / “pie” . . “espalda”, for example. The opening line plays on the phonically very close pair “hombre” (man) and “hombro” (shoulder), something impossible to reproduce in English. It is noticeable that these sound devices occur much more in the first lines of stanzas than the second. This alternation helps maintain a balance between the “poetry” of the poem and an apparent artlessness that underscores its emotional directness. Untitled but dated 5 Nov. 1937, the poem reads as a response to the enormity of human suffering at the time of rising fascism and the Great Depression. There is some degree of crescendo towards the poem’s final line: “¿Cómo hablar del no-yó sin dar un grito?” (“How speak of the not-i without screaming?”) but from stanza to stanza there is no obvious increase or diminution in intensity or rationale for the ordering of the sequence. Most importantly the poem relies on the sense of a speaking voice, a very specific voice created by word choices, rhythm, the frequent verbless sentences, the first person “Voy” at the start of line 2 and repeated in the same position in line 8, along with the use of a startling surreal image (“Otro ha entrado a mi pecho con un palo en la mano,” line 7), ironic understatement in line 13 (“Un albañil cae de un techo, muere y ya no almuerza”), the rapid succession of harsh vivid words (“fango”, “huesos”, “cascaras” in line 11) and juxtaposition (for example, the shift from line 11 to the rarefied “del infinito” at the close of line 12). This is clearly poetry, but poetry in a very different sense compared to “Wanderers Nachtlied II”. If in poetry words need to be rolled round in the mouth and stayed with, here they are not words like “schweigen” and “Walde” but “fango”, “hueso”, “cáscara”, “escupe sangre” and “grito”.

Vallejo’s poem, unlike Goethe’s, translates very readily into English as a poem in its own right. The readily translatable semantic content works powerfully in English, but also the structure, rhythm, images and ironies are all readily accommodated. Even the (i:) of the poem’s last word “grito” is repeated in the word “scream” just as the occasional alliteration is easily achieved in English. A purist might argue that Eshleman should have translated “pasa” in the
same way in the first and last lines of the poem but “walks by” in the first line copies the type of alliteration Vallejo is using in that line and works well. Up to a point the translator of a poem like this need only be accurate, have some instinct for rhythm and register and not get in the way with any unnecessary poeticism or clumsiness. Nevertheless, the poem can be translated slightly differently, as shown in the version by Valentino Gianuzzi and Michael Smith:

A man passes with a loaf of bread on his shoulder.  
Shall I, afterwards, write about my double?

Another sits, scratches himself, picks a louse from his armpit and kills it.  
What’s the use of talking about psychoanalysis?

Another has entered my chest with a stick in his hand.  
Shall I afterwards talk to the doctor about Socrates?

A cripple goes by giving his arm to a boy.  
Shall I later on read André Breton?

Another shivers with cold, coughs, spits up blood.  
How can I allude to the I of depth-psychology?

Another rakes in the mud for bones and husks.  
Can I, later on, write about infinity?

A mason falls from a roof, dies before lunch.  
How can I renew, after that, the trope, the metaphor.

A shopkeeper cheats a customer out of a gram.  
How then can I write about the fourth dimension?

A banker forges his balance.  
Have I the nerve to weep at the theatre?
An outcast sleeps with his foot behind his back.
Can I later speak to anyone about Picasso?

Someone attends a funeral in floods of tears.
How can I then accept membership of the Academy?

Someone cleans a rifle in his kitchen.
What’s the point of talking about the afterlife?

Someone goes by counting on his fingers.
How can I speak of the not-I and not scream?

Some lines arguably read more powerfully in the Smith-Gianuzzi translation:
line 9 (“Another shivers with cold . . .”), lines 11 and 12 (“Another rakes in the mud . . .” / “Can I, later on . . .”), for example. Likewise Smith-Gianuzzi’s “with a stick in his hand” reads better than Eshleman’s “with a stick in hand”, an unnecessarily odd phrase for the regular Spanish “con un palo en la mano.” However the choice of “passes” in the first line, the repeated use of the old-fashioned “Shall I” and the addition of “and” before “kills it” in the third line all contribute to a slightly formal, upper-class tone that jars slightly, at least to the ears of an Australian. The translation of line 13 loses its vital irony by condensing “muere y ya no almuerza” into “dies before lunch”. Rhythmically Eshleman’s translation is also a closer match to Vallejo than Smith and Gianuzzi’s which in places seems very diffuse. Consider the following examples:

How dare one speak about psychoanalysis?
How write, after that, about the infinite? . .
To innovate, then, the trope, the metaphor? . .
How dare one speak of the beyond? (line 24)
(Trans. Eshleman)

What’s the use of talking about psycholanalysis?

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Vallejo Complete Later Poems, 227-229
Can I, later on, write about infinity? . . .
How can I renew, after that, the trope, the metaphor? . . .
What’s the point of talking about the afterlife?  (line 24)

(Trans. Smith and Gianuzzi)

The differing translation of line 24 is the strongest example: Eshleman, like Vallejo, uses the instinctive authority of rhythm (x / x /); Smith’s version lacks any obvious rhythm, sounding more like casual speech, detracting to that extent from its power as poetry. Vallejo’s line “¿Con qué valor hablar del más allá?” has very similar phrasing to Eshleman’s: two phrasal groups, where Smith has three (“What’s the point/ of talking about/ the afterlife?”). If the translation of a poem into a poem should ideally answer not only the question “What does the original mean?” but also the implicit questions “What is so good about this poem?”, “Why should this poem from another tradition be included in our tradition?”, then I would prefer Eshleman’s translation, though there are merits in both versions.206

Goethe’s poem exemplifies how resistant to translation a short poem that relies heavily on phonemic patterning can be. With Vallejo’s poem we have seen how, by paying close attention to register and rhythmic patterning, translators can often create effective poems that are closely analogous to the original. Unlike the Goethe or Vallejo poems, Baudelaire’s “Paysage” is constructed in a set metric form and that form, with all its nuances of sound, shapes the tone of the poem and our response as readers. An examination of the original and its translation by Ashbery illustrates the complexity of seeking to match a poem’s rhythm and metre in translation when those, often crucial, dimensions of the poem are deeply enmeshed in the specific sound

206 The style of Eshleman’s Vallejo translations in The Complete Posthumous Poems is also notably different from Eshleman’s own poems with their strong influences from Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Gary Snyder. In the translations there is a simple directness, a lack of concern to “ground” the poem in a wealth of specific detail, an absence of a certain kind of “self”, a very different aesthetic at work compared to such Eshleman poems as “The Book of Barbara”, “Little Moon Worm”, ‘The Ascent” or “Sensing Duncan”. For all its power as a poetry of social-political protest, Vallejo’s work is quite unlike what Pierre Joris describes as “an information-laden American poetry” (“The Space Opened” 39). While Eshleman has translated Vallejo into North American English, “A man goes by with a stick of bread on his shoulder” does not feel like a late 20th-century North American poem. A key factor in the success of this translation, its achievement of the sense of gaining another’s voice, is Eshleman’s attention to Vallejo’s rhythms and sound patterns.
textures of a given language. The dominant metric forms of a poetic culture, whether Virgil’s dactylic hexameter, Dante’s terza rima, Shakespeare’s unrhymed blank verse or Racine’s alexandrines, are built on and utilise the total linguistic fabric of a specific language, from its grammatical and semantic structures to its sound features. Accordingly, attempting to replicate them in a different language can risk distorting what was fluent and relatively natural into a contortionist’s display, shifting the poem’s weight and tone in the process.

Ashbery’s translation of Baudelaire’s “Paysage” appeared in his 1984 book A Wave and, of his numerous translations, is one of only two included in his own books of poetry. Baudelaire’s poem was originally published as the opening poem of the “Tableaux Parisiens” section of Les fleurs du mal in its 1861 edition. The shift in context from Paris 1860s to New York 1980s is surely one factor why the poem may feel so different in Ashbery’s imagining of it. Also significantly, it is not one of Baudelaire’s canonic poems. Unlike “Le cygne”, “À une passante”, “Les sept vieillards”, “Le voyage”, or (to evoke a different side of Baudelaire) “L’Invitation au voyage”, “Harmonie du soir”, “Le balcon”, it is not highly anthologized or discussed. Walter Benjamin, for example, in his book on Baudelaire never mentions it, despite discussing in detail several other poems from the “Tableaux Parisiens” section (44-46, 60, 73, 82-83, 97, 123, 124-125). This status as a minor poem perhaps particularly

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207 Clive Scott suggests that “in the case of regular verse, translation should involve the translation of metre into rhythm” and there should be “a dialectical interaction between the ST [Source Text] rhythms and the TT [Translated Text] rhythms” (Translating the Perception 41). According to Scott, rhythm expresses the poem’s creative energy while metre belongs to its static form as part of the more general poetic practices of a given culture. The translator, then, should seek to match the energy (and variations, shifts, patterns of energy) of the original rather than simply its outward formal properties. Scott’s analysis of Baudelaire’s “Causerie” – including a translation that uses visual devices to suggest oral subtleties of pausing, rhythm and emphasis – makes a strong case for the view that focusing on metre and rhyme leads the translator in the wrong direction. It diminishes rather than increases our ability to savor the aural dimensions of the poem-in-translation (and so increases the risk that a reader without the source language will ascribe a kind of mechanistic versification to the original.) Subtler patterns of phrasing, intonation and sound suggestion (of the kind discussed by Fónagy and Jakobson), Scott argues, are crucial to the power, energy and dynamic shifts of Baudelaire’s original and are readily lost if the translator focuses on reproducing a metrical pattern that Baudelaire, in many ways, was working against (Literary Translation 108-120).

208 In A Wave and in Ashbery’s Selected Poems “Landscape” carries the inscription “After Baudelaire” in brackets (305.) The original French and the translation also appear in his Collected French Translations Poetry (14-15), marking its status as both genuine translation and version, both Baudelaire’s poem and Ashbery’s own poem “After Baudelaire”.
attracted Ashbery, leaving him greater freedom to experiment. Baudelaire’s original and Ashbery’s translation form an interesting study in the complexities of attempting to match poetic form in translation:

Paysage

Je veux, pour composer chastement mes élogues,
Coucher auprès du ciel, comme les astrologues.
Et, voisin des clochers, écouter en rêvant
Leurs hymnes solennels emportés par le vent.
Les deux mains au menton, du haut de ma mansarde,
Je verrai l’atelier qui chante et qui bavarde;
Les tuyaux, les clochers, ces mâts de la cité,
Et les grands ciels qui font rêver d’éternité.

Il est doux, à travers les brumes, de voir naître
L’étoile dans l’azur, la lampe à la fenêtre,
Les fleuves du charbon monter au firmament
Et la lune verser son pâle enchantement.
Je verrai les printemps, les étés, les automnes;
Et quand viendra l’hiver aux neiges monotones,
Je fermerai partout portières et volets
Pour bâtir dans la nuit mes féeriques palais.
Alors je rêverai des horizons bleuâtres,
Des jardins, des jets d’eau pleurant dans les albâtres,
Des baisers, des oiseaux chantant soir et matin,
Et tout ce que l’Idylle a de plus enfantin.
L’Émeute, tempêtant vainement à ma vitre,
Ne fera pas lever mon front de ma pupitre;
Car je serai plongé dans cette volupté
D’évoquer le Printemps avec ma volonté,
De tirer un soleil de mon coeur, et de faire
De mes pensers brûlants une tiède atmosphère.209

209 Charles Baudelaire, in Ashbery Collected French Translations, 14
Landscape

I want a bedroom near the sky, an astrologer’s cave
Where I can fashion eclogues that are chaste and grave.
Dreaming, I’ll hear the wind in the steeples close by
Sweep the solemn hymns away. I’ll spy
On factories from my attic window, resting my chin
In both hands, drinking in the songs, the din.
I’ll see chimneys and steeples, those masts of the city,
And the huge sky that makes us dream of eternity.

How sweet to watch the birth of the star in the still-blue
Sky, through mist; the lamp burning anew
At the window; rivers of coal climbing the firmament
And the moon pouring out its pale enchantment.
I’ll see the spring, the summer and the fall
And when winter casts its monotonous pall
Of snow, I’ll draw the blinds and curtains tight
And build my magic palaces in the night;
Then dream of gardens, of bluish horizons,
Of jets of water weeping in alabaster basins,
Of kisses, of birds singing at dawn and at nightfall,
Of all that’s most childish in our pastoral.
When the rebellion rattles my windowpane
I’ll stay hunched at my desk, it will roar in vain
For I’ll have plunged deep inside the thrill
Of conjuring spring with the force of my will,
Coaxing the sun from my heart, and building here
Out of my fiery thoughts, a tepid atmosphere.210

In translating the first stanza Ashbery achieves a more airy, more spacious feel than is present in Baudelaire’s original. By opening with “a bedroom near the sky” rather than the less interesting “pour composer chastement mes

210 Ashbery Collected French Translations, 15
églotes” Ashbery significantly refocuses the poem. Within the first few lines he uses transposition (the verb “coucher” becomes the noun “a bedroom”, the verbs “chante” and “bavarde” become “songs”, “din”), shifts in word order and elaboration (“comme les astrologues” becomes “an astrologer’s cave”, “chastement” becomes “chaste and grave”). These shifts help establish a positive tone towards the dreamer in the attic. Baudelaire only sounds this note in any clear way in the last line of stanza one (“Et les grands ciels qui font rêver d’éternité”) and stanza two proceeds rapidly to problematize it. Ashbery establishes this mood from the start and maintains its dominance throughout the poem. Even the specification of “us” in the last line of stanza one encourages identification with the poet/dreamer/observer.

In stanza two Ashbery again shifts the spacious, liberating image from line two to line one (“the birth of the star in the still-blue” takes the place of “à travers les brumes”), making whatever is negative or oppressive only an after-thought. Likewise the simple “la lampe à la fenêtre” becomes the more positively-inflected “the lamp burning anew”. As stanza two progresses, the divergence between the two poems increases. In Baudelaire it would be hard to decide whether the reader should interpret lines three and four positively or negatively. The “fleuves du charbon” are, after all, soot from chimneys and smokestacks; “pâle” describing the moon suggests wan and sickly. In Ashbery’s version, given the reader’s previous positioning, the lines are more likely to be felt as purely beautiful. From lines seven to sixteen of stanza two a further divergence between the two poems takes place. Ashbery’s poem seems more light-weight, with less emotional reach, marked in the second stanza by a sense of artificiality rather than beauty, and without the critical subtext of Baudelaire’s original. The modern city, symbolized by the coal-smoke in the sky and the storm of violent civil unrest outside the poet’s window, has a stronger presence in Baudelaire. By the close of Baudelaire’s poem the reader is surely meant to feel a strong ambiguity. Is it good that the poet’s “burning thoughts” be refashioned into a “tiède” (stifling/lukewarm) atmosphere? Isn’t there something wrong with a world where the sun needs to be drawn out of one’s own heart? Is this imagined poet in his attempt at an aesthetics of prettified objects taking a wrong direction? In *Les fleurs du mal* Baudelaire places this poem immediately before a sequence of poems (“Le
cygne”, “Les sept vieillards”, “Les petites vieilles”, “À une passante”) where the encounter with the city’s outsiders becomes the trigger for powerful moving poems. Arguably, then, “Paysage” should be read as implicit criticism of the poet-dreamer.

The divergence between Ashbery’s poem and Baudelaire’s is created not only by lexical choices and shifts in the sequencing of information but through crucial changes in sound patterns. These concern especially the way the rhymes work and the rhythmic pattern of the two poems. Baudelaire’s poem is in alexandrines, lines of twelve syllables with a caesura in the middle, and consists of rhyming couplets. The rhymes themselves are attenuated in several ways: the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is much weaker in French; the caesura at the centre of the line prolongs the gap experienced between the pair of rhyming words; French words are mostly polysyllabic with each syllable receiving its full pronunciation (not being reduced to schwa (ə), as happens with unstressed syllables in English), weakening the effect of the rhyme in French; the French language also has far more opportunity for rhyme, partly because of common verb endings, partly because certain vowel sounds are so common, notably (e) which can occur as “é”, “et” and (e) in “ais”, “ait, “aient”, for example. Derek Attridge summarizes the very different ways rhyme functions in the two languages. In English “it emphasises rhythmic patterns which are already very prominent, where French rhyme makes it easier for the ear to grasp a relatively unobtrusive pattern” (58). Put simply, rhyme obtrudes far more in English and risks having a forced feeling. In his study of the success of rhymed

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211 The connection between a relatively unaccentuated language and the need for rhyme can be seen in the absence of blank verse in French, as Paul Verlaine commented, “Our language with little accentuation could not admit blank verse (unrhymed verse) [...] Rhyme weakly, use assonance if you like, but rhyme or use assonance, there’s no French verse without that.” Scott captures the relatively unaccentuated nature of French when he speaks of “the relative deafness of the French ear to accent, attributable partly to the relative imperceptibility, in many instances, of differences between the accented and the unaccentuated/disaccentuated, partly to the mobility of accents in French, partly to other causes” (Scott The Poetics, 27).

212 Clive Scott makes similar observations, commenting on the very different practices of rhyme in French, such as having degrees of rhyme, alternating rhyme-gender and rhymes on endings and suffixes. He concludes that “To encourage readers to think of French and English rhymes as equivalent is seriously and irresponsibly to mislead them” (Literary Translation 127).
tragedy in France and its relative failure in England Attridge ascribes the main cause to “the conditions imposed on verse forms by the medium itself, the language whose physical substance is being shaped and patterned” (54). While rhyme has been successful in English for lyrics, for humour and for those uses of poetry that most approximate song, audiences and poets themselves have mostly experienced rhyme in serious drama as an artificial distraction from the emotions of the play (52-53, 70-71). Attridge comments, “for most of us the artificiality it [rhymed dialogue] creates is comic”(62). If rhyme carries these risks in drama, it is reasonable to accept that, if not handled extremely skilfully, it carries the same risks in serious poetry that seeks to create the effect of a personal voice talking openly to us. This danger may well in part explain the widespread, though never complete, turning away from rhyme in English-language poetry over the course of the 20th century.

In the first stanza, Ashbery’s use of rhyme and his poem’s rhythmic flow work admirably as a counterpart to Baudelaire’s alexandrines. The frequent use of enjambment, the slowing down of pace with breaks between phrases, the only very faint half-rhyme between “city” and “eternity” all help maintain a poem that has a light, airy feel, a delight in space that matches the emotional content. In stanza two the divergence between the rhythmic patterns of the French and the English escalates at the same time as a semantic gap develops between the two poems. From line 7 to 16 of stanza two the rhymes of Ashbery’s translation become obtrusive just as the rhythm takes on a faster, more sing-song quality. The differences can be seen most clearly if we compare the following two couplets in Baudelaire’s poem and Ashbery’s translation:

Je fermerai partout portières et volets
Pour bâtir dans la nuit mes féeriques palais. (lines 7-8)

Car je serai plongé dans cette volupté
D’évoquer le Printemps avec ma volonté, (lines 15-16)
Of snow, I’ll draw the blinds and curtains tight
And build my magic palaces in the night; (lines 7-8)

For I’ll have plunged deep inside the thrill
Of conjuring spring with the force of my will, (lines 15-16)

In Baudelaire’s line 7 the sounds are evenly spaced, the line is divided by a caesura after “partout” and enjambment further attenuates the rhyme. Likewise line 8 is divided by a caesura and has a calm measured feel. Lines 15 and 16 also have the caesura, enjambment, evenly spaced syllables and the rhyming words are polysyllabic. In Ashbery’s corresponding lines there are no caesuras, no enjambment and the monosyllabic words “tight”, “night” carry great prominence as a very obvious rhyme. The “thrill”/“will” rhyme in lines 15 and 16 is almost comic in effect, emphasized by the four beat stress in line 16 (x/ xx/ xx/ xx/). Line 15 also has a four beat pattern (x/ x/ / xxx/), resembling the dolnik in form (a verse form with a four beat line and the greatest flexibility as to the number of unstressed syllables – if any – separating the beats). While in Ashbery’s first stanza and in lines 1 to 6 of stanza two there are five or six beats to each line, from stanza 2 line 7 to the close of the poem there are only four beats per line, making the poem speed up and giving it quite a different, less spacious, less serious feel. While the rhythmic pattern of the alexandrine and the inclusion of a degree of ambivalence from the start of the poem give Baudelaire’s “Paysage” a strong consistency, the change in rhythmic pattern in the second stanza of “Landscape” gives Ashbery’s poem a sense of taking a slightly different direction, shifting perhaps from expansiveness to a less complex, more purely light-weight playfulness.

The rhythmic qualities of a poem are also inevitably bound up with the literary and historical associations certain verse forms bring with them. In this

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213 This form is discussed in detail by Attridge who analyses its extensive use in medieval poems, early modern ballads, the English romantics and children’s verse (147-187). Two examples of dolnick – four beats per line with no count taken of unstressed syllables if any – are “Star light, star bright./ The first star I see tonight” and (from Walter Scott “The Lay of the Last Minstrel”) “The feast was over in Branksome tower/ And the Ladye had gone to her secret bower;/ The bower that was guarded by word and by spell,/ Deadly to hear and deadly to tell - / Jesu Maria, shield us well” (151, 158)
respect the French alexandrine and the English dolnik are polar opposites: the first is associated with high seriousness and the dramas of Racine, the second with popular ballads, children’s poetry and light verse. All this is not to say that Ashbery’s poem is in fact light verse or to dismiss it, but merely to point out how the effects he is employing create a different kind of poem compared to Baudelaire’s. There are also significant lexical shifts. In line 16 “volupté” carries the suggestion of sensuality and sensuousness and is better translated as “pleasure”. It is a key word that occurs across many of Baudelaire’s poems (in “L’Invitation au voyage”, for example, in the famous line “Luxe, calme et volupté”). “Thrill” evokes something far more trivial, more casual, more gratuitous. Baudelaire’s “L’Émeute” implies out of control, public violence whereas Ashbery’s “rebellion” has a safer feel. Both these lexical shifts help give a lighter feel to Ashbery’s poem.

By including “Landscape” in his own book of poetry (both in the original A Wave and in Selected Poems) Ashbery indicates that, in a way he considered significant, it forms part of his own oeuvre. Perhaps it could be seen as fitting within Ashbery’s own aesthetic of breaking down barriers between the light-weight and the serious in poetry and reclaiming the values of artifice and playfulness. Contrasted with poets like Robert Lowell, James Wright or Philip Levine, Ashbery can be seen as forging a style that deliberately avoids a moral or high serious tone in poetry. The combination of space, freedom, inward expansiveness with playfulness and the transgression of genre-based expectations could be seen as the distinctive achievement of Ashbery as a poet. His purposes, then, in “Landscape” might be seen as exploring the creation of a certain kind of poem and a certain kind of self. These purposes, arguably, are rather different from Baudelaire’s. Written against the background of the 1830 and 1848 revolutions (summoned by the image of “L’Émeute” storming outside the poet’s window) and within the context of 19th-century poverty and human misery evoked in poem after poem of Les fleurs du mal, Baudelaire’s poem feels very different from Ashbery’s.

214 The inclusion of translations or “versions” within a poet’s own work is by no means a recent North American phenomenon. Longfellow’s translations from German, for example, are in his Collected Poetical Works, Yeats’ versions of Du Bellay’s sonnet “Quand tu seras bien vieille” (“When you are old and grey and full of sleep”) and of a chorus from Oedipus at Colonus figure prominently in his own poetry, and Pound’s “The River Merchant’s Wife” is a key poem among his canonical works.
All of this is not to deny the beauty or the accomplishment of Ashbery’s achievement. The relationship between the two poems is a complicated one. Ashbery retains almost everything in Baudelaire’s poem. There are no omissions of lines or additions of new images, as Lowell often does with his versions in *Imitations.* There is in many ways a high degree of faithfulness to the original. Arguably the first stanza of Ashbery’s poem is more interesting, more satisfying and beautiful than the first stanza of Baudelaire’s poem – the opening line is certainly more interesting. It is only in the second stanza that the difference becomes substantial. Even this hinges on my own reading of Baudelaire’s poem which itself is far from clear as to its overall significance. One thing Ashbery is doing here is offering a fresh perspective on a neglected poem by a canonical poet. The changes that happen are the result of three factors: shifts in the sequencing of information, the occasional lexical choice (“thrill” for “volupté”) and differences in rhythmic patterns. It is this last difference, a shift in the poem’s sound shape, that plays the strongest role in creating a new poem.

While Goethe’s poem illustrates the problems posed for a translator by phonemic patterning and Vallejo’s poem the importance of register and rhythmic patterning, Baudelaire’s “Paysage” exemplifies how rhythm and metre are intimately connected with the specific sound textures of a given language. The analysis of Ashbery’s translation shows how copying metrical forms from one language to another is a complex issue, likely to result in quite different effects. A further range of issues appears when considering the Uruguayan Marosa di Giorgio’s prose poems. Prose poems have generally been seen as relatively short texts without metre, rhyme or line breaks, marked as poetry by a general “poetic” purpose, with language itself functioning much as it would in a novel or short story. I would argue that in the case of Di Giorgio, as with such masters of the form as Max Jacob, Henri Michaux and René Char, prose poems strongly resemble traditional poems in their use of sound qualities, and thus pose a range of similar problems for the translator.\(^{215}\) Though line breaks and regular metre have gone, Di Giorgio’s

\(^{215}\) David Lehman sees the prose in prose poems as operating exactly as it does in other prose forms like the essay, the short story, the novel or the letter, but given a poetic twist in terms of
prose poems invite us to linger over sounds and phrases, to subvocalise and be guided by sound echoes and connections as much as, or more than, by narratival or logical connections.\textsuperscript{216}

Across the 652 pages of Di Giorgio’s collected works, \textit{Los papeles salvajes}, the prose poem is her dominant form.\textsuperscript{217} Two stylistic systems help shape her work. There is an interweaving of sounds, with frequent repetitions of phonemes and morphemes, parallelisms in structure, and a persistent accumulation of adjectives or adjectival phrases after the noun, including a fondness for \textit{–isimo, -isima} as an Italian-flavoured superlative. These devices help establish the sense of Di Giorgio’s unique voice: part child-like, part rhapsodic, often fusing the usually divided life-stages: childhood, adolescence, old age, able to shift rapidly between the everyday, the magical and the horrific. The second system is to do with phrasing, rhythm and the use of pauses. This system is especially important in structuring each poem as

\begin{itemize}
\item Its purposes. His focus is the prose poem as it developed in the United States where it has had quite a different trajectory compared to its classic form in France. Notably in the United States the prose poem has tended towards much longer texts, exemplified by Ashbery’s \textit{Three Poems}, and has often merged into straight prose. Lehman clearly wishes to provide a general account of all those texts identified by their authors as prose poems, implicitly seeking an answer to the question “What is a prose poem?” In that context it is correct to say there need be no difference between the way sound qualities operate in prose poems and in short stories or novels. Roger Pensom analyses the sound qualities and rhythm in prose poems by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, showing how, as in verse poems, the sound aspects of language are powerfully at work, demanding subvocalisation by the reader. Pensom’s approach is especially important to a translator as a reminder that, in most (though not all) cases, sound qualities operate powerfully in prose poems and a good translation will provide analogues to the effects achieved in the original. Pensom’s conclusions about the importance of sound qualities in prose poetry are further supported by Yves Vadé in his analysis of the prose poem within French literature. Likewise John Taylor, contrasting the French and the American traditions of prose poems, comments on the greater attention to rhythms, imagery and what could be considered poetic writing within the French tradition, suggesting that “style per se, as much as what it conveys, remains in the forefront of the (French) writer’s aim and the reader’s experience” (363).

\textsuperscript{216} Nigel Fabb argues for a formal definition of poetry as consisting of lines, or segments of language, that are determined by such features as metre, alliteration, rhyme and parallelism rather than purely syntactic considerations. However the lines do not depend on layout since they can exist in purely oral cultures (9-11). From the point of view of an audience listening to a reading, it is usually impossible to distinguish a prose poem from a free-verse poem. The oral markers of poetry that Fabb notes - alliteration, sections with a metric regularity, heightened rhythm, frequent parallelism - are likely to be equally strong in either form. The decision by poets to lay their work out as free-verse or as prose poem is, I would suggest, a complex one, partly connected to traditions specific to their culture, and not necessarily indicative of any stronger or weaker approximation to regular prose or everyday speech.

\textsuperscript{217} Di Giorgio’s poems appeared in thirteen separate books over her lifetime, each with distinct titles and presenting each separate untitled poem divided only by asterisks or numbers from the others. As they have a striking unity of location (the half-mythic, half-real farmhouse outside Salto, Uruguay) and the same narrator, they also carry strong elements of a narrative or quasi-autobiographic nature.
a whole, and frequently adds power and emphasis to a poem’s close. To examine how these features operate, I shall briefly analyse two poems (individually untitled, as all her poems are), as well as their translations by Adam Giannnelli. My analysis is also informed by Di Giorgio’s reading of her poems on her CD *Diadema*.218

The first poem, originally in Di Giorgio’s 1981 *La liebre de marzo*, is as follows:

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Las casas campesinas guardan huesos, huevos.
En la noche de los relámpagos, desde la cama, los veía brillar.
Bajo las mesas iban perros, gatos y murciélagos; cada uno
persiguiendo a su perseguidor. Por el aire había caballos pequeños como
moscas; de esa colmena de caballos venía el sonido.
Se abrían todos los caminos de la vida, pero, ¿dónde
poner los ojos?
Crisantemas color crema, rizadas, me rodearon toda la cama, como en
un funeral.
Aventuré una mano entre ellas.
O el viento me removió los cabellos.
Y, nunca, entendí cómo se salía del altar.219
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*             *              *

The houses in the country store bones, eggs.
When lightning lit the night, from my bed, I saw them shine.
Under the table raced dogs, cats and bats, each in pursuit of its
pursuer. In the air fluttered little horses like flies; that hive of horses was
murmuring.
All the paths of life unfolding, but where to look?

218 The CD is included with Marosa di Giorgio’s *La flor de lis*, 2004. The fact that she made a CD of her reading is itself testimony that her texts are not in the same category as short stories or novels but should be listened to, precisely, as poetry. Her recital of a selection of her poems as a theatrical performance entitled “Diadema”, alongside her creation of the CD, further complicates the notion of “voice” in her poems – and so what it might mean for a translator to attempt an analogue of her voice. The theatrical performance and the CD also highlight one way of approaching her work – as separate individual texts rather than book-length poems. Giannelli in *Diadem* approaches her poetry in that spirit, while Jeannine Pitas, Anna Deeny, Susan Briante and myself have focussed on the nature of her work as book-length poems.

219 Di Giorgio *Diadem*, 66
Cream-coloured chrysanthemums, curly, surrounded my bed, as at a funeral.
I reached in with one hand.
Or the wind ruffled my hair.
And I never knew how to step down from the altar.\textsuperscript{220}

From the poem’s first line, alliteration and mirroring of words are prominent (“casas campesinas” / “huesos, huevos”). Words are repeated with changes only in their ending: “perseguiendo” becomes “perseguidor”. The poem’s last two lines both contain three phrasal groups, with sound echoes in each line: “viento” / “removió”, then repeated “a” and “l” in “salía del altar” at the poem’s close. Rhythmically the last two lines are slow, with a kind of trailing-off effect, as if the ’I’ of the poem was speaking out of a profound sense of being lost. Giannnelli’s translation captures these effects admirably, though of course certain pairings like “huesos, huevos” (“bones, eggs”) cannot be reproduced in English. The harshness of Giannnelli’s first line works well and alliteration and echo effects are captured in phrases like “lightning lit the night”, “saw them shine”, “fluttered . . flies”, “hive of horses”. In a crucial line of the poem, near its centre, the repeated “l” in “life unfolding . . look” helps bind the sentence tightly and add force to it. Likewise, by adding to the alliterative patterning in the following line (“Cream-coloured chrysanthemums, curly”), Giannnelli compensates for the relative loss of alliteration in the opening line. The concluding two lines, rising rhythmically towards the key word “how” and broken by pauses into three phrases, match Di Giorgio’s Spanish well, providing a powerful close to the poem.

There is, however, an important dimension that becomes obscured in the translation. Di Giorgio’s opening line sets the tone for the rest of the poem by playing on the fact that in Spanish the symbol of birth, of life, the egg, is barely one letter away from the symbol of death, bones. They even merge into what sounds like one word, as if someone was stuttering and correcting themselves, “huesos-huevos”. Accidentally misplace an “s” for a “v” and we shift from life to death. The rest of the poem unfolds from this first line. Three stanzas focus on life, then three on death. The tone of “Las casas campesinas”

\textsuperscript{220} Trans. Giannnelli, Di Giorgio Diadem 67
is also more earthy, more farm-labourer-like than the slightly gentrified "houses in the country". Perhaps, reversing the order of “huesos” and “huevos” to add to its sound impact in English, then using rhythmic accumulation to approximate the punch of Di Giorgio’s opening line, we could try:

The simplest farmhouses hold in their depths eggs and bones, egg-bones.

But this doesn’t really work either and strays too far from Di Giorgio’s simplicity. Word play of the kind Di Giorgio uses here represents a major challenge to translation.

The much longer poem “Cuando nació, apareció el lobo” was read by Di Giorgio on her Diadema CD; the pairing of wolf and small girl is a recurrent trope in Los papeles salvajes, suggesting the centrality of this poem to her work. The original text and the translation by Giannnelli are as follows:

Cuando nació, apareció el lobo. Era un domingo al mediodía, - a las once y media, luz brillante -, y la madre vio a través del vidrio, el hocico picudo, y en la pelambre, las espinas de escarcha, y clamoreó; mas, le dieron una pócima que la adormecía alegremente.

El lobo asistió al bautismo y a la comunión; el bautismo, con faldones; la comunión, vestido rosa. El lobo no se veía; sólo asomaban sus orejas puntiagudas entre las cosas.

La persiguió a la escuela, oculto por rosales y repollos; la espiaba en las fiestas de exámenes, cuando ella tembló un poco.

Divisó al primer novio, y al segundo, y al tercero, que sólo la miraron tras la reja. Ella con el organdí ilusorio, que usaban entonces, las niñas de jardines. Y perlas, en la cabeza, en el escote, en el ruedo, perlas pesadas y esplendorosas, (era lo único que sostenía el vestido). Al moverse perdía alguna de esas perlas. Pero los novios desaparecieron sin que nadie supiese por qué.

Las amigas se casaban; unas tras otras; fue a las grandes fiestas; asistió al nacimiento de los niños de cada una.
Y los años pasaron y volaron, y ella en su extrañeza. Un día se volvió y dijo a alguien: Es el lobo.

Aunque en verdad ella nunca había visto un lobo.

Hasta que llegó una noche extraordinaria, por las camelia y las estrellas. Llegó una noche extraordinaria.

Detrás de la reja apareció el lobo; apareció como novio, como un hombre habló en voz baja y convincente. Le dijo: Ven. Ella obedeció; se le cayó una perla. Salió. El dijo: -¿Acá?

Pero, atravesaron camélulas y rosales, todo negro por la oscuridad, hasta un hueco que parecía cavado especialmente. Ella se arrodilló; él se arrodilló. Estiró su grande lengua y la lamíó. Le dijo: ¿Cómo quieres?

Ella no respondía. Era una reina. Sólo la sonrisa leve que había visto a las amigas en las bodas.

Él le sacó una mano, y la otra mano; un pie, el otro pie; la contempló un instante así. Luego le sacó la cabeza; los ojos, (puso uno a cada lado); le sacó las costillas y todo.

Pero, por sobre todo, devoró la sangre, con rapidez, maestría y gran virilidad.221

* * *

When she was born, the wolf appeared. It was a Sunday at noon – at eleven thirty, shining light – and her mother saw through the glass his long snout, and on his fur, frosty spikes, and cried out, but they gave her a concoction to drink that lulled her blissfully to sleep.

The wolf attended her baptism and her communion; the baptism, in a christening gown; the communion, a pink dress. No one saw the wolf; but his pointed ears poked out from under things.

He followed her to school, behind roses and cabbages; he spied on her during parties after exams, when she felt a shiver.

He spotted her first boyfriend, and the second, and third, who only stared at her through the gate. She in the illusory organdy that girls in the gardens wore back then. And pearls, around her head, her neckline, her hem, heavy and luminous pearls, (they were the only thing that held

221 Di Giorgio Diadem, 148
up the dress). When she moved, she’d lose one of those pearls. But the boyfriends disappeared without anyone knowing why.

Her friends got married; one after the other; she went to the big parties; she was there when their children were born.

And the years flew and went, and she in her oddity. One day she turned and said to someone, “It’s the wolf.”

Although she’d never actually seen a wolf.

Until an extraordinary night arrived, among the camellias and the stars. An extraordinary night arrived.

Behind the gate the wolf appeared; he appeared like one of her boyfriends, like a man he spoke in a soft, convincing voice. He said, “Come.” She obeyed; a pearl fell. She left. He said, “Here?”

But they walked through camellias and roses, black in the darkness, to a hole that seemed to have been dug for a reason. She knelt down; he knelt down. He stretched out his long tongue and licked her. He said, “How do you want it?”

She wouldn’t answer. She was a queen. Only the faint smile that she’d seen on her friends at their weddings.

He pulled out her hand, the other hand; a foot, the other foot; he considered her for a moment like that. Then he pulled off her head; pulled out her eyes, (set one to each side); her ribs, and all.

But, above all, he devoured her blood, with speed, skill, and great virility.222

From the poem’s start there is a strong use of parallelisms: “nació”/“apareció”, “bautismo”/“communión”, (later in the poem) “ella” (she)/ “él” (he), which largely serve to dramatize the mirroring of girl and wolf. In the first paragraph there is a prominent repetition of consonant sounds: “m” and “d” in “domingo”, “mediodía”, “media” and “madre”, “v” in “vio”, “través” and “vidrio”, “p” in “picudo”, “pelambre”, “espinas”, “pócima”. The pairing of mirrored words where both vowels and consonants echo each other, such as “vio” and “vidrio”, “hocico picudo”, “espinas de escarcha”, helps bind words and concepts, giving the whole a tight, slightly predestined feel. As if controlled by an instinctive sense of structure very

222 Trans. Giannelli Diadem, 149
close to traditional verse-form structures, the poem consists of six paragraphs, a central paragraph, then a final six paragraphs. The central paragraph reads: “Aunque en verdad ella nunca había visto un lobo,” or “Although she’d never actually seen a wolf” in Giannelli’s translation (literally, “Though in truth she had never seen a wolf.”) The first paragraph of the poem’s second half uses repetition of an entire phrase to mark the movement towards the poem’s dénouement:

Hasta que llegó una noche extraordinaria, por las camelias y las estrellas. Llegó una noche extraordinaria.

Until an extraordinary night arrived, among the camellias and the stars. An extraordinary night arrived. (Trans. Giannelli)

In the last four paragraphs again there is the use of parallelism (“Ella se arrodilló; él se arrodilló,” for example) and frequent use of alliteration, notably of “l” and “r” in “Estiró su grande lengua y la lamíó. Le dijo.” In the third last paragraph, the short sentence “Era una reina” has two words that are near anagrams of each other, as if being in the past (“era”/“(she) was”) and queen (“reina”) were aspects of the one fact. The second last paragraph continues a pattern of parallelisms, as matching body parts are laid out on different sides.

The final paragraph offers a strong form of parallelism. It can be seen as consisting of two lines, of 12 and 13 syllables respectively, each containing four phrasal groups separated (especially in Di Giorgio’s reading) by slight or pronounced pauses (I have marked the strong pauses // and the weak pauses /):

Pero,/ por sobre todo,// devoró/ la sangre,//
con rapidez,/ maestría// y gran/ virilidad.

There is a strong rhythmic feel to these two lines, dramatizing the wolf’s dismemberment and devouring of the woman as a chillingly ironic enactment of “virility”. It is important that the lines are slow, delivering their ironic message with full weight, a message that resonates not only in the context of
feminism, but also against the background of the widespread political torture and murder in Uruguay (and Argentina and Chile) through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Adam Giannnelli translates the last paragraph as:

But, above all, he devoured her blood, with speed, skill, and great virility.

For me, at this point, the translation loses power compared to the Spanish. The three-syllable words “rapidez” and “maestría” become monosyllables (“speed” and “skill”), there is no way to pause after “devoured” or “great” and rhythmically the English “virility” (vərɪˈlɪtɪ), with its heavily-accented second syllable, is no match for the Spanish “virilidad” (vɪrɪˈlɪdɑd) where each syllable maintains its full value, not reducing to schwa (ə). If we attempt a closer match to syllable count, phrasal groups and overall rhythm, rather than focussing predominantly on lexical matching and alliteration patterns, perhaps we could try (adding the preceding paragraph as well):

He tore off one hand, the other hand; one foot, the other foot. He looked at her like that for a moment. Then he tore off her head; her eyes (he placed one on each side); he tore out her ribs and everything.
But, most of all, he devoured her blood, rapidly, with sure skill, and the utmost virility.

With this wording it becomes possible to pause, just slightly, after “devoured” and “utmost”, approximating the phrasal groupings of the original. A purist might argue I have added two words, but the English is still only one syllable longer than the Spanish. The close of a poem is an extremely important moment. Although in prose poems there is no one set metre acting consistently throughout, this does not mean that powerful rhythmic patterns do not occur in places, and the close of a poem is typically one such place. For a translator the difficulty is that, with the last sentence of a poem, there is

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223 Anna Deeny analyses Di Giorgio’s work, specifically in Clavel y Tenebrario (1979), as a witnessing to collective horror under Uruguay’s military dictatorship.

224 Boyle Poems of Olga Orozco, Marosa di Giorgio and Jorge Palma, 101

225 This point is stressed by Yves Vadé in his lengthy analysis of the prose poem as a major form in modern French poetry (173-184).
Di Giorgio’s poetry exemplifies the role alliteration, phonemic patterning and parallelism frequently play in prose poetry. The marked rhythmic patterns present in her prose poetry help create the distinctive intensity of her voice, a voice little interested in recounting any coherent story but focussed on speaking from inside experiences of wonder, estrangement, vulnerability and horror. It is not, as in much of James Tate’s, Charles Simic’s or Russell Edson’s work, a casual everyday voice that happens to be relating strange or horrific things. Approaching in English the rhythmic patterns of Di Giorgio’s prose poetry, as well as her signature use of homophones, parallelisms, alliteration and sound-play, enables the creation of an English-language analogue to her voice. Giannnelli demonstrates how a skilful poet-translator can largely match these sound qualities, creating poems that work well in English. We have also seen how rhythmic considerations may strongly affect prose poems, posing special problems for a translator, in particular at the close of a poem. In the process of translating, it is important to recognise the immense diversity of what are called “prose poems”. The belief that the prose in prose poems operates exactly as it does in any other prose text can be perilous when translating another culture’s prose poems. The danger is to impose a flatness, a lack of concern for the sound dimensions of language, on poems that should be intense, strongly rhythmic and full of punch - not toned

226 Roberto Echavarren analyses Di Giorgio’s “hybrid” poetry in terms of an “intensity” that transgresses narratival and rational frameworks, frustrating reader expectations of fixed characters or explicable sequences of events. Rhythms, homophones, parallelisms and soundplay control the unfolding of unresolved intensities. Echavarren also sees her work as bearing important resemblances to Lautréamont.

227 While Charles Simic’s The World Doesn’t End, Russell Edson’s The Rooster’s Wife and James Tate’s Dome of the Hidden Pavilion employ a direct, deliberately flat or prosaic voice, often marked by irony, to relate brief bizarre, often chilling, surreal events, Di Giorgio’s work, as I have argued, is in many respects far more poetically inflected - rhythmically, in terms of the range of word choice, and structurally as paragraphs are often used in ways that resemble lines or stanzas. It is not that any one approach is intrinsically “better” as poetry than the other - only that it is important to recognise that they are quite different approaches. Simic’s, Edson’s and Tate’s books are also collections of discrete poems with (for Edson and Tate) individual titles - Di Giorgio’s work is organized with the separate books or sections of books as the only titled units, as if we were dealing with a single very strange novel or autobiography, minimising in a way the distance between herself and the work.
down to prosaic everydayness. We risk shrinking the poetry and missing out on the experience of difference.  

The examination of poems by Goethe, Vallejo, Baudelaire and Di Giorgio reveals the dominant role sound qualities play in poetry, creating and complicating meaning. Phonemic patterning, alliteration, rhythm and metre, parallelism and phrasing, among other language features, help shape a poem’s meaning as well as its power and value. They are as important, sometimes more important, than the content created by lexical and grammatical means. Because sound features are so intimately a part of a given language and its community of speakers, the translation of poetry presents special difficulties. To create a poem out of a poem in another language requires more than skill, a high level of general writing ability and linguistic knowledge (or the ability to use someone else’s linguistic knowledge). While Jones discusses this something extra as “shaping force” or “psychic energy” (70-71, 86), Vendler speaks of the “emotional curve” of a poem, an emotional trajectory that moves the reader through a poem (138-139). Her list of ways of analysing a poem suggests how many different levels (of meaning, sound, layout, word order, structure, for example) interact to produce a poem that truly works. The translator of Japanese poetry, Leza Lowitz, speaks of the need to make contact with the “underpoem”, the poem’s emotional core, and how this requires of the translator above all skill as a poet (106-111). Robinson compares the translation of a poem to performing a piece of music, where words, like notes, need integration into a “rhythmic and expressive structure”, emphasising the importance of a unifying interpretative vision that goes beyond lexical choices and matching of individual poetic techniques (97). This attunement to an emotional core or rhythmic-expressive structure could equally be described as finding one’s own analogue for the original poet’s voice.

Commenting on the challenges Shakespeare poses for French translators Bonnefoy writes, “Translation becomes a language’s struggle with its own nature, at the very core of its being, the quickening point of its growth [. . .] The confrontation of two languages in a translation is a metaphysical and moral experiment, the ‘testing’ of one way of thinking by another” (“Shakespeare and the French poet” 19-20). Respecting the “otherness” in the styistics and poetic assumptions of a poet from another language and culture, not merely the surface differences in content and social-political background, and grappling with the search for ways to communicate such “otherness” constitute an important opportunity for a poetic culture to rethink its own assumptions.
The translation of a poem into a poem in a new language is a transformative creative act. A poem in another language no more translates itself into a poem in English than the experience of seeing a brother die of tuberculosis and having tuberculosis oneself automatically produces Keats’ late poetry. The source text, like life experiences however powerful or harrowing, is best seen as raw material inviting the creation of poetry. In the transformative process of creating a new poem in a different language finding an analogue for the original poet’s voice is crucial. This requires a strong grasp of the stylistic, rhythmic and lexical nuances of the original. A great deal is to be gained, poetry in English itself stands to gain, when by giving the closest attention to the original in all its complex layers a translator writes a new, fully alive poem. As they work to inhabit the rhythms, tones, imagery and emotions of the original poem reborn in a different language, poet-translators could realistically be considered to be writing in voices other than their own.

Both Venuti (Translation Changes, 179-192) and Vinay and Darbelnet (288-289) suggest that it is misleading to set up an either/or choice between faithful-but-unpoetic and free-and-poetic-but-unfaithful translations of poetry. Ideally the translation of a poem should be both faithful and poetic.
Conclusion

Heteronymous poetry and poetry translation share the desire to introduce forms, styles and aesthetic possibilities from outside one’s own language and community. What is distinctive in the heteronym tradition associated with Pessoa is the creation of fusion poets who bring together different traditions not previously associated with each other. Unlike pastiches, parodies and hoaxes, the concern is less to produce exaggerated imitations of a single poet or school of poets (however worthwhile such a practice may be in terms of the release of creative energy and humour) but rather to invent imaginary poets who combine often seemingly incompatible traditions and in whose voices their creator can, in some measure, venture outside their previous repertoire. It is largely this authorization to experiment outside the norms of one’s poetic community that explains the continuation of heteronymous poetry beyond the psychological circumstances of its founder, Pessoa. In some places, notably with Pessoa’s Álvaro de Campos, heteronymous poetry could be regarded as “translation by other means”. In Campos’ Odes, without translating a single poem, Pessoa develops a non-American Whitman with Whitman’s enthusiasm for modernity, his all-embracing pantheism and homosexuality and much of the tone of his poetry, but there is none of Whitman’s attachment to the United States. Likewise in Le livre des questions Jabès does not translate or cite any actual Talmud or Kabbalah, but, through his vast array of imaginary rabbis, he gives these texts an unprecedented presence within French poetry.

Heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry both involve a conscious attempt by a poet to write in a voice other than their own. It may be that this arrival of a different voice happens suddenly, as in the case of Pessoa, Schiavetta or, on occasions, with some of my own heteronyms. It may be a slower, more deliberate process. In either case there is a willingness to shed habits and aesthetic assumptions from one’s own poetic culture in order to open up to something from outside. There is a degree of surrender to the other that goes beyond the empathy involved in all fiction, for the writing itself must bear the convincing imprint of an other. Leaving the comfort zone of a given language’s poetic norms, the creator of heteronyms, like the
translator, seeks to become an other, to write a poetry that comes from elsewhere. This often involves a deep immersion in other languages and literatures. Jabès, for example, spent years reading Talmud and Kabbalah and thinking through a new approach to poetry that would encompass that sacred literature, though many of the fragments of Le livre des questions, written in snatches of time on the Metro or late at night, may well have appeared as clear voices outside himself. To speak of heteronymous poetry in terms of “writing in voices other than one’s own” is to highlight the way that, beyond individual markers of difference such as common tropes, poetic forms or signature vocabulary, the creator of heteronymous poetry is shaping fictive selves with distinct poetic visions and practices as well as distinct personalities, histories and attitudes.

In broad terms the heteronym tradition looks in two directions: towards the inclusion of fiction in poetry, a concern shared with verse drama and the dramatic monologue; and towards the translation of poetry into poetry, with the desire to find new models and new sources of inspiration. The status of heteronyms as fictions has a liberating effect for many poets, paradoxically making it easier to include or revisit aspects of experience that may be difficult to write about directly in their own voice and from their own life. However, while the dramatic monologue and heteronymous poetry both use fiction, the creator of heteronymous poetry seeks to inscribe an alterity into the texture of the poetry itself. The poetry’s form, style and aesthetics emerge from and articulate the voice of an imaginary other. In seeking to move outside their own repertoire and the approaches to poetry most entrenched within their community, heteronymous poetry and translation share a disruptive function. They challenge the set patterns and assumptions of a given community’s poetry by bringing it into contact with modes of writing, thinking and imagining arriving from elsewhere.

The creator of heteronyms, endowing his or her imaginary poets with the outlines of a biography, increases the illusion of each heteronym’s own singular voice while providing material for further poems. It will be recalled that voice in poetry points towards the movement back and forth between apparently surface traits, such as sound patterning and rhythm, and
underlying emotional and intellectual structures, between the physicality of a language's sound textures and the projection of interiority. In the translation of poetry the translator aims to create an analogue in a new language for the distinctive voice of a poet in another language. Attentive to the sounds and energy shifts of the original poem as much as to its meaning, the translator seeks, as far as possible, a parallel on all levels. Although “writing in a voice other than one’s own” is a paradoxical phrase not typically used by translators, it has the merit of capturing the sense of being at the service of a personality, an aesthetic and a palette of sound-meaning colours other than one’s own. This being at the service of another is experienced not as a denial or betrayal of oneself but rather as a liberating creative opportunity. Heteronymous poetry and the translation of poetry radically undermine the need for a stable underlying poetic self. Both practises show how people can, and do, create and inhabit a multiplicity of poetic selves, enriching cultures and communities in the process.
Ghostspeaking

(selected excerpts)
Note to the Selections from *Ghostspeaking*

*Ghostspeaking* is a long book of heteronymous poetry whose origins go back to 2010 but which, for the most part, was written after commencement of the DCA. In conformity with the word limits for a Doctoral thesis a selection only is included here. The selection does not include any portion of the work published in any form prior to commencement of the Doctorate.
Ricardo Xavier Bousoño was born in Posadas in Argentina in 1953, the second son of a conservative local lawyer and an impoverished socialite from Buenos Aires. He left Argentina in 1976, fearing for his life as the activities of the military and right-wing death squads intensified. After living in Brazil for twelve years he went to Spain with a long-term lover who found work there as a pianist. His final years were spent in Veracruz, Mexico.

Bousoño was a successful painter and installation artist as well as poet. His two collections of poetry are Utilities (1983) and Chronicles of a Wedding (1987). He died in Veracruz in 2011.
Selected Poems from *Utilities* (1983)

House arrest in São Paulo

1

And while I slept the clouds came in –
these clouds they have here
that occupy cities for a month or for a decade,
that shift slightly at irregular moments,
clouds like deep sleepers
turning in their own imprisoned dreams

so that children climbing a hill in daylight
are at once lost in night,
streetlights come on, birds recognise
familiar purple grass in trimmed
dry patches

and a year of cloud weather moves so quickly,
you age so fast.
The speed with which I write
testifies to the shrinking multiplying
inner sprawl of the universe.
They have lodged me in this high-rise hotel,
official guest of a Writers’,
Artists’, Ergo-econometricians’ Archival
Thought-Fest, downtown São Paulo,
prisoner 25967 in this
bugged lab of babble.
Once the nomads have entered you
there’s no way of going back,
no way to slow the chaos in the blood.
2.

Antonio Moneda created the three
rust continents that exist.
On them eyes grow into a bent heaviness,
the spine of the prisoners
is all one spine
so the act of breakage can be
singular and simultaneous.
When at night
a finger wakes in a drawer under the stove
it understands but cannot think through to the end
what a body was.

Say this only:
what happened elsewhere
speaks now because
there is no elsewhere.

I am writing from my space
in this many-layered house inhabited
by slowly dysfunctioning monsters. Wayward
transmission signals set the walls aglow.
Surveillance cameras with bovine faces
burn holes in the fake
stability of floorboards.
They have instructed me to climb into my coffin
and not get out:
an everyday request.
I retorted (mildly I thought) with a list
of instructions for my (twice daily) cocktail.
I have hopes for the gradual
transmigration of my brain.
To eat: wild rocket, salamanders,
soft cheese and silence.
3.

The statue of Christ the birds feed on –
its green moss wets their beaks –
the sky of the underworld
is a trickle of blue sound
from a space below his lips.

Above the roar
of a city roused to its own pain at daybreak
I feel his gaze
walk with me down the darkened halls.
Poor broken clay, so little
to offer, a light-bulb
at the farthest end of a dead-end street,
wired to the sun for a thousand years.

4.

In the Montenegrin heiress’s dream of spring
the alchemist has left his crystals
out in the rain. The full moon
has done its worst and passing predators –
the one-eyed motorcyclist, screech owls,
foxes that have lost the art
of metamorphosis –
distrust these cold star-shaped
brightnesses.
A chalice left in a forest
will blossom only as rust.
5.

At this distance, too far
for herbs or auscultation, too close
for exorcism, I circle
a slow dying.
Now in the season of hungry birds
I watch my hand’s crimson thread spill out.
The splintering of the back
continues forking.
Inside the sky of the cerebellum
a tiny microbe-spider blows bubbles
on a bent twig of cartilage.

I dreamt I climbed into the bottle
to become a message
and then they drained the sea.

6.

In the month of the great rains,
when my coffin was a ship
on the sidewalks of São Paulo,
navigating between the legs
of fruit-shop girls and secretaries,
I understood
life is explosion.
The night sky and the cries of street vendors
come close.
They whisper, ‘Now,
it is now you’ll see.’
The wind is light here, the ocean promised 
and everything is distance and becoming.
If I could step outside the window 
and stand in air
I would be completely calm in its radiance.
Even the traffic today
is like a distant calligraphy splashed
on the tassels of a temple curtain.
Enter now:
strike the gong with the ritual clapper,
bow three times, shake
the row of paper slips suspended on thin wires,
snatch one blindly to know your fortune.

My coffin opens on the world
and, all around me, the black walls are
dazzling light I haven’t learnt to
feel yet. In the slower faster drift of
time-frames other than ours, extra-terrestrial life
falls through us and, almost,
I could be there inside it.
Listen to the creaking of trees
from before the time of the dinosaurs.
On the other paths life spiralled down
you can hear the dizzying journey that explodes
in the thousand-layered symphony
of bird song.

For days now there is no sign of sky.
From the coffin
I watch the mirroring grey swirls –
nothing beyond –
by night the same:
a wall against the stars.
The drinks have long since stopped,
the door is bolted.
Wiry spiders race across my books,
voices from neighbours’ TV sets
argue softly in the distance.
Through a broken window
sometimes they lower an apple
or a plate of food scraps.
The world above goes on:
small signs suggest the hope of
an erratic heaven.

9.

He is waving to me
from the farthest room
at the end of innumerable corridors:
the ghost I will become.

Nothing
in the history of the universe
has so tenderly familiar
a face.

10.

A five-pointed word stranded in blankness –
points five simultaneous directions,
a word alone
indicating the loss of direction, the presence of many directions, the refusal to guide.

I stand by my word, will not relinquish it, to the death it tokens me, the bird of haunted night has flown clear through me and the lice off its back have entered the word.

The lice now inhabit the word, along with the wind, the night, these paper walls, the thousand sheets of mirroring glass, an old man and his faith in meanings.
Aura of the poem

The poem travels just ahead of the traveller.
It checks in for the night,
lowers the blinds,
makes tea.
The traveller gets angry with the flight delays,
is held up
by missing baggage,
gets soaked to the skin by
the unpredictable downpour of the one
torrential evening of the dry spell.

The poem sits and waits,
warms the room,
arranges all to make it welcoming.
Sometime after midnight
the traveller turns the key:
and the glow of some
unfathomable beauty
dries the anguished moisture
on his skin.
From a traveller’s notebook

1.
A bridge has been laid down across the abyss and on it I recognise a figure walking: diminished and with a piece taken out of the soul but still myself.
The flowers in my hand are black but the green water is a voice that flows by unconcerned.
I listen for the slow sharp ringing of the bell that says the snow is falling.
In the high mountains the white trees prepare themselves for spring.

2.
How many suitcases to bring with you to the house that casts no shadows? Despite the furious declensions, no one and nothing in all the corridors of the sky understands your subtle post-aorist tenses: your unique way to say what the past would have chosen under its heaven of mutated stars and celestial algae. Know this clearly: now and for this once only you are leaving the earth.

3.
The guttering ran the way it had to along the edges of the sky. The man is looking at his watch. The trains in this place are imprecise. What is this moment to him? The train door about to open –
the dull shine of posters opposite,
one hand around the grip of a backpack,
the other at his side.
A mountain is growing in the back of his head.
Words fall short of nature
but words fall short of everything.

4.
He stepped past the Guardian Dogs at the temple entrance.
On the wall above him Chinese signs
for enclosed empire, for mountain and river
and the boxed windows of rain.
The growling of griffons off to the left.
At the altar, throwing sacred coins,
he asked for his name and fate.
Incense rose from bowls that drifted
on a lake of rose water.
Last night’s dream: a sluggish river clogged with old tyres.
The coins told him only “You have no permission to ask”.

5.
I remember the boatman on the high mountain lake:
his cupped hands bearing fire across the water.
So you carry me beside you
on the ferry over black waters.
Beside you, beside your veiled ghost-face,
I am the soul of an old lampshade left out on the kerb,
the resonating heart of the empty biscuit box.
Hold me among the hours of the living.
What sounds still
in the vast surrounding heaven.
From *Chronicles of a Wedding* (1987)

Freiheit

Wherever you live you can find them, 
Prussian outposts: 
In the fork of a tree 
the leopard’s head with his tongue 
trailing down. In a suburb with no name 
a twist of wire from the underworld and, 
sunk in its garden of criss-crossed trenches, 
the house of the mandrake roots. 
Just by breathing and accidentally 
opening your eyes you see them, 
Prussian outposts. It’s no good saying 
the fish from the Royal Pond perished 
years ago of frost-bite or the same 
mysterious starvation as 
the local tribes. The vast repertoire 
of the northern sun of arctic darkness 
always begins afresh right here. This day. 
Mixed with the tar of your hometown street 
and the tang of an open sewer 
drink it down, this elixir 
exploding in your head like a light-bulb in 
a backroom where the all-night TV 
transmits football and a thousand 
small losses, each one stamped with your name 
and all fatal, 
murga durga, kali candomblé unglückliche 
Freiheit, das macht nichts.
An ordinary day in Uzbekistan

The fruit grower climbs out of the sky
as the butcher of day-old lambs
wipes the blood from his apron.
“Ah, your strawberries all smell of cold mist
and the drool of anaemic angels flows in your veins.”
They were building Babel off to the left
as the polyglots sharpened their skills
round the chessboard.
All over the white city with its high-rise anxiety
the whisper ran of the impending coup.
From the land of milk and honey
my parents arrived: mother leading father by the hand,
father with his pure gold walking stick
making Masonic signs in the air.
“There’s a full tank in the Cadillac. You’re no Uzbeki –
we’re here to get you out. Within hours
the generalissimo will have the roads sealed off,
then the planes will come in laden with sarin gas.
He’s got plans for this country and people aren’t part of it.”
My friends crowd me out, eyes pleading
like bobbing balloons of trust
in the portholes of the Titanic.
How can I abandon the salt of the earth,
the cousins of the fruit grower and his prolific
multiply-incestuous family?
Next thing my parents are gone,
stripped from the sky
like news headlines in this tropic downpour.
A siren sounds: we’re all trying to get out now,
the fruit growers, impressed peons from the Babel work-gang
and a bunch of bearded poets,
dodging our way through the forest.
While the generalissimo’s planes roar by overhead
and in the distance bombs drift down.
There is no hijacking in this poem
though a small band of war-painted types in mufti,
clandestine connoisseurs of torture,
are tiptoeing across the edges of the poem
to remind me they could at any moment
gatecrash this kingdom of words.

A day like any other in Uzbekistan.
The normality project going on in one corner
and the loading of sarin canisters in another.
The generalissimo’s effigy
imprints itself on a forest clearing,
his gaunt face a patchwork of tiny stickers
marked “Order” and “Cleansing of parasites”.
Babel always there to be renewed,
one more development fiasco
in the land of glib.
Ricardo Xavier Bousoño: an Interview

Ricardo Xavier Bousoño greeted me with a broad smile at the door to his small apartment on the outskirts of Veracruz. It was my first trip to Mexico and I was finding it hard coping with the crowds and the noise and the sheer difficulty of travelling in the relentless heat. Soon I was comfortably seated under the air conditioning and, with Ricardo’s permission, had set the small recorder going for our interview. In all, during my week in Veracruz, we met three times for a long afternoon chat, so what I reproduce here is, in fact, an edited version of three interviews.

A recurrent theme of Ricardo’s conversations was his sense of being passed over, never mentioned in awards, not invited (or worse deliberately uninvited) to festivals, excluded from magazines, having to fund the publication of his own books. Without the modest success of his paintings and installations he would have starved long ago, he confessed. “My trouble was I’m an apolitical poet – at least in the sense people understood things in the 70s and 80s. I’m gay. I would have been dead if I stayed in Argentina. I hate the fascist bastards but I was never about to fall in love with Fidel. Always my instinct has been not to trust idealist programmes, not to trust any group that promises salvation. I had the misfortune of being a 21st Century poet stranded in the 20th Century. I was born sceptical, some would say cynical but I don’t use that word. No one wanted to publish me. I wasn’t part of the in-group. I once had a dream I met Neruda and he told me I had a bad smell. Or maybe it was a bad spell. It was a crazy dream, all in English. I once met García Marquez in Caracas and said to him, ‘If you think Fidel’s so great would you want a Communist dictatorship for Colombia?’ ‘No, not for Colombia’, he said, ‘It wouldn’t work there.’ ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘you motherfucker, so it’s all right for Cuba to be fucked over by Castro and his cronies but not Colombia. You know in Cuba they’d lock me up too and probably torture me for good measure just for the hell of it. I don’t trust any dictatorship.’ “

When I met Ricardo that afternoon in late August 2010 he was already very sick. At fifty-seven he looked like a man in his nineties. He told me it wasn’t the drugs he’d done all those years – it was cancer. He was already in the final stages of bone cancer. I offered to go away and stop bugging him.
“No, no,” he insisted. “I’m curious to have someone from so far away interested in my work. If you want to translate my poems that’s fine. Though in a way oblivion would be better.”

I asked about Brazil where he spent seven years after getting out of Argentina in 1976. “Weird,” he said, “Gullar escaped Brazil to be safe in Argentina and I escaped Argentina to be safe in Brazil. Back then there were monsters everywhere. You just had to get lucky – I was lucky. You’ve seen our dear friend Fernando – you know what they did to him?” I knew. I didn’t have to be told. I’d seen the burn scars on his arms and legs. Thirty-five years later. While through a haze his hand and eyes had indicated his whole body. And then he’d described how they did it. “I didn’t want to write political poems,” Ricardo went on, “I didn’t want those bastards to think they’d captured my psyche for the rest of my life. I didn’t want to give them that satisfaction. But everyone’s different. I respect deeply, very deeply” he added, making sure I’d caught the seriousness of his voice, “those like Cardenal or Raúl Zurita who live and write out of their commitment, out of their need to speak of horrors. And I respect Juan Gelman of course, there’s no need to say it, for all he does, though seventy percent of his poetry is I think pretty slight, one-dimensional or very thin you could say, but that’s not the point. I can only be myself. I tried at first in the late seventies but I could never sit down and write poems of witness. Partly because of my temperament. Partly because they never got me and it would feel like bad faith to write poems about comrades or the whole Neruda shit. I got lucky: I escaped in time. So how can I pretend to some kind of martyrdom? When I first got to Brazil I wanted to write political poems. For the first three years in São Paulo, one hour, two hours early morning every day I tried to write. Nothing, blank, nada. The rest of the day I painted – that worked. Then one day, I had my own place by then, I sat there as usual and it just came to me, the whole nightmare of my first six months in São Paulo. Cooped up in a friend’s apartment, afraid of my own shadow, can you imagine it? ‘Don’t go out’, he’d say all the time, ‘You can’t trust anyone. There’s police informants everywhere and they’ll sell you to the secret police just to get the money for a bus trip to visit their sick mother in the countryside.’ I used to joke with him that I was under house arrest – so that’s when I wrote the poem you’ve translated ‘House Arrest in São Paulo’ – that was the first poem in my book
Utilities. I remember writing it very rapidly in two days back in December 1979.”

Bousoño’s living room was lined with books in several languages – French, German, English, as well as Spanish. Just as in Eugenio Montejo’s Caracas apartment that I visited in 2005, there was an LP of Alec Guinness reading The Waste Land. Bousoño explained how Latin American poetry had always been cutting edge and eclectic. It wasn’t something invented in the 1980s by the neo-baroque poets. “Vallejo published Trilce in 1922 and it’s more avant-garde, more out there, than anything written in Europe at the time”, he went on, “whereas, from what I’ve read, Australian poetry didn’t enter the 20th Century till the 1970’s with Forbes and Tranter.” I wanted to protest that this was unfair to poets like Webb, Slessor and Brennan but I didn’t want to interrupt the forward rush of his ideas. In any case, in a way he was right.

I asked him about Chronicles of a Wedding and whether Perlongher’s Austria-Hungría was an influence there. “Of course I knew Perlongher”, he replied, “but our poems are quite different. I was never as political and I wasn’t into Santo Daime. He didn’t invent the comparison of the Argentine military with the Nazis either – many of them saw themselves as the Nazis and said so, often. But that poem ‘Freiheit’, it says ‘Wherever you live you can find them’ and that’s what I meant. It’s not just Argentina. It’s a global thing. Look at your country. It’s more obvious now, but even in the 1970s you had your own CIA coup when the socialist Whitlam was toppled. And I gather you’re building your own Guantánamo at Port Hedland or Nauru, incarcerating refugees, asylum seekers and illegals. The script is set and the client states follow. As someone wrote a few years ago in the New York Times, ‘We are all torturers now’.” The conversation stopped, and the room suddenly narrowed and darkened as his words sank in.

I asked how he got to Brazil and how he came to know Ferreira Gullar. “There’s a strange story in that,” he said. “About a month before the coup a friend tipped me off how they planned to kill every gay in Misiones – he said this was not a joke, systematically they planned to do this and maybe starting within a week. So I caught the bus to Bernardo de Irigoyen and then walked over the border. There were so many people on the road and I had papers from a friend of a friend in the Gendarmerie so I could get out. There were
hundreds of people leaving like that – on buses, walking, by private car, whatever. So I was walking towards a bus station in the first big town after the border. I looked around and there, standing right next to me on a street corner, was this guy I recognised from my home town, an elderly guy, very short, lame in one leg – ‘the one true inhabitant of Misiones’, that was what everyone called him. All his life he was writing this book. Whenever you met him he had it with him: vast printed sheets he’d sometimes wrap round him in folds like a flag, or tuck under one arm so he looked like he was carrying a boat. He filled small square-lined exercise books with his poems, all written with his favourite fountain pens in blue ink, and every year or so he’d take them to a friend who had a small printery. That’s how he made his famous ‘Editions of one’. ‘It’s a true book,’ he’d say, ‘it doesn’t dissolve in the rain.’ Somehow we all guessed it was a single long poem tracing the true story of an imagined place, maybe in Argentina or Brazil or Paraguay. I asked him what he would do now the great evil had come. He said somewhere, not too far across the border, he’d wait it out, wait till the monsters had gone. I said it would be a long wait. He said nothing to that, just looked beyond me into the trees and the darkening sky. I’ve thought about him and his book for a long time now. I’ve never read it – never even skimmed part of it. He didn’t let people read it. I asked him once but he said I wasn’t ready yet. Never ‘it’ wasn’t ready – just me. That’s how he always was.”

Later he talked a little about his friendship with Ferreira Gullar and all his years in Brazil. “It’s funny. After *Utilities* and *Chronicles of a Wedding* I virtually stopped writing for decades. And then, five years ago, I started again. Over the past five years I’ve been writing something new, very short. Completely unlike the poems you’ve been translating – those were all from the 80s. I’ve been going backwards, wanting to write something simple, narratival, almost like the Beats, a little like Gullar’s *Poema Sujo* maybe, though not really. I’m too close to death for bitterness or cynicism or being clever. I’ve used up all my irony.” He went back into his bedroom and brought out a folder, a *carpeta*, with a string binder and a sheaf of pages with short narrow poems on them. “Take these”, he said. “But don’t mix them with the other ones. If you want to publish them put them in a separate section. You can leave out my name if you like. Just leave people guessing. Remember: these ones I want to be simple.”
I still remember his final words to me at the doorway as I left. “I was lucky – that’s all. Inside myself I’m a coward and I don’t think my existence or non-existence is a big deal. Tomorrow, next month, next year, I’ll vanish like mist.”
ANTONIO ALMEIDA (1899 – 1981)

Antonio Almeida was born in Ronda, Spain, in 1899. His father was an employee of the Hotel Reina Victoria but died when Antonio was still young. The family then moved to Valladolid where his mother’s family lived. After working as a secretary to a local lawyer, Antonio settled in Madrid in 1934. In 1940 he migrated to Uruguay where he married. Following the military coup in Uruguay he settled with his daughter and son-in-law in Italy. He died in Rome in 1981.

He began writing poetry only late in life and a small selection was published in a Spanish-Italian edition by Faenza Editores in Milan in 2001.
Selected Poems

Waiting

I have sat down to listen to you.
I have drawn myself up into silence.
I have laid bare an imaginary table before me,
on a shelf beside me have placed two glasses –
a thimble of brandy, a wide cup of spiced tea –
and I have asked that you come
and I will listen.

It is night and cold
and I have searched so long for your presence,
your small voice in the large house
where all is absence.
Whatever you will say will find me out
housed as you are
on the outside of the world.

You are the one who lingers behind
in spaces vast and small
that wrap around the simplest things,
in ditches and lost jars,
in a row of streetlamps going nowhere,
in containers where the childhood of the dead
goes on trading bottle tops and cards.

And, if not you, who
will find for me in some forest depths
the fallen tree
where all walking stops?
A thousand white flowers
line the path through the sky.
So many have travelled that way
but you alone turned back from the door.
It is your voice I am waiting for.
Inside whatever words you say
in whatever language
it is your voice,
your being here still

in this world.

(translated 10 August 2015)
The second word of infinity’s other name overheard by a young woman crossing the intersection of Maldonado and Paraguay

You grow at the centre of my palm as a speck where two lines meet as you grow in the dawn ice glittering under a streetlamp and in the stare of a startled cat caught by a sweeper’s broom behind rubbish bins. You enter me from an open window of a club where men are playing chess or from a lone drop of rain that brushes my left eye. A driver adjusts his mirror. A woman on an early morning bus reapplyes her lipstick. Gently you take shape like two letters on a kiosk’s newspaper banner marrying for the first time with a steady indrawn breath unheard in any human language or you click behind me all at once as the faint shudder of sound that stumbles out of a dream fragment to reappear as a car brakes.

My heart is light as I walk with this chip of infinite mystery rushing to the place where I must be this morning.

(translated 29 August 2014)
Thoughts in a café

Day and world on a road that leads beyond.
I pass them by
and it’s good to know
sparks left behind have lodged
in the leaves of the chinaberry tree
I saw in a photograph of a Cuban sidewalk, circa 1912.

Nothing is lost.
Sitting beside a mirror that runs
the whole length of this café
I wait at the very edge
of a double life. Every person,
every table, cup and plate
persists in its glassy being
and the tree outside, the buildings of the street
swim towards me, ignorant of death.
Men and women lean into each other,
stand or drift. The stillness
of a Sunday without end
muffles their voices. We have
all the time of that unmoving cloud resting
above the shoulder of the young girl
with her far-away smile and long long ponytail.

My eyes lift to see your face
on the threshold of the corridor that descends,
goes on descending through
the mind’s still centre:

gone   gone    utterly gone.

(translated 12 December 2010)
On my forty-second birthday I take the bus to work

The world hangs off the edge
of a vast shelf tacked onto the void –
each time I close my eyes
it glitters faintly:
the eyes of ending.

Is there an answer in my hat
cocked at this angle among the hatless?
Will it save me
from all the terrors that lie
now half ahead and half behind me
dangling as I am
at the midpoint of my life?

You gather me, O Lord,
among those held
in the brief light.
For now you hold me back
from the great unmaking.

(translated 15 August 2011)
Rain at dawn

We are waiting for the plane
as first light comes through the eerie terminal
and the boom of voices dies out.

Back home in a neighbour’s garden the jasmine
have just opened their overpowering fragrance
and already the rain is shredding their white puffs
here and there.

In black suits holding black bundles
we are waiting for the plane
and not all of us will make it
to the other shore.

(translated 19 September 2001)
The time of weeping

When I could walk no more
I lay down at the side of the road,
beaten down, curled up,
my head wrapped in my arms.

A man went by who wept for his lost fortune.
Then a man passed by weeping for his lost home

and then another who wept for his lost father
and then, bathed in the same dust, a man
came weeping, the shape of his lost child
draped over his shoulders.

A man came staggering but almost upright,
his lost family strapped to his back.
His weeping was no longer of this earth
but tore at the sky.

And then a man approached slowly,
carrying the weight of his lost family
and a million more brothers and sisters murdered beside them.
His weeping had lost its tears.
His weeping was a rip that ran
from the crown of his head
to the fingertips of his right hand.

And then came a man who hardly moved but still moved
who was the last man
who carried on his back every face that had once
been like his face, every look, every human gesture,
and all the beings of the earth and the inhabitants of the sky
that had perished as well.
His weeping was quiet, almost silent,
and he wept that his weeping
should be the last human sound.

And I got up and took up my walking stick
and I made a very small sign in the dirt by the side of the road
that here was the end
to my time of weeping.

(translated September 1997)
Excerpts from Antonio Almeida’s Sketch for a biography

I had never really seen my own city – who does? – until those two or three weeks when I guided the foreigner, the poet, here or there, to see this or that place, to purchase little gifts he wanted for friends in Austria or Germany or Paris. It was December 1912 and I was thirteen years old. But, before I tell the story of myself and the poet, I must say a little about myself as I was then. The fourth child in a family of six, I stuttered a lot and was very slow of speech, often withdrawing for days into complete silence. It had – I was told – something to do with an illness I had as an infant. Some of the local boys teased me but there was a group who stood by me, accepting me as I was. I knew myself that, though blocked from words, I wasn’t stupid. My father always believed in me. When a famous poet came to stay at the hotel where he worked, my father decided being around someone so different might help. A curandera had told him the angels had touched me and, if I met the right person, I would start to find my own way into speech. It was my father’s idea to suggest me as the poet’s unofficial local assistant. I was an odd choice to guide a poet, and yet we communicated easily, rapidly in our mostly wordless way. He was always writing in his notebook or on sheets of Hotel paper – letters often, I knew that, but sometimes just notes or lines of poems he would repeat aloud in his slightly ringing, harsh, bright German, to see how they sounded. I think he needed to walk in order to see, in order to help his breath find the flow of words. Some mornings he read a book as he walked – from its cover I saw it was the Koran.

I remember one day especially. We had walked to the southern edge of the city, to visit my Aunty’s workshop where she made tiny mosaics of glass. He’d just bought one as a souvenir when we began the walk back. There was a large barren patch between two houses. “Look”, he said, and I turned in the direction I thought he was pointing. How this could be I don’t know, but there was a lion resting against a wall and an old man with a very long beard at its feet. In the man’s lap a book was open. Its binding was the colour of blood, the colour of flames. The lion looked right into me, peacefully, like the gentlest possible summons or like an offering. In a moment the vision vanished: just thistles, barren space, pale cold winter light against a whitewashed wall. Then the poet said again, “Don’t you see it” and
I realised he had been pointing in a different direction, not at that small barren patch, but at an immense stretch of land and sky over which there was a rainbow.

Only much later, when I wrote down this vision, did I understand it enough to question: was it meant for the poet, but he was looking the wrong way? Was it meant for me, but I was only thirteen, almost wordless and would not write poetry for another thirty years? Years later I first saw a painting of Saint Jerome. The man in my vision was similar to him, but not the same. The man I saw was older and belonged to a world far more ancient, far more of this earth and beyond this earth, than Christianity. In any case, it wasn’t the old man who looked deeply into me, but the lion. I have since thought that, maybe, the lion was one of those powerful angels who come to earth at various times.

When the poet – Rilke as I later learnt – left early the next year, the memory of those days, those images, stayed with me. From then on poetry and its connection to a world other than this, a world that erupts into this, was something always there in the back of my consciousness.

My father died when I was seventeen and my mother moved us to Valladolid where her older brother lived. There I worked as a secretary for a lawyer, wrote and filed correspondence and arranged his appointments. In April 1922, just before my twenty-third birthday, he sent me for a week to Madrid with a series of errands to attend to. I took an afternoon train that was due to reach Madrid around midnight. As it wound slowly through the Guadarrama, about half-way through the journey, the train stopped at Segovia to let on new passengers. In my compartment there was now a young woman with a child, a disturbed looking man of about forty and a man whose age and occupation I at first found hard to judge but, since he read and wrote the entire trip, I quickly dubbed him “the professor”. The small boy was soon asleep in the woman’s lap. The middle-aged man began mumbling to himself and gazed anxiously at the window as if some disaster was pressing on him and he didn’t know how to lift it. I was travelling light, my battered case containing only the few items of clothing and toiletries needed for a week in the capital. I could sense that, though the “professor” appeared fully absorbed in his own papers, he was taking in everything around him, sifting and
holding clear the essence of everyone in that small compartment. At some point I began to think of him not as “the professor” but as “the poet”.

About an hour out of Madrid rain started falling. We seemed at once strangely isolated, the inhabitants of a tiny ark labouring through the mountains and the darkness. It felt, that night, as if a great catastrophe was heading towards all of us but also I sensed that something powerful was protecting us. I imagined an invisible rainbow had haloed our train. Eventually we reached Madrid. On the platform two or three people were there to greet the man I thought of by now as “the poet” and so I overheard his name: Antonio Machado. As happens when you are young and such things mean more, I was struck by the coincidence of our names: Antonio, Saint Anthony, the patron saint of finding.

Several years later I bought the book Nuevas canciones and saw the poem “Iris de la noche”. Instantly I recognised the woman, the small boy falling asleep in her lap, the anxious man mumbling to himself. I was not, am not, in the poem. You might imagine that this would have disappointed me but not at all. I understood I was not in the poem because, like Machado, I was a witness to the miracle that takes place in the poem and so, of necessity, must be outside it. I had seen those people, our small compartment surrounded by night, in the way Machado had seen it, had written it inwardly without words and so was being marked as a poet without yet being able to write poems. I felt Machado had left me out to tell me what matters most: “The poet is outside the frame. He preserves the needed balance by extinguishing himself. Instead of being buffeted by the chaotic, disordered back and forth of feelings, instead of sinking secret hooks into others by proclaiming what we take to be our own love or tenderness, the poet needs selflessness. Only in that way can the feelings that things generate in themselves be perceived most powerfully, be taken somewhere inside ourselves to find, eventually, their true words.”

But, for all that, in the following twenty years, though I tried several times, there were no poems. I remained wordless and alone in life. In July 1936 when the war broke out I joined the Republican Army. Working with others, swept up in the struggle, I started to lose my wordlessness. Wounded at Teruel, I was moved to the Communications section first in Madrid, then in Barcelona. In the end I made it across the frontier into France.
and there met Ana Mercedes, Emilia’s mother. We married on the boat to Uruguay and, along with so many other Spanish refugees, began our new life in Montevideo. Not long after the birth of Emilia I started to write the first poems that I felt worked as poems. It was extremely slow, requiring endless revisions, and at first I only wrote one poem every two or three years, but poems I was willing to accept did at last start to come.

I was now a successful businessman, owner of a small electrical supplies and repairs shop. Life seemed settled when my wife, Ana Mercedes, fell ill with an extreme fever and, without the doctors ever diagnosing what it was, died in the course of three terrifying days. I was in a state of shock and despair. I did not know how I would find the strength to continue. I had a fourteen-year-old daughter to take care of but I could barely take care of myself. My life felt as if it had been completely torn out of me. It was in this state that I met the man whom I still think of as Elijah.

About a month after Ana Mercedes’ death, night came down within me. I felt the absolute certainty that, for the moment, I must place my daughter apart from me, somewhere safe. We had neighbours who were very kind and so I left my daughter with them and walked out into night. Soon I had no sense of where I had walked or who I was. In front of me and behind me streets elongated or changed shape. For the first time the weight of everything I had lived through – my father’s death, the loss of my family in the Civil War, the crushing of Spain, and now Ana Mercedes’ death – jolted me like a massive explosion of wiring in the chest, like a heavy blow to my temples. I walked and walked. How many hours had gone by? I remember seeing a bridge over railway tracks and the line of the sea.

I was seated on a bench when I returned to myself. From the dampness of my face I knew I had been weeping. I still did not know where I was or how I might find my way back. I could grasp little more than the memory of my name, “Antonio”, and the image of my daughter. I remembered she was safe with the neighbours if I could only remember where I lived.

In this darkness that seemed beyond darkness a tall man with a rough beard and dirty clothes appeared, someone with the looks of those who live on the street, “un clochard”, the French word came to me I don’t know why. I don’t know how to say this but he looked completely through me, a
brusque, almost contemptuous, look that mingled with an extraordinary delicacy. “I have been sent to bring you home”, he announced. I was confused by his strange statement and started asking a string of questions. He just looked at me with a sort of condescending impatience that, in other circumstances, might have angered me. “I am here. That’s enough”, he replied. Then through a series of questions, word by word, he prompted me to remember my surname, my occupation, the name of where I worked, the cafés I went to, my daughter’s name. Memory came more easily because it felt that he knew all these things already and was only pretending curiosity to help me fix these things more clearly in my mind.

So we began our walk back, but it was not a straight walk. I was soon aware he was guiding me a very long way around past various shops that sold pastries, past a synagogue, a barber’s shop, a chess club. From time to time people greeted him in Yiddish. And all the while we talked – or, to be more precise, he talked and I listened. He knew everything that I knew but much more. He recited in German the poems Rilke had written in Ronda and the poem by Machado. He spoke of the madness in Europe and in Spain. Most of all we talked – how this happened I don’t know – of the book of Job. He would take a few lines of Job and interpret them one way, then demolish what he had said and interpret them another way. I cannot remember the details of his arguments but, as his commentary went backwards and forwards across the book, I felt the history of humanity and my own history were held there, acted out and made clear in his words. As we traced our way back in slowly narrowing circles I could feel Job’s anger, his knowledge of himself and his determination not to let God off, cleansing me. At one moment, like a sudden jolt, like a voice both inside and outside me, I heard the words, “Write the poems. Write all the poems.” How my poems could be connected to the story of Job I don’t know but it felt clear, that night, that they were. More quietly but several times a sentence also slipped into my head: “You have your daughter and your poems – that is your lighted path through the wilderness.” Three times I heard that sentence though I am sure neither myself nor the stranger said those words.

Just after dawn I stood on the landing outside the neighbour’s apartment and rang the buzzer. As I heard someone come to the door I glanced around but he had gone already. I thanked the neighbour and went
back to my flat with my daughter. By now there was a strong sense of calm in me, enough to focus on the tasks ahead of me. About two years later my daughter made friends with a girl who had recently lost her father. The mother and I never quite worked out to be a couple, but there was a beautiful July evening I remember when all four of us stayed at a place she owned in the country. I remember the girls wanting to mark the evening by tying prayer flags round the tree.

Several years went by. I had been working late one evening at the repair shop when a boy arrived with a note he said had been given him by a strange man who looked like a hobo. The note asked me to meet him at a certain intersection not far away in an hour’s time. I knew it must be the man I still thought of as Elijah. Sure enough there he was at the intersection. He told me that things would get bad in this country very soon and, when they did, I should take my family elsewhere. He said I should go to Italy and gave me the names and addresses of people who could help me there. When I asked for his name he smiled and said, “Just describe me. They will know who I am.” He took an envelope from his raincoat and gave it to me. “I don’t need this,” he said, “but it will help you buy the four plane tickets you will need. Don’t wait too long – the moment the violence starts to happen, go.” Five years later what he said came true – the military dictatorship, death squads. And by then he was right – there were four of us as my daughter was now married with a son and also a baby, a daughter, who travelled with her and didn’t need a ticket.
How I came to meet Antonio Almeida: Rome airport, March 1981.

At the end of August 1980 I went to Madrid, intending to spend at least a year there teaching English and learning Spanish. As it happened I was there little more than six months, my plans overtaken by the onset of depression and a series of anxiety attacks that convinced me I had to return to familiar surroundings. It was with a profound sense of defeat, of repeated failure, that I set about organising my return.

Although I had originally thought of flying home through London, I found a cheaper deal that involved flying to Rome and spending a few days there before flying on to Sydney. I had barely collected my baggage and entered the main concourse of Rome airport when a woman approached me. She spoke to me in Spanish and asked a strange series of questions: “Did I speak Spanish? Had I come from Madrid? Was I Irish?” (I told her I was Australian but my ancestors came from Ireland – “That’s perfect”, she said.) “Was I a poet?” (To which I answered “Yes” though, at that time, I had written very few poems.) She then introduced herself as Emilia and explained briefly that she wanted me to meet her father who was very ill and had been looking for someone who matched my description – my limp, my age, my Irish background, my coming on a flight at that hour from Spain – to entrust the eventual translation of his poems to. I gathered they were following some kind of prediction, possibly an act of cartomancy, and that, to them, knowledge of the Spanish language, something that could always grow over time, was less important in their translator than an obsession with poetry. (“However long you require, whatever you can manage, even just five or six poems. You have many years ahead of you. Think of it as a blessing for both of us,” Antonio said.)

I at once went with her, like a sleepwalker guided by forces to which he has completely surrendered. Emilia drove me to the hospital where her father was, then later I stayed at her place, along with her husband and two children. I felt entirely safe in their presence as if all the fears I had been through myself were now at an end, or at least as if, through her, I had been given a sign that this darkness in my life now had a term set to it. By becoming her father’s translator I had been given a fresh chance at life.
MARIA ZAFARELLI STREGA (1961 – ?)
My attempts to find Maria Zafarelli Strega

During my partner’s absence in Bhutan I went by myself to Buenos Aires in late May 2014 to find out what I could about Maria Zafarelli Strega. I had read the few poems by her included in Alianza Editores’ *Antología de Poesía Rioplatense*, originally published in 1993 though I owned the expanded second edition of 2011. I loved the poems, was curious about her and wanted to find out more. It seemed she was still alive, but where? A friend in the film and theatre business in Buenos Aires had suggested an address but no one there had heard of her. Asking at nightclubs and bars in the Palermo district (a suggestion sparked by correspondence with one of the staff at Alianza) eventually brought a result.

After three nights of useless searching, I met a middle-aged woman who gave her name as Carlotta and immediately sparked up at the mention of Maria Zafarelli Strega’s name. “Of course I knew Maria”, she said. “Buy me another drink and I’ll tell you about her.” The chill from an open side door drifted across us. Up on stage a rather shrill singer had just finished a round. A noisy group of Spanish tourists had moved on to another nightclub. We settled down at a table in the rear of the bar and she began, “Maria was tough – her life was tough. When she was young she was wealthy, I mean they were all wealthy, her family, but cursed because of that father of hers, a monster if there was ever one. Dead now and anyone might have done it, though I’ve got my theories. The only really happy time in her life was the summer holidays with her grandparents in Uruguay – at Punta del Este. She’d talk about the huge drop from her grandparents’ house to the ocean and the din of cicadas. And then, when she was twelve, her grandparents both died. I don’t think she ever got over that shock. She told me too about when she was fourteen and another girl in her class sat on a window ledge to feel the top of her head, found all these bumps and told her she was destined to be a great genius. She never spoke about her father and the terror she and her mother knew because of him – I think she was too frightened ever to talk of that. But, as I said, he’s gone now, found in a lane near Teatro Colon with three knives in him. She disappeared just after that.” She said this last phrase slowly, with a knowing look I thought, but maybe I’m reading too much into it. “Maria told me she was twenty two,” Carlotta went on, “when she finally got free of
her father. She’d left secretly for Uruguay, finally ready to become someone else – the only way she could ever be herself. It was tough, her three years in Montevideo. Moving from place to place, half-starved sometimes, looking for cheap places to eat or sleep or escape from it all with alcohol or pills, mostly in Aguada and Villa Muñoz, never that far from the Estación General Artigas – that was when she met Aurélie, the great love of her life. But if you know about Maria you know about Aurélie. I don’t want to talk about Aurélie – if you know how it ended it’s too painful to talk about, and maybe I’m jealous – maybe I hoped somewhere I would be loved like that. But I was never Maria’s type. We got to know each other around the time she and Aurélie broke up, after she’d tried to kill herself with barbiturates. But I don’t want to talk about that.” And at that Carlotta looked worried, confused, downed her drink, swept everything into her handbag, and prepared to leave. “I forgot. I should be somewhere else. Come back tomorrow night and I’ll meet you here. I don’t want to talk any more but you can see the scraps of writing she left me. It’s all I have of hers . . . she never liked photos.” And with that she rose to her feet and, slightly the worse for her several drinks, vanished into the chill late autumn night.

The next day I went back to the bar and waited and waited. At one in the morning there was still no sign of her so I left. I returned the next night and waited. When she hadn’t turned up by twelve thirty I started to leave. We almost collided in the door as Carlotta walked in, making no apologies as if the missed night had not existed. Once we were seated at the same table in the rear of the bar she produced from her handbag a battered dog-eared copy of a French edition of Aurélia by Gérard de Nerval. And, as I opened the front cover, there on the title page was the word “Aurélia” surrounded by hand-drawn stars and a strange shape that on closer inspection was a bolt of lightning severing a pigeon into two parts. Flipping through the book I saw pasted onto various pages small cards covered in what I took to be Maria’s handwriting, at times in a peculiarly disjointed Spanish. Were these really the writings of Maria Zafarelli Strega, the poet born in September 1961 whose whereabouts had been unknown since 1995? Her name was written on the front cover, in a neat miniature script that certainly looked like the one letter of hers I had been shown from the archives at Alianza Editores or, to my mind, like the scrawl on a handful of similar
cards later brought out by the owner of a bookshop on Calle Florida, another enthusiast of her poetry whom I met through introductions from my film and theatre friend, Fernando. (When I spoke to the woman at the bookshop a few days later, shortly before flying back to Australia, she gave the impression she was tired of the mysterious disappearance and the endless speculations. She seemed fairly certain that if Maria had disappeared it was because Maria had wanted to disappear. After all, she said, the years of the dictatorship were long gone and there seemed little reason to suspect foul play, and yet?)

Carlotta spoke very little that second night, content to give me time to read the notes and, with her permission, I copied down several of the cards. There were many I barely glanced at, cards with only phone numbers, names of people, individual disjointed words or phrases scrawled in ways I could not decipher. They seemed to point towards a privacy I already felt should be left as privacy. It was Maria’s writings as a poet I was interested in. I already felt I had come as close as I ever would to the real Maria. Her thin volume of poems I have never been able to track down – only 100 copies were produced in 1988 and there have been no re-issues. It is only her poems in the Anthology I have ever been able to find. The fragments I found on the cards I will reproduce (in translation) here. I was struck by the strangeness with which she wrote about herself, almost always, in the third person, not unlike the poem in the Alianza Anthology titled “From the notebooks of Maria Zafarelli Strega”.

Only later on the plane back to Sydney did I recall a certain phrase used by Ana, the woman in the bookshop, “Sometimes when people disappear they stay exactly where they are.” It occurred to me that, if Maria had changed her name once, she could do so again and for a few moments I wondered, but it seemed too crazy a thought, could Carlotta be Maria?
The Card Collection

MZF’s vertiginous reinvention of herself began at age 22 on a sidewalk near the Cementerio del Norte in Montevideo, a cold morning in mid-winter. She no longer had a name – that baggage of evil had fallen into the sea on the ferry from Buenos Aires – and for three days she had wandered the city without a name. That morning she saw it appear all by itself on a shop window frosted over by 6 am chill: Maria Zafarelli Strega. Her name.

She heard only the sounds no one hears.

Poor Maria. If she could just climb out of herself and step down into the other world. Then she could love.

She always dreamed of living in Paris but every time she saved up money to go there someone would break into her flat or strangers would steal it. Even when she had no flat, even when she had no money. She was destined to survive here only or not at all.

It will not be easy to be born under the earth. I have heard plants tell me that.

An ordinary evening in the park near Paseo de Florida. She was invited by two mice to accompany them and she tracked her way across the park into a deserted building, the two mice constantly looking back to make sure she was
following. Once she entered the building, they wanted her to go down into their underground burrow and she had to explain patiently that this was not possible. And from the window, just above her, the leaden weight of the sky kept trying to force her to surrender.

For a whole month during the bitterest winter of my memories, in a hovel near the docks I would unfold my map of Paris. The two working girls who let me stay there marveled at the joy I took in my map. I would say out loud, I will write this novel on this street, on this street I will write a poem, at a bar near this corner I will begin my most famous book. And I would imagine making my way through the curves and steep tunnels of lanes leading to Père Lachaise or heading across the Marais. The two girls watched with incredulity as I played with the map. I was at some time the lover of both girls but we did not make love anymore. Our bodies had become too strange, too much a tangled skein of catastrophes. I remember once kissing the long scar that trailed down one girl’s belly. I remember a very drunken dawn when one of them tried to kiss the knot of pain that kept exploding deep under my skull. When they made it back to the room at dawn after all the clients of the afternoon and the night, after working the streets and sometimes being kicked and beaten, they came back to sleep.

Years later I had a much older woman who was my lover. When she left me she said, “I have made this for you. Lay this small sack of herbs over your eyes and you’ll find sleep. Someday you’ll see. When you can’t give love anymore, at least you can give sleep.”

I was destined to survive here only, to invent my name, to discover almost nothing – but that slender thread would be everything.

Self-sabotaging faces in a frosted mirror at dawn.
We were breathless like the wire of the sky.

When the cat came to play with me and I had to explain that I would be dying soon it understood everything straightaway. Everything I could never explain to people was clear straight away. And because words were almost unnecessary, new playful words migrated into my head or suddenly were just there, secreted by some twist in a vein or fold of tissue, puffed up there and then like balloons in the vexing inner chamber of my head. The words were not audible. I simply saw them, like the words of my new name that just wrote themselves out before me one morning. They made me remember things that came from another world.

She was being driven out along the magical bridge of the seven rivers. River after river flowed slowly by under the narrow bench of her carriage while, in front, the driver sat idly flicking a knot of string into the air above the horse that shifted a little forward every few moments. An immense dawn sky stretched in layers of gold and pink interrupted by white wisps of cloud, but there were no birds. She wondered why in all the teeming flow of waters there were no birds, and why the silence of the world was so total. ‘India’ she thought to herself, and here she was, being driven towards this secret India devoid of people, this plain of silent rivers and limitless dawn.

Each river she crossed was less than a river – it was as if every river had been shredded into thin ribbons of water in an inexhaustible plain. Is this the Ganges or the pampas, she wondered. “Nous voyageons vers l’Orient mais nous sommes en ‘Oriente’,” she said to herself in French, using the old Argentine name for Uruguay, and then, counting each separate stream she was passing, she thought “when the sequence of finite numbers has run out I will wake up at my grandmother’s house in Punta del Este.”
Waiting out the grey wind. Sometimes I wake and I think: it is somewhere. In a small box slipped under the floorboards of the stairs, my blue wish, my breath. What came out of my eyes one night, what hid away.

At a certain time I had to say, No, I will not go any further down the dark road. I will stop just here, under this tree, and write for two days, then I will die. And the two days grew and grew and started to look, almost, like a lifetime.

Along the flat endless road where I walk, sheltered from the brisk wind by fragrant burning piles of cow-dung, I stop beside a small one-room house where I catch sight of a tiny mirror dangling from the ceiling. Stepping through the doorway, I am suddenly in a corridor of whirling mirrors, each turning at different angles at different speeds as if in answer to a multitude of undetectable breezes, a myriad of off-centered climates or micro-whirlwinds that arise only in private deserts. Fearfully I step among them and my face slips into one mirror while my hands, my legs are elsewhere. I am enjoying my fractured loneliness when a woman steps from behind a curtain. She is wearing purple gauze and a conical blue hat that is topped with the sign of the moon. “It is all frightfully simple,” she says. “You just choose.” And her smile slides back and forth between a wide gentleness and a knowing carnivorous intensity. Between the small circling diamonds of glass I freeze and I wonder, Am I she?

Who is it who comes to me, who is almost known, almost visible, almost might leave a glance inside me, a thumb print on a wall, a name, even just a single word, now in extremis as a curtain falls back into place when the breeze stops, something or someone whose gliding past brushes me, glare of the one day so awful, yet needing to be stayed with, this absolute face I yearn
for, the longest arc of days, washing of the sea through the window of death, wave on grey wave tilting towards the end of vision, almost slightly, who?

Yesterday all day rats circling round me – first in the rat eyes of the old woman nibbling at the fingers and toes of the children caught in the sugar house, then in the two small sandals worn by the woman eaten by rats. When all that is left is terror and hunger. When we are both the rat with its numbed eyes and the victim unable to escape, a wilted starved body nailed to a bed of collapse. In the distance the rising falling notes of the legendary piper who would lead away our nightmare. A music in the world’s far corner that holds the key to our unsuspected otherness. The part of us already elsewhere.
Poems from the Alianza Anthology *Poesía Rioplatense Contemporánea*

From the Notebooks of Maria Zafarelli Strega

1.

Despite the monsters we are here.
Such small threads have lasseled a distant star
to a mirror of ice.
Who are we to be graced
with this clumsy incomprehensible abundance?

We barely walk the road of the sky.
Hobbled by the world,
this ecstasy.

2.

I don’t know how I manage to live
so crowded out by them –
no one released to heaven
since those doors shut firm millennia ago.
Always there are more of them,
and they keep invading each thing I touch,
each plank I move across
hemmed in to right and left
as I go on, letting more and more escape me,
simplifying down till I have to vacate
every memory
and live only in the question
“Who am I?”
but even that bewilderment
comes to me battered by this throng of faces and voices,
this distorting shifting mirror
that repeats:
even as pure absence
you have nowhere to go.

3.

For now
they have hauled us out of a difficult heaven.
Fish-hooked by the stars.
Bent-double people.
Sifted through the sky people.
In this thin air.

4.

In the Book of Lions the cavern opened out.
And the soul descended a long staircase,
hearing always further ahead
the soft waters of oblivion.
Each fall lifts the heart.
Each notch of darkness
promises the sky.

You are the woman I see in my tiny hand-mirror.
Your lips bear the beauty of the dead.
Asphixia

On the hill the black sky chokes the purple house
my cry goes out
to no one

I will drink the glass of water
My death is teeming there –
a red vibration, the signature
of fractured eyes

Tuesday climbs the hill
slopping pails of skulls
At the grandparents

Two doors down
you reigned your cheerful notes
in tune with the faint ringing of a sherry glass
as your smile leant over
the pink tilted head of the parrot
meditative and omniscient in his perched cage.
How he rocked, his white salt tongue
tainted by the sea that lurched
always at your shoulder in the window
while we munched your sweets,
slightly frightened like Hansel and Gretel
in your stucco biscuit house.
The dizzy green drop beyond your garden
was all the length of summer falling
to the sea
and when we left at the front gate
our eyes fell step by step into the stillness
where jasmine, frangipani and that
green creeping abundance that has no name
jostled our senses.
The red paint on my grandparents' front fence
stays unflaking in memory
long after all our deaths.
And my eyes still crave the sea.
In the end

the paper shines through
so that now
from the vastness of the book in front of me,

from all its
never-to-be-unscrambled subplots,
this empty silent being-here

is its gift.
LAZLO THALASSA (1940 ? - ?)
Lazlo Thalassa: A Biographical Note

This eccentric Mexican poet of mixed Bulgarian and Turkish origins is a shadowy figure whose very existence has been much debated. Lazlo Thalassa’s monumental poetic work *Of Fate and other inconveniences* is apparently a translation into Spanish of a manuscript found in a small monastery outside Skopje. Though written in Cyrillic script, the original text was long known to be in a non-Slavic language – at first it was thought to be a variant of Greek, Latin or medieval Tuscan but that hypothesis was soon abandoned. After prolonged study Lazlo decoded it as an abandoned offshoot of old Persian.

Lazlo first contacted me via email with a request that I translate his book from its original Spanish into English. He explained the work as itself a free translation (rather in the manner of Pound’s Propertius) of the 15th century poet Hieronymus Gesualdo, a heretic refugee from Urbino who settled on the shores of Lake Ohrid to write his epic in old Persian, a wily stratagem to maximize confusion and escape inquisitorial scrutiny.

In attempting to recreate the shifting mood and deceptive structure of Lazlo’s *Of Fate and other inconveniences* I imagined it as an expression of Gesualdo’s Lake Ohrid, a surface of great sunlight, of pleasure boats and laughter, of holidaying Polish and Russian girls in sultry bikinis with a taste for strong drinks, and beneath it all a river is flowing, a river in the depths of the lake that comes from somewhere higher up and will travel much further, bearing the cold weight of earth’s sunless core, to join the oceans of the world. As much a sea as a lake, with storms and unknown dark currents, it is, like that other deep rift of prehistoric water Lake Tanganyika, a trace of something far older than humans, a place that suggests the before and after of a species as much as any private vulnerability.

A final warning to the reader: Thalassa clearly omitted whole passages from the original where he was unable to make sense of Gesualdo’s idiosyncratic use of a hieratic language intended to have only one speaker: the King of Kings interceding for his people with the gods. Those who live by the razor perish by the razor: Thalassa’s own Spanish was in many places beyond me – words and expressions not in any dictionary, not appearing anywhere on the Web. Several passages he apparently wrote in the dialect of the
neighbourhood he grew up in, a barrio of a small town on an island that sank into the southern Caribbean fifty-five years ago. No Spanish speaker I spoke to understood these phrases. I have had to use my own discretion.

Postscript

Some time after my work on a version of Of Fate and other inconveniences Thalassa contacted me again, insisting on his personal reality while admitting that he himself (but fate as well) had been the author of much confusion. He published his poetry under the pseudonym of Lazlo Thalassa, he explained, in part to preserve his anonymity as Miguel Todorov, a research scientist in plate tectonic theory, but mostly to avoid the inevitable confusion with his unrelated namesake Tzvetan Todorov. He wanted to send me a copy of his latest book El Señor L’Amoroso and Other Strangers which he thought I might be interested in translating. I soon spotted the stylistic similarities, the love of the Renaissance and the referencing of English literature of the Elizabethan and medieval period. In Of Fate and other inconveniences Thalassa references Shakespeare, in the poem I have translated from El Señor L’Amoroso it is Malory. There is the same disregard for historic periods and the catapulting of the self into the story. Where else but in Lazlo Thalassa would Dostoyevski brazenly usurp a line of Ezra Pound’s? I look forward to translating more of these poems.
LAZLO THALASSA  (ADDITIONAL TRANSLATIONS)

Selected Poems from *El señor L'Amoroso and Other Strangers*
The entrance of L’Amoroso at the Grand Concourse for Skeletons.

1.
The plane came in limping down the runway.
Arriving for the banquet of the skeletons,
L’Amoroso (his woven bag filled
with parchments, sonnets and sonatas, the plumed
articulation of a wild bird’s soaring) crosses
the tarmac, glides through
the trembling doors: fragrant bursts
of pine forest, of dark earth
and rising ocean mist, ooze
from his bones.

A flotilla of doves, willow-branch-laden, brush
his coiffed and perfumed head.
He enters a room of candelabra, of
massed candles, gold brocade, escorted by
two lutes, a zither, five violas.
A scurry of page-boys, lords and ladies,
suddenly stock-still, all
hushed for his passage.
In the frilled garb of half-naked choristers
two sopranos, a contralto
weave their voices towards some inner Spring.
On a star-painted floor of darkness
two actors, their bodies draped in silk,
mime the fifteen poses of the sacred lovers.
In vestibules to right and left flutter
the red fleur-de-lis of Florence.
High horns float gold ripples of La Serenissima.
The centre aisle becomes the Grand Canal
as, across mirroring conflicted waters,
embroidered notes and coins sail back and forth
while, to each side, stone, metal, glass
press downward into earth.
From elaborate doorframes
pre-fabricated word-skeins glitter
a thousand ideograms for “Welcome”.
All breath extols this
geography of love to which the lutes ascend.

Meanwhile the conference of skeletons by moonlight has begun.
L’Amoroso enters the chamber of xrays
where everything inside him
is outside him, ribs and tubing, twirled
spirals of the ear, the listening
purple flora of the gut.
And beyond that lies the room of darkness
where only the eyes, nose and mouth
glow green and pink beyond
the steady mist of gathering black.
Stripped of his entourage
he wades in. Tall and elegantly gaunt,
a trawler in the velvet cape of a young prince,
he skims the waters of this psychic reservoir,
his body a net
loosely woven to fit the heart’s detritus,
while his curled magician’s sandals
stride the flood.
There is a cupboard known only
to the fish who are reborn each day from
the saint’s recurrent nightmare of earth’s death.
In this cupboard lie the dreams
L’Amoroso must invent:
the mountain that became a moon-struck eagle;
his days in the tabernacle of fire; his life
among the white stone trees, the white flowers,
a snowscape where his face is hidden
by the wind-dusted scree on
a lake’s frozen surface.

And the cupboard opens its own several faces
as storage space for the afterlife of
broken computers, as the one darkness
where the skeletons won’t go, or the mind’s
inner signal box for lost trains,

while on a shelf L’Amoroso finds
a motel room that fits inside the palm of one hand
where over and over two lovers copulate
their mouths their genitals their souls
awaking each other into knowing
hour after hour for ever

and from the ream of notes for still-unwritten sonnets
tucked somewhere in the third drawer on the left
L’Amoroso’s hand pulls out the phrase

“I must into the vale of Avalon
to heal me of my grievous wound."

2.
Tucked under the door to my apartment
a note on florid parchment:

« Por favor la sua presencia
está invitado
al gran concurso de los esqueletos
afín que podía
cenare conmigo ese notte
El señor L’Amoroso. »

and straightaway I am transported
under earth, down caverns, through forests,
hurried by palanquin across tottering gorges,
halted on a bridge below a waterfall.
A fine mist passes through me
as I rise to stand at last
at one with the sky.
Meanwhile at my back I hear
the whirlwind of skeletons approach.
A chaos of air swirls overhead
and I step into
the altered hall of endings. Venice. 1610.
The lords and ladies chatter, the banners are assembled.
The high horns blazon
while outside on the runway
el señor L’Amoroso taxies in.
Prince Myshkin, falling into deep samadhi by the stabbed body of Natasha Filipovna, awakes on a sidewalk in Mexico City

1.

Not even a chance to say ‘Kak pozivaetya?’ or ‘Dobry vecher’
and always the clanging bell
between dom and doom, between dome
and home, casa and catastrophe – that
slight echo of an inward bell.
From the highest mountains that I know
(intellectually) are there
From the pit of the low lake
that I understand in my bones
I am walking across
blocked and silted up and filled
with the ash of the dead
Again the skies blaze

Never before have I seen
Never before have I smelt
Never tasted
what the throat is flooded with

Here where road intersects road
over and over
is the true shape of the cross

In Switzerland where
in tall grass above the village
I lay held by the sky
In Russia where
snow melted into my eyes and all
was a vast work of fiction played out too fast
but here at the junction of all worlds
the feeling that, sooner or later,
the sky comes to an end
knowing my mind has become
a depot for abandoned umbrellas
and so, like that, should I set out?

Arriving in the land of fire
drawn into the immense bab-el
where my speech is the howl of the other side
not me not me
but the ones that made me
sky-shapers

Above the lake
above the burning
the house that is shining arises
fivefold dwelling place of all holy ones
and from windows of light
graceful arms lean out
hands joined in prayer
above the lake that is fire
above the doom that arrives from the four directions
above the collapsing causeway
in compassionate stillness

on the sidewalk the blare of a city
workmen demolishing whole blocks of humanity
gourd-carvers knife-grinders hat-hawkers taxi cabs fruit stalls

and already stepping out of the crowd
a young boy approaches me
bearing a letter held high in his time-frozen hand
and my hand has almost reached his
the letter has almost brushed the back of my hand
when a vision intervenes – a temple
that takes the place of a letter –
the sound of chanting
a junction of five dusty tracks under a banyan tree
a fivefold path

It is the night of unbearable brightness
My eyes utter blessings

2.

Dear Prince,

please forgive me,
It was I who wrote the letter
summoning you back from Switzerland,
I bribed two of those men
to share your railway carriage
and, all those times at the stations,
that face in the crowd you kept seeing was me.
I used you. I set you up.
It’s true I was sent to Siberia,
was nearly shot by firing squad, nearly went mad,
but what I did interfering with your life
I know Christ will never forgive.
If I had left you in Switzerland
you would have grown strong with the children,
would have converted your irrepressible crowds of believers
in the riper cantons of Switzerland,
so much purer than us, so much closer to the sky.
I can foresee that in the war that is coming
you or your followers
would have converted to the peaceful joy of non-violence
that embittered man, the demagogue exile whose return
would bring so much suffering, so many deaths
to our Holy Mother Russia.
I know, then, through this one act on my part,
this whim, this caprice, the entire blood-soaked
misery of the 20th Century falls on my head.
But, even should I close my eyes to this,
that I brought you back,
that I bribed those men to entangle you,
that I made you meet Natasha Filipovna,
that I contrived for the beautiful Aglaia to fix her
somewhat bewildered need for conventional happiness on you:
all this is my unpardonable fault.

Maybe every life is like mine.
Maybe every life has so much guilt
it outstrips us,
a shame so large
there can never be room for the saying.
Maybe that is why we have ghosts,
those detached portions of uncontainable guilt
that go on trying to speak.

And now I have no idea where you are.
You never arrived back in Switzerland – I know that much.
So I have summoned the young boy with the faraway eyes,
have folded and sealed this letter, entrust it to him,
to his knowledge of all realms,
and (why even now do the words of another enter me,
why do I steal yet again from the future?)
send him a thousand miles thinking.

Yours in the love of God,

Fyodor Dostoyevski.
FEDERICO SILVA (1901-1980)
Federico Silva – A Biographic Note

Federico Silva (born in Tours in 1901 and died in Madrid 1980) was a little known painter, writer of abandoned novels and a small collection of poems. In Paris during the 1920’s and early 30’s he was a sometime acquaintance of Erik Satie, Michel Leiris, and the young René Char. While living in Madrid he translated extensively from Spanish to French, being especially interested in the poets emerging in the 1950’s and later. The Cuban concert violinist, Antonieta Villanueva, a good friend of musicians like Ricardo Viñes, Alicia de Larrocha and Federico Mompou, was his companion in his later years. His Catalan background may be spurious, nevertheless he chose to write poetry in that language under the pseudonym Umberto Suarez.
Introduction to a selection of poems by Federico Silva

Initially I had decided not to include Silva’s poetry as the work from the late 1920s and 30s under the name of Suarez seemed to me rather disappointing compared to Silva’s prose. Late in 2014, however, I came across a thin French edition of his poems. At first I assumed they were merely translations of the Catalan poems I’d already read. Instead these were late poems, written in French during the 1960s and 70s. Quite different in style and tone from his early work, they reflect his own life in a far more obvious way, as I recognised from having read parts of his journals.

A recurrent theme in the journals is his grief at the death of his mother. She died in her home outside Tours in 1942 while Federico was cut off, taking refuge from the Vichy authorities in Spain. By the end of the war the family home with parents and eight children, the whole magic world conjured in “The Garden at Vercingetorix”, was gone forever. The poem “The well” evokes that loss. A second source of grief was the end of his marriage, when in 1938 his Canadian wife took the two children, then aged nine and ten, and returned to Toronto. With the war and his wife’s remarriage it was not until 1952 that he met his daughter again. “Houses for rent (two moments in a marriage)” deals in part with that whole period of his life. I was taken aback by the mention in the poem of grevillea and fruit bats, which I thought only existed in Australia, but grevillea is also endemic to New Caledonia from where an uncle had brought back cuttings, just as he had brought a menagerie of fruit bats from Greece where they also live. The style of this poem is, I believe, decidedly Catalan or Spanish, owing something to the plain-speaking tradition associated with Jaime Gil de Biedma or Gabriel Ferrater or, equally, with Italian poet Cesare Pavese. A more playful approach is evident in “The translator’s eyesight” or the quasi-surrealist “Climbing the staircase of water”. It is curious that, settling in Madrid, where he lived with the then-severely-disabled Antonieta Villanueva, he began writing poems in French but marked by Spanish influences whereas, previously, living in France and under the spell (perhaps too strong a spell) of French poets, he wrote in

231 The reader will meet Antonieta Villanueva later in this book where excerpts from her Memoirs are presented.
Catalan. Whether it was the change in languages, the adoption of a more congenial style or simply greater maturity, these final poems strike me as far more interesting than the various collages, concrete poems and collections of puns that fill his first two volumes.\(^{232}\)

\(^{232}\) I had thought I was being rather unfair to Silva’s Catalan poetry but very recently came upon the following remarks in Villanueva’s Memoirs, Volume II. I would be the first to admit her comments are rather one-sided and exaggerated, but still I find them interesting:

“I never liked those books from the 1930’s, Jocs d’una sargantana de l’estiu and Grillons d’una taronja de foc\(^*\), and I was never afraid to tell Federico so. I couldn’t see him in them at all. Too much Michel Leiris. It’s true that in his Preface he was the first one to use the word ‘constraints’ and I claim he invented the term ‘usine poétique’, not Roussel. But how dull all that experimentalism was. They were so in love with inventing procedures for mass-producing poetry they forgot there has to be actual life in there. In music the inventors of new forms didn’t just stop and say ‘Look at me, I’m the first person to use a xylophone combined with a washbasin’, as if that was all there was to music. Think of Bartok’s last piano concerto or Poulenc’s late chamber music. Or Messiaen’s Quartet. For them innovation was simply a fresh way to channel the stuff that really matters – the horror, the beauty, the delicacy, the silence. When I saw ‘The well’ I knew Federico had found a voice. He’d finally got over competing for ‘novelty’. He’d become a poet.”

\(^*\)Games of a summer lizard and Slices of a fiery orange.
Poems by Federico Silva

The well

Far below in the valley
a small light glitters –
the pilot light of the underworld
shining from the earth-bound well
where my mother lives.

I am at the airport waiting for my cousin to arrive
bringing the sealed urn with the elixir
direct from Florida.
We will sprinkle it over her face:
ageing will stop, she will grow young again
and we will pour what remains in the urn
over the ashes of our house
and it will come back:
my brothers and I will be sitting there
at the long table,
around us space will hang
suspended for one moment
as paint grows back, laughter ricochets above us,
buried tins of long-lost regrets
reappear in cupboards –

and a single peal of my mother’s voice
will be there
sounding in the ear of each of us –
her voice
like flakes of bread made golden in a light
unknown to any of us
will settle into the deep furrows
over the eyebrows of each of our children
while our own voices chase
the whirlwind of dust.
The translator’s eyesight

*calzar:* to put on one’s shoes; *cazar:* to hunt

- Spanish Dictionary

I misread “cazando” as “calzando” so error
leads the poem in new directions.
How else would the mice learn to put on their shoes,
button their after-dinner jackets, fold
the graven tablets of protocol and assess
the pink line of twilight reddening
above the sea, weighed now
with a sombre and eloquent dispassion?

In one glance the mice take in
a candle-flame trembling on a window-ledge
and, beyond, a curve of ocean,
a small naval vessel turning
its grey shoulder to the last
flickers of a summer sky.

And like the naval vessel I turn,
buffeted by misdirection, to catch
my reflection in an off-balance gaze,
myopic. My dress shoes
hunting words that still escape me.
My borrowed mice eyes
seeing the world made new.
Jeunes filles au jardin

for Antonieta

Summer. Cloudless sky.
I guide your wheelchair down the steep busy hill,
past the fountain at Cibeles to the Retiro’s
reed-lined lake.
It is August 1961 and I am sixty
and, from behind us, the cries of young girls
come towards us. The shrillness
of their voices brushes our hair
like lost hands that still caress
the sunlight’s rich texture.

Soon under the acacia’s leaves
you are reading me a fresh installment of your memoirs.
And I see your twelve year old self
hesitant, encased in one of those
frilled many-layered dresses
girls wore in those times. Havana afternoons.
Warm twilight on the edge of formal gardens.
Discretely you lift to your lips
the crushed coolness of guava and mango
while, outside, the fountain’s wayward spray
lightly dusts your classmates as they chatter.

Above Madrid’s restless traffic
last night, hearing Alicia play, suddenly
I heard their soft whispering once more
and saw you in your twelve-year-old dress.
Their voices, your face
trapped forever in five rising falling notes.
It is Federico Mompou. Girls in the garden.
The long drive to the end of the sky

In the sixteenth year of his death
my father drives out along the wind-blown peninsula
beyond the whirling canebreaks, the glittering
ancient sandbanks where signposts and roads
lose their knowledge of human spaces
and birds and rodents watch us with heat-laden eyes.
We kids are in the back and all our later lives,
our mistakes, have been wiped clean,
lightly falling away like dead skin
from sun-burnt noses.

Care-worn as always,
my mother waits for our return
in the deep well where she now lives.
However anxious she is on the inside, for us
her face will register only the statement
that all is well. My father is flicking
between stations on the radio as he
always did, simultaneously following
a dozen news reports in four languages
and criticizing each one.

A cloud follows us, half white half
darkness and charged with
that dry summer lightning that is
the flavour of our eternal identity.
And there is somehow a waterfall
we drive through and drive beyond
into a cool sub-alpine climate
where a rainbow has brushed
the forever unchanging leaves
of pines, eucalypts and cedars.
Abundance is our life here
at the end of the sky.
THE MONTAIGNE POET

*New Essays by Montaigne*

(published in Paris and Barcelona, 2003)
The Montaigne Poet: An Introduction

In 2003 *The New Essays of Montaigne* was published. The *prière d’insérer* of the French edition identified the author as ‘The Montaigne poet’ while the simultaneous Spanish edition gave the same name to its author on the front and back covers.

Beyond the obvious fun of transparent hoaxing, *The New Essays of Montaigne* draws attention to two distinctively French literary forms – the essay as developed by Michel de Montaigne in the late 16th Century, and the prose poem initiated by Aloysius de Bertrand, Baudelaire and Rimbaud in the 19th Century but gaining its full prominence in the 20th Century with such masters of the form as Francis Ponge, Max Jacob, Henri Michaux and René Char. *The New Essays* perhaps suggests a convergence between the two traditions – both open forms enabling the inclusion of all sorts of material previously considered “non-literary”, both inviting rapid transformations and reflections on the most varied issues, both capable of being either very personal or almost impersonal in their examination of a topic from multiple sides.

My selection here is no more than a taster. I have chosen a mix of those prose poems, verse poems or essays dealing with personal life, including the life of one working inside a bureaucracy (a parallel after all to Montaigne’s reflections on service to the state) alongside others that reflect on writing itself (again a major theme of Montaigne’s work).
The Montaigne Poet: Selected Poems and Micro-essays

On falls: by way of a preface

Concussed I see a strange man sitting opposite me, in ruffled lace and black doublet. He is speaking to me in Latin. He has just fallen off a horse as I have just fallen from a height when a balustrade gave way. Our death is so close to both of us that if we stretched out our fingers the same ice would form along their edges, extending their tips until they meet. It is the year 1995 – it is the year 1575. I am listening to him: his voice enters me. As I wake from the operation to fix my shattered legs and my left shoulder blade he gives me my instructions: “Write”.
Of blindness and God’s immediacy

He folded and turned the paper, mumbling to himself and rocking in the one space of thin white light before the wall. Later they placed the folded paper, along with all the others, on a bent iron plate and slid it into the oven. And then the oven stopped. They pulled it out and unfolded the strangely shaped paper. There was no writing on it. He did not know how to write. The twists and kinks of the paper were his mnemonic – his way of impressing his story on the world because, from birth, he could not speak. And that is why the oven went out: there was no need for his paper to be burnt – it had already been directly read by God.

Immediately they went to find him in the vast underground prison that, in those days, was all that was left of their lives. They looked everywhere but neither he nor his body was found. The suggestion was then made (no one remembers now who said it) that he must have been taken up painlessly, breathlessly, in a single act of translation into the other world.
Of parents and children

At any age one can need adoption. Equally at any age one can yearn to have a child of one’s own. And why not both at the same time? A person puts their name down in the queue to adopt and, simultaneously, in another queue to be adopted. (They may have children who have grown up; they may have parents who have died; whatever.) They wait for years and years, they wait their whole lifetime. Suns rise and set on this double unattainable craving. They think: what is it to have lived without having parents? What is it to have lived without being a parent? They feel like the shell of some strange creature that has swallowed its own beginning and its end. I cannot imagine what it means to have never had a parent or to live without a child since I grew up with parents and have had children of my own. And yet those who wait forever to adopt and be adopted are also us as we are at every moment: profoundly, inextricably alone.
On first words best words

Anyone could have written this poem. I say it to myself. Maybe I wrote this poem – or maybe a young girl who wants to feel what it’s like to write a poem, or maybe an elderly man who wants to feel what it’s like to be a young girl dreaming of writing a poem. The words are there and I have no idea of their value. Perhaps they will be the last poem I will write. The young girl leans her head above the page and sees a lotus pond and, at her back, a Buddhist temple, the big one on the hill overlooking the freeway – one she doesn’t care for much anymore with its flashy bright red designs and excessive architecture, a kind of moneyed-gesture, she guesses now, from some wealthy Taiwanese businessman wishing to acquire good karma, a kind of pre-emptive atonement. Is that what poems are, she hears herself wondering. There is so much goodness in her the world will never contain it. All evening, as she prepares to write, dense thunder is marshalling itself on the four horizons. When she got home from visiting her mother in the hospital she found a grasshopper in the kitchen and took it outside, trapping it in a large glass jar before releasing it on the veranda into the large pot with her grandmother’s orchids. That and the long bamboo lounge-chair remind her of her grandmother, the legacy of a kindly deity around the house. How much goodness can she contain? Can goodness write a poem and, if not, why then write poems? This is no vanity, only (as with her meditation) the desire to go deeper. Because time is short. Because her whole long life is no more than the twenty minutes it takes for a storm to gather. Already lightning and heavy rain beat against the windows all around her. Her pen is there above the page. And she writes. Anyone could have written this poem.

Coda:

The girl has placed line breaks in the poem which the old man reading over her shoulder mentally takes out. The line breaks have no reason to be there – they could as well be here
or here.
She has put them in
to say
this is a poem.
The older man thinks you can also show that this is a poem just by saying this is a poem. Leaving out line breaks is, to him, a more economical way of filling space. Why not just say read this slowly. A full stop is a kind of line break.
Sort of.
Maybe the girl is more visual
or the man more
aesthetically atrophied.
It matters little. Either way space is filled. And emptiness left.

Anyone could have written this poem.
On the eternal nature of fresh beginnings

This body next to you, said the German expert on design, is your ideal self – what you climbed out of once and have since forgotten about. Like gills and dialogues with rainbows, like your life as a ruminant quadruped, it has been erased from your waking story. When the time is right you will step inside it and it will transport you. Do not look at the claws that dangle from its withered right arm – consider only its wings. Say to yourself the word “Perfection”. Be confident. All the stars of the universe were placed millennia ago far inside you.
Of books and silence

He is guiding me,
a man in a red fez,
beside what seems to be a line of bookcases
but what he holds in his hand is a long curved oar
with which he moves our flat-bottomed skiff forward
between the windows and spires, the winding façades of the drowned city.

Yes, he says,
all the books of the earth are here,
including those that to you
are not yet written.
Your books are here too somewhere
though we have not come for them.
I want most of all for you to feel this place,
to have the sense that it is here
on the earth’s other side.
When you wake
you will remember the feel of the water under you,
the freshness of the air
in this moment of always beginning
and these delicately tinted mirrors of glass that are books.
No one can read them all –
it is enough to drift between them
as we are doing.
The light that drips from them,
from the slightly ajar edges that are their pages,
is enough to guide you home.

– And the books, I ask,
what do they say?
Facing my last years of pain and my death,
what do they say?
– As we drift past, he says,
place your hand beside this row of light-blue windows
that are also books.
Now listen: do you understand?
The silence changes.
ANTONIETA VILLANUEVA (1907 – 1982)
Antonieta Villanueva: An Introduction.

I first came across the name of Antonieta Villanueva in a monograph published by the University of Turin on the life and work of Federico Silva, French poet and essayist, whom the reader will have met earlier in these pages. They lived together for close to twenty years. Silva in his final Madrid years is described as being “both partner and carer” for Antonieta who had lost both her legs “in an accident” and was “confined to a wheelchair”. From 1959 to Silva’s death they lived together in a small apartment off Fuencarral, a short walk from Puerta del Sol and Cibeles. The monograph also mentioned that the Cuban-born Antonieta had written a well-received and briefly very popular three volume biography, part prose, part poetry, with the intriguing title *No voy a escribir mis memorias* (“I am not going to write my memoirs”) (Vol I, Madrid, 1957, Vol II, Barcelona, 1965, Vol III, Madrid, 1969).

By 2010 when I first discovered her name all volumes were out of print and apparently unobtainable. Eventually I was able to track down second-hand copies of Volumes I and II. I am not a native speaker of Spanish and for me it requires several hours of focussed work to translate a page of poetry or complex prose, so there was no question of my attempting to translate the whole or even an extended portion of Antonieta’s non-memoir memoirs. Nevertheless, as I became increasingly absorbed by her writing and since the work was already in the form of numerous discrete fragments, I decided to prepare a short sample.

What particularly drew me to her work, besides the flair in her style and a certain haunted quality, was the series of coincidences between our lives. Both of us contracted polio in early childhood – Antonieta just after her third birthday, myself just before. Both of us seem quite distant from the

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233 On the form of her *Memoirs* Antonieta wrote in the Preface: “When I thought of writing a portrait of myself I had before me a very definite model of how this could be done. From *Impresiones intimas* written when he was twenty six to the masterpiece of his seventies, *Musica callada*, Federico Mompou, working solely with miniatures, constructed a vast, inwardly consistent, image of his sensations, his world. The accumulation of discontinuous moments heard with the utmost precision is enough to say it all.”
Hollywood image of the “battler” child “defeating” a life-threatening disease to emerge whole and triumphant. Neither in Antonieta’s account nor in my own life does it make sense to talk of personal effort or bravery triumphing over illness. There was, of course, all the work of parents and doctors, but physiological recovery, in so far as there is ever recovery, was essentially the work of invisible biological agents over which one has no more control than over any other virus or microbe that enters the body. And hospitalisations continued right though childhood and into adolescence, each time adding to the distance between oneself and other children. For both of us, polio made us who we were and it was no more possible to step aside from this than to trade in one’s body or one’s mind for a different one. What especially gripped me in Antonieta’s story is that she is struck down not once but twice. After the childhood polio she invented herself as a young violin star, and then in mid-life, after a catastrophic accident, she made herself into a writer.

But there was something even more powerful that drew me to her. This is precisely the area in which her life is so different from mine. It is not merely the Cuban background or her life as a concert violinist in the late 1920’s and 30’s. It is not something I feel able to talk about very much. Forces larger than her seem to work their way through her. She seems possessed. It is this suspicion which hovers over the edges of her book. Even when she was alive, she was haunted by others.
Excerpts from *No voy a escribir mis memorias / I am not going to write my memoirs*

Lifted up and gazing down, I fly, I fly over Havana. I am nine years old and I am three years old and twelve. My frame has gone, my sticks have gone as I have no need to walk. I see the Central Railway Station newly built and shining with flags and the magnificent department store on Florida. I see the gardens, the river, the flight of birds towards the city centre at sunset. I have slipped through the upstairs window opposite my bed and I breathe the air that at first almost burns my throat. Then, without thinking, I drink it and drink it. I become part of it, it becomes part of me. For this one hour I hold my life entire. And I weep from the perfection of it, the happiness of it, till, stricken by a sudden guilt, I go back to take my shape of a young girl lying encased in iron on a bed on the fifth floor of the Infectious Diseases Hospital and, seeing my parents enter the ward with such anxious faces, so that everything may happen, I resume my life.

* * *

It is the interminable hot summer of the year when I turn twelve. It is five weeks since I have come out of hospital, nine weeks after the last of the four operations to give me control over my legs, so I can walk. On a mission to cheer me up, my grandmother takes me to the theatre to see a visiting musical company from Madrid. It is, even then, a very old-fashioned zarzuela, stylised and wondrously over-costumed, perhaps my supposed initiation into young womanhood. I remember the small box of sweets my grandmother bought during the second interval and how one stuck to the roof of my mouth all through the complex denouement I no longer remember. I do not know why the theatre terrified me so much – the violent red of the heavy curtains, the dark sweltering heat of the salon, the distant fans whirring on the ceiling like calibrated knives. I remember feeling so out of place as if a
theatre was meant entirely for some other class of people, some other race, while I sat there a young girl in an audience composed entirely of adults.

And into this memory suddenly rushes another memory, the heavy cream of make up applied to my seventeen year old face, the white foundation, the smell of it, and my mother carefully applying strokes of red to my lips, that evening of the reception at the French Embassy, the announcement of my scholarship to the Paris Conservatoire, studies in violin and composition, to launch myself out into the world as some young Cuban Sarasate. Of that night I recall, most of all, my terror of make up as if a wall were being clamped down over me, a painted frame to encase my skull and my eyes, and once inside I could no longer soar, could no longer speak with my own voice, only some stranger’s words suddenly there echoing inside my throat.

* * *

At the threshold of the door
the black and white wasp they call “The Chooser”.
Midday is the hour
pencilled in on his calling card
but he is patient, politely reticent,
a calmly non-insistent houseguest.
He eyes all that is inside,
especially the cool rim of the glass
foaming with ice and juice, summer scents
of quiet green fruits pierced open.
He injects his lance of poison, then affably,
intractably flies away
to other doors and other stories –
but always he is “The Chooser”.

* * *
There is a tramcar that goes above the world and a narrow valley that plunges underneath it. Leaving from the beach, from the seaside park with its Ferris wheel, its miniature toy ponies trapped inside the garish colours of the merry-go-round, the little tramcar climbs above the sea perched on a perilous shoulder of red rock. Birds peck at its wires. Rivers go under us. The roar of their passage, the dizzying plunge of their waterfalls, grip us at random moments. One day early in life, just arrived in the city of culture, the famed world capital, I sit quietly huddled into myself on a bench in a park and sense the history of the planet moving by underneath me with its lazy suns and misguided moons, its withering seasons of universal shedding. Not often but every so often, all through my life, I have sat still enough to hear it. Almost, maybe once or twice, have my eyes become sharp enough to see it.

* * *

The lights are dazzling that evening in Budapest, the night of the fall. I am on stage, leaning perhaps more than I should into my violin. It is a partita by Bach and I have reached a moment of absorption in the ambivalent pain-tenderness crescendo that spins out from my hand, my arm, my thin frame, as I lean into the sound-box of my violin, this wired coffin-space of the earth’s melodies, and at once I sense a crack as my calliper gives way underneath me, buckles underneath and I crash backwards and sideways, my head bashing the hardwood floor, the broken bone from above my knee splintering the skin. And as people from backstage move to assist me I feel a great inward calm: the music inside me stilled, the red curtains of the theatre, the candelabra on the ceiling spinning, and softly I touch the back of my head where blood is oozing and, as the seconds go by, I feel more and more certain that I am not dead, am not about to die, but that my career in the concert hall, my life as I know it, is over. And I feel in the deepest sense untroubled, almost relieved, like someone stepping into a quiet knowledge long prepared inside them. I let the violin rest on the floor at some distance from my arms as if the music had gone as far as it was meant to go.
The operation in Budapest is well-intentioned but a mess. They try to redo it in Paris but, with the thin bones of my right leg, it doesn’t take. When an infection sets in they amputate. My husband of five years does not know this woman who is always in pain, withdraws, seems to shut out the world of music, is no longer interested in conversation, old friends, lovemaking, feeling only a bitter angry disgust for her own body. At thirty-three I am divorced and suddenly without an occupation. One afternoon in a café near my ground floor apartment in rue Solferino I take out a clear notebook and begin to write.

* * *

I am haunted by the others, those children and young women who lay in beds beside me in the various hospitals of my life but who did not live. The children swept away by fever, by deliriums of pain who did not come back. And when I left those places (for good I thought) at age thirteen, there is within me the pure pitch of their scream down the corridors of four a.m. Music where it stops us carries something of that scream, but moderated, articulated, reshaped into a dialogue of tension and relaxing, of soaring and giving way, coming to the edge of the precipice then drawing back. And what lies the other side of the scream?

Even now the best I have ever found to say is that the other side of the scream is magic, the silent inexplicable unfolding of magic. At age eighteen I am standing for the first time in my life in Paris, my hands open catching snow as it falls – a child of the tropics, I sense its miracle falling within me. And later I remember Ricardo Viñes playing for me the first of Federico’s Cançons i Danses, the immense trust in space held in those opening bars, the shining back of the universe. I remember thinking if only I could write music – not just play it, interpret it, but write it. Invent a wholly new way of being in the world.

* * *
The languid hour.
In the tank in the living room
the wide-eyed gobi jams a single eye against the glass –
a poking finger that scrubs and scrubs its
fixed dark corner of the afternoon.
Underneath, sheathed in the grey detritus
of a failed migration, a stone goes on
emitting bubbles.
The green waterlily is shedding
a ghost arm in spirals round the gobi
as the afternoon, our lives, are stuck.
And then mother pulls out the stool, lifts
the mahogany lid on the still shining piano, that once more
an obliquely altered wild glissando
should interrupt the silence of the living room’s
contagious clocks.

*   *   *

In the two years after my fall I start to dream patterns, to see shapes for
works that are half verbal, half music but without any clear tunes – interplays
of presence and absence, word and void, the phrases and gestures of others
cracked open to reveal an identity between sound and mask, I who no longer
make love begin to image a lovemaking of voices and silences, of screaming
and the space beyond the scream.

*   *   *

A cold wind comes to me over the escarpment. Lanterns have been left
out in the little café above the beach. As the painkillers release their calm I
start to write. A younger woman with a family of children officiates as drinks
are served and long red and white criss-crossed baskets of bread are placed
on the table. Small candles glow as the night begins to settle. My pen flows across the page as I write these memoirs.

* * *

Where does music go when it ceases to be channelled through you? My hands no longer want to touch violins or stroke the keyboard of a piano. There is a rhythm in speech, in words themselves I want to unleash. And, even more, there is a rhythm in the world itself as it circulates around me, but not specifically around me – around itself, around people, birds, trees, like the wind realigning the leaves on a path by the pond in the Jardin du Luxembourg or the silhouettes of people seen from a distance gliding or bumping down the stairwell into the metro near Les Halles, or the other day the random faces of young men leaning over drinks in a bar opposite the railway station to the south, the brightly lit Palace of Departures, and the tiredness of a waiter wiping grease from the surface of a table. And I seek out other rhythms, like the clipped falsity of a speech that, beneath its bravura, hides a repressed childhood of endured persecutions, or at this very moment a tree in the south bursting into the ragged red blossoms of its lost orient. And I remember how we move unaware through the slow ballet of plants crossing and recrossing the earth.

I do not want to write my memoirs. I want the music that died with my fall to find its other passage to me.

* * *

The butterflies that guard the portals of the underworld hover just outside my window this morning. I know them from the solemn tilt of their heads, the insistent beating of wings. In the uncertain grey of dawn they guide me down the street towards an iron grate that holds pure darkness in place. And, as I peer down into the darkness, my eyes suddenly wake to see the two butterflies once more at the window of my bedroom – to which they have led me back. The moss-covered canal banks of Havana are rocking to the
waters of Lethe. There is a barcarolle by Liszt played by my mother floating up from the living room. My brother’s kite is tilting at the skyline. And, for me, the two white butterflies have brought me home. In the cradle of mosquito netting, prickly with the heat and damp, I awake, a larva-princess, blighted and blessed.

*   *   *

In a bar in Madrid

the sky has crumbled like dust in my hands,
the Estremadura highway opens, to north and east,
the cold blooms of its desert.

In a bar in Madrid they whisper:

the lady in the wheelchair is on drugs,
the lady in the wheelchair is flying high above the sky.

In a bar in Madrid

the angels of winter are weeping at the door,
the ice is setting up its carnival lightshow all along
the cracked stone sidewalk.

In a bar in Madrid they whisper:

the lady in the wheelchair is smiling as she writes,
it must be a letter to home, a letter to family,
but what is she doing here
    in the rain and the cold?

*   *   *

I peer up from under the beams of wood that form the veranda – from here, sky and the voices of adults blend and interchange, laughter, glasses clinking, the pouring of drinks, a phonograph scraping its way across a soprano’s wavering voice. No one knows I am here. Dragging myself and crawling on all fours, I have found a way through the hidden passages of the house, the spaces behind walls, under floors to this cavernous, prodigious
dead end. If I fear dark narrow spaces why do they also draw me, why am I compelled to go down into them? The fearful darkness with its small clay mountains, its broken ridges of cement and its soft hidden ant nests. As if I might come out under a waterfall and enter the valley of Shangri La. The world below the world feels like the true place that claims me. Until at age seven I discover violins and my life changes.

* * *

(In the hospital, late summer)

Like a boat tapping its great dull wooden bell through fog all night this sound

To float in starlight over the grey cities of the world: husks of an infant planet cover my eyes

To stand in a sea while the sea stood in me: isolate, impenetrable, dissolved

The black boat stumbles: a corridor of ice on fire, at last the rain.

* * *

One day the puppet-master arrives with his long stilts and sky-blue hat. He sets up his display for us children in a neighbouring garden. My mother insists I leave off my violin practice for the afternoon to be with the other children. Reluctantly with my older brother and younger sister, the
three of us set off along the back lane linking the gardens of the houses. I want to stay outside of the group, but my older brother, following my mother’s instructions, insists I go with the two of them into the neighbour’s yard.

I have just taken my seat in the front row when I see it. The puppet of the wife in the play, Donna Rosa, has the same glass eyes as the witch that visits me at night. I sit frozen through the performance, determined no one should notice my fear, and even more determined only the puppet and myself should share this secret.

* * *

Mother and father are both out of the house when the surveyor appears at our door. He is carrying his instruments of air-spun gold and clearly the sky has rubbed off on him. He stands there mopping a brow that I know doesn’t glisten with sweat but with the rain that only falls inside clouds. When I see him I tell him to wait there and go back to prepare a large glass brimming with ice and orange juice and soda. As I return with the drink I see that he casts no shadow. He moves from place to place, he tells me, measuring the contours of the earth. If I was not a violinist, I tell him, I would be a surveyor. And are you really a violinist, he asks me, his eyes taking in this girl of ten who totters on her callipers and thick black boots as she walks. I step inside and bring back my instrument which is chestnut brown and smells of the wild forests from which it was made. Not too sure of what he might like, I adjust the felt in the curve of my neck, position the violin exactly, then, careful to keep the pacing slow but varied, play the meditation from Thaïs. When he asks for a second piece I play a fast movement from Vivaldi. When he asks for more I smile and say that is enough. Then I ask him to show me how he measures the earth and, with calibrations of his tripod and notches and his small book of tables, he measures the shadow of our house first, and then my shadow.

He is the surveyor of roads and fields and harbours and all passageways between. From his table of calculations he recites the true distances and times. As he bids me farewell I see a small fragment of the sky has lodged in a corner of his face.
Thirteen slaves out of Africa hung themselves from the trees on my great-great-uncle’s farm. He forbad their women to cover their faces in handkerchiefs soaked in blood – trying to stop the repetitive pattern of mass suicides. The women believed that if those who suicided had their eyes covered in the blood-laced underwear of their women they would return to Africa, would find peace and plenty and freedom there again. And so the thirteen slaves became thirteen enormous birds with jet-black feathers, with claws made from the tiny eyes of the unborn, and they drift above the skies of my family’s houses, wherever we place our houses, whatever names we give ourselves to protect us.

My grandfather was enraged when birds attacked the rows of banana palms he had planted. He took a gun and chased them off. They returned to attack the soft wooden frame of the shelter where his daughter was sleeping with girlfriends after a young person’s party. The birds lashed the soft wooden walls with their beaks and, when the girls’ screams chased them off, one of the damaged walls collapsed, and a heavy beam from the roof fell and killed Estella, my grandfather’s youngest daughter.

When I was not yet ten days old my mother saw a great jackdaw, but much larger than a jackdaw, perched at the door looking in. She chased it off but she knew that I too was marked.

And the sounds that come towards us from the world beyond the world.

I am brought home from hospital and my father carries me around the large patio of the new house – and there, at the centre of this sun-filled greenery, a wide rectangular pond where fish of all colours, gold, orange, turquoise, vermilion, iridescent blue with crimson-and-grey markings, dart between the clustered stems of lilies. And gently, very gently, my father lowers me down to a smooth cool space on the bank. Far from the hot May
afternoon that rages outside our house, I trail my hands in the water and watch the fish swim around my fingers.

To me the garden is voracious, compulsive. In the months after the hospital I begin eating dirt, its pure metallic grit sharp against my teeth. Later I am cured by a strange concoction of apples my grandmother prepares with fennel, hollyhock, cardamom, cinnamon and star anise.

The night visitors that terrified or comforted me in the hospital continue to surround my bed. In my room on the upper floor, my head resting on pillows under the window, when everyone else in the house is asleep, in the long hours between midnight and dawn, they come. The witch who leaves me her book of vanishing recipes, the bird-mother whose face alone brings terror or strength. The fragrant spirits of miscarried babies, bearing their traces of lavender and orange-blossom, trying to find their way back from the other world.

Of all this is the invisible music composed.

Of course there are also the days and the weeks, the excursions by car to the countryside, visits to cousins, private lessons, then a few years at a local school. But these things seem external to me, indifferent, barely touching me. And at seven, suddenly, unexpectedly, violins.

*   *   *

Under an enormous fig tree the day has gathered, heavy as a fig. My sister and I see our white dresses stretched out at the mercy of the figs. In all the sky, in all the orchard, heat blazes. Only, under the fig tree’s shadow, the dark heady cool of the earth. Secretly, I reach down with one hand to fill my mouth with dirt, the dark cool taste of it, the fragrance of a spring that edges its way far down, unstoppable sister tributary of Lethe.

*   *   *

I am put to bed early as usual the night my father invites Joaquín Alameda, the virtuoso from Barcelona, to dinner. I am fascinated by the violin
case he has brought and, once he starts playing after dinner, leave my room and sit listening on the stairs. When my mother notices me she beckons me over and I watch close up, enraptured. Joaquín shows me how to hold the bow and the violin. Within minutes I am able to reproduce, at first slightly mechanically, but soon fluently, confidently, the tune he has played. I stay up late that night and all of us talk, all of us make music, Joaquín and sometimes myself on the violin, my mother on her piano, and for songs and arias my father joins in as tenor. My mother immediately understands my passion and father soon acquiesces. Within a week I have begun lessons and hold in my hands a small violin, a gift from Joaquín.

Worried about the obvious pain I feel when standing still and the risk of damaging my already twisted spine, mother consults a designer of carriages and chairs who, following European models, has begun his own shaping of custom-built callipers. For me he devises a kind of metal chair that lets me rest my tail bone, keeping my lower back in a good posture, as I half stand, half sit. It is this frame, or a version of it, I use for my practising and, only gradually, go back to standing independently as I play, first for only five minutes, later for longer periods. After the last of my operations at age thirteen the improved strength in my left leg allows me to stand unaided for much longer. (My right leg, with its withered muscles, would always need a calliper.) By seventeen I develop the pattern of using the sitting frame for my practice hours while performing in public with no need of external support. When I reach Europe at age nineteen it is no longer my legs but the strength in my arms and upper body everyone notices. Standing tall and thin in the spotlight, the violin clasped at ready between hand and chin, facing the black space of the audience, I feel myself a mermaid carved into the prow of a ship, erect and fearless, slicing my way through the cold, turbulent waves of the world.

* * *

It is almost night when the owl visits.
And the dress I had hung out to dry mirrors the grey face of the owl.
He stands on the railing just beyond the clothes-rack.
I close my eyes and see the earth
waiting to stop.

Puffed up with the rough certitude of what he brings,
his face peers into me, lays me bare.
A child who sits for hours
eye-to-eye with lizards, an elm, the sky,
I will not avert my gaze,
strong in the quiet knowledge
we are partners.

Here in the opening present
the owl that offers death
in a garden wide as the sun.

* * *

On my forty-ninth birthday I dream the descent into a deep valley high
in the mountains and find my grandmother is there – then briefly Paulo, then
Federico who I begin kissing passionately, only it is a twenty-five-year-old
Federico and I am barely twenty-two. We are lovers or about to become
lovers when a small flotilla of black clouds pass over, heading for Africa. In
the dream I am whole and there is a thread of music passing out of my right
hand where Federico has cut a slit with a small knife he has been using to peel
an apple.

And suddenly I wonder why I am not dead – of all those in this vast
upland region of death, why am I still breathing? Why do I think it my right
to kiss Federico when everyone in my family, everyone I know, is dead?
There are vast grey eagles in this dream and they carry spirits from
Cienfuegos high in a broad sweep towards the centre of Havana and, as they
fly, they become blackbirds and, in the trees of the Parque Central, they fold
their wings around the spirits of the dead who at last know what it is to sleep.
Elsewhere in my dream rises the many storied apartment block where I stayed in Madrid. From my wheelchair I will have to fly to the third floor – in a moment I do it – only to be told the third floor is closed now and I must relocate to the basement. Inside the basement there is a Balinese entrance plaque on the wall. When I press my forehead against it, I see a panel in the wall open to reveal a slab of rough concrete on which a packet of clove cigarettes has been placed. In my dream I realise my father and mother are in there, sitting quietly at the long table of my childhood, blocked by this wall where sound ends.

* * *

The violin tutor’s house. Mid afternoon. The seeds of the cherries my mother packed for me to bring as merienda grow like a mound of skulls in the patio of Señora Valenzuela’s house. Under the caoba tree with its shade I sit devouring cherries. Resting from the violin and the frame I stretch my limbs. All at once, without knowing what I am doing, I have made an altar of skulls, this counterpoint to the soaring interplay of violins.

* * *

In the display case of the cabinet in our house in Vedado: miniature glass bears from Russia filled with Kümmel, a tiny bottle of green chartreuse, elephants and a small pagoda of ivory, a flute player, a crafted boat that has just pulled in at the far reaches of the Western ocean. My father’s oddments mingled with my grandmother’s bric-à-brac from India, from her first marriage to a British officer, then after his death a holiday in the Canaries, a second marriage with three children – the first my father – and there were also the small watercolours she painted in India and others from Matanzas and the house in Cienfuegos, the vivid blue, gold and crimson splashes of parrots, jays, macaws.
All around me, in the background of my life, the unrealised, unrealisable ambitions of women to create something other than children or a home, the summons to something else.

* * *

Visits to downtown in my father’s landaulet: the Parque Central with a short walk to the bookshop on Obispo, the cafés with their glass cases of cakes with chocolate and citron and almond paste, or browsing shops with my mother while my father went to the Gallego club. In the hot April wind the walk to the Plaza de Armas and the sea beyond.

* * *

There are three of them sitting in a row in the doctor’s waiting room; under the whirring fan they lean at different angles on unstable chairs, hair grey and wispy as if attached to the head by a glue that is steadily melting, skin mottled by the Cuban sun, eyes dimly adrift in the 11 a.m. torpor; one with a thin gold-plated walking stick that tilts down towards the earth’s centre. The right hand of the one in the centre cradles her left hand, passing under the wrist. The cords of her shopping bag are entwined around her lower arm (its long leather strap) and an unfolded tissue covers half her face. Three elderly Chinese women, and at once I feel myself Chinese, their sadness seeping in behind my eyes, and the doctor, an elderly Chinese man, whom my mother is taking me to see at age 12, following a strange sudden wasting of the soul. This black cloud where I lose all interest in eating, turn aside from others, gaze elsewhere, gripped by fears I cannot name. This settling into night. For a moment I close my eyes to let myself be invaded by blindness.

In his room the doctor inserts acupuncture needles in spots on my wrists and below my ears. He speaks softly, something I understand completely but cannot remember, then taps my forehead with a wand. My life that was stuck moves forward again.
The saurian cat with his unsleeping eyes immobile in the garden, grown plumper and plumper; the garden divided between the cat and the lizard, its twin deities, not just any lizard but a puffy frill-necked monarch, a chipojo, his long green neck reaching upward, hovering there with all the condescension of his slow ancestors, then all at once lightning-fast and brutal with tarantulas. I remember the time my mother’s second-cousin, newly arrived from Galicia, screamed in horror when the lizard entered the house – this young woman newly come from the wettest spot in all Spain, a place where the weather could always be described with one word ‘rain’, entering the kaleidoscopic torrid zone of the island.

And in our garden, heavy with sapodillas, mangoes and guava and the fruit we call anón, fragrant with jasmines, orange blossoms, frangipani and bougainvillea, bountiful and confined, the cat and the lizard measured out their divided realm.

Already so far from the shoreline, my ten-year-old body rises and falls. A great silence descends layer by layer underneath me through vast currents of blue. Arms wide, legs resting open, I drift into fresh angles of the sun. Waves rise and fall. The sea spins slowly. I turn my face into the ripples of the earth’s tilt, while, far under me, the white shadow of a manatee passes. Green foliage wavers and spins in its wake, a fragrance of earth’s beginning. I can feel my body gently held firm in this spinning place, the wheel’s centre.

There was a creek I was following one afternoon and a black umbrella bobbed mysteriously a little way before me – I could only see the top of it between the ferns and palms. The creek led to the sea, of course – that was
where all creeks led but sometimes they died in long meanders or faded into fields of tobacco, blossoming or abandoned. Or a few cows would stand suddenly on a road that shimmered with heat, munching the weeds that grew along the edges. I was always slow to reach destinations and would need to find places to stop and rest. It was a year when I was always sneaking out to do this, in brief bursts mapping the geography of the new house, understanding this strange sensation of walking.

* * *

Mother’s small white vase that lingered on the edge of an enormous window, painted in gold stars. I never remember it filled with flowers – it seemed too magical in itself to permit anything else to be joined to it. I remember lying on a couch watching it, listening to my mother playing pieces by Chopin, Schubert and Brahms in the adjacent room. It must have been during those weeks after one of the operations, when I could not walk yet and drifted for days in and out of consciousness, lulled by small doses of ether to manage the pain. And the stars on the white vase shone for me – they promised distances, boats setting off across oceans and a world that, though smaller, was also wider, more opened out than the world of other children who walked so easily on two legs but did not understand about flying.

And I remember how we would cut out paper for Reyes, colour it gold and hang these golden messages on the front door, above the small carpet of grass and the glass of water for the camels. I remember how they glittered invitation and, for me, the knowledge that this was a place from which things started out.

Plenty of stars, the small white vase spoke up.
It liked the room we had chosen
but most the wide window
that gave onto the world.

* * *
And my memories, what are they after all? Which parts of them did I dream, which parts did I really see? Was it a great-great-uncle who called down a curse through his treatment of the bodies of dead slaves? Or was it my grandfather or his father who owned the slaves? And surely there were no handkerchiefs covered in blood? Surely it was as the books describe it, the clothes and belongings in a neat bundle, everything set in order at the foot of the tree, so the spirit could fly back to Africa?

* * *

I am playing Debussy’s String Quartet. For a moment I close my eyes and immediately I am in a field of tall dandelions, clover and yellow flowering tobacco plants; above me wasps hover, my face is golden with sun. My playing continues, responding to, launching itself beyond the other players. My eyes open, then close again. I step in and out of a field of bright sharp scents, of restful, aching heat. While the wand I hold, the bow, glides slowly across the strings and my fingers race over the fingerboard, I leap back and forth between this brightly-lit stage in Milan and a field of flowering tobacco plants outside Cienfuegos, Cuba. They say nature does not make leaps, only sometimes it does.
Ernesto Ray: a brief biographic note

Ernesto Ray was born in Farjado, Puerto Rico, in April 1965. He moved with his parents to New York at age twelve. In high school he was a voracious reader in both Spanish and English – novels, poetry, short stories, biographies, plays – but increasingly he was drawn to music. At fifteen he became a regular visitor at the Nuyorican Poets Café, first performing there at age seventeen. Meanwhile with a few classmates he had developed his own band playing a mix of hip hop, reggae-jazz and I-am-furious-electro-ballad styles. He achieved fame early as a singer songwriter who has been likened at times to a Puerto Rican Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen. From the beginning he insisted “Everyone is just themselves”, yet clearly he idolized Dylan and Cohen and, far more than any of his contemporaries, sought to emulate the imaginative range of their lyrics. But, equally, he played his lyrical narratives against a very different, far more aggressive musical ‘counter-voice’, as he described it in his celebrated 1986 Rolling Stone Interview.

I do not intend to translate these lyrics as, stripped of their music, rhymes and elaborate word play, they feel impossible to do justice to in English. In any case, many are readily available on-line in passable translations, as well as in *The Definitive Nuyorican Almanac of 1997*. The year after the great Almanac came out Ernesto shocked his fans by renouncing music, New York and the Nuyorican scene, travelling to China and remaking himself as a humble teacher of English and student of Buddhism. “Giving it all away,” he explained in an interview, “appeals to me far more than growing old trapped in repetition”. This “rite of passage” as he called his thirty-third year saw him seek obscurity as single-mindedly as once he had sought fame.

On his return to New York in January 2003 he brought his new wife Pauline with him and the two of them focussed their life around the teaching and practice of meditation. He did do a few sell-out concerts and wrote a few new songs but many felt the magic had gone. It was a quiet time but also, undoubtedly for him, a time of inner growth and of a new-found contentment.
In 2012 everything changed. His beloved Pauline was diagnosed with cancer. His posthumously published *A Cloak for Pauline* is his first (and only) book of poems meant for reading on the page. During those years he also wrote three very lengthy songs, most notably “Ballad of the Drowned Lovers”. I have reworked into parallel ballad form two of the thirty-three quatrains that make up this song. In *A Cloak for Pauline*, Ernesto, as he describes in his Preface (attached here as an Afterword), sought to shape poems that would work as spells. He never mentions Pauline’s name in them and even writes what might seem to be a sequence of poems to other women. He does this, as he explained on several occasions, for reasons of superstition. To mention her name within any of the spells would seem to be placing her survival at risk. The most he will do is refer to her as “beloved”. The sequence of women he writes poems to (or about), he once told prominent poet and critic Nancy Jones, are spirit beings, different aspects of one protective presence. In keeping with Ernesto’s practice of reticence I do not wish to say here whether Pauline or Ernesto died first. For my own reasons I wish silence to surround these spells.

I have also included a few extracts from Ray’s letter to Nancy Jones written shortly before his death. It’s perhaps necessary to add that, four months before his third birthday, Ernesto Ray was hospitalised with a severe fever and nearly died in hospital. It was only his father who in effect kidnapped him from there, thus saving his life. Ray’s first memory is of being extremely weak, unable to walk, in his father’s arms, carried along a ridge under acacia trees near the sea. This background helps explain one of the images in the first extract.

One final late addition: “Hammerblows” – a poem in a mixed ballad-rap style from the last year of Ray’s life but omitted from *A Cloak for Pauline*. I include it here in translation as perhaps Ernesto Ray’s last work.
hand me my boots of silver
hand me my boots of tin
hand me my golden pedestal
when the rain sets in

so she brought in his boots of silver
she brought in his boots of tin
she brought in his golden pedestal
and let the sky come flooding in

(excerpt from Ernesto Ray ‘Ballad of the Drowned Lovers’
)
Selected poems from *A Cloak for Pauline*

**Of spells**

A man, perhaps in his late fifties, is found lying in deep sleep in a gully near the San Juan-Caguas highway. He is unharmed apart from the few markings of life’s normal blows: dental work, scars from one or two past operations, a slight disfigurement to three fingers of the left hand. There are letters in his pockets – one in the pocket of his shirt, one in each pocket of his trousers. His breathing is regular as of one relaxed into deep sleep, but neither the travellers who found him nor the medics who were soon summoned could wake him. Besides the letters there is a wallet with driver’s licence and various cards. They can identify him. They soon know where he was born (Fajardo, 1954), where he lived, who his parents were. He had been a bus driver, living alone in a small apartment in San Juan after a divorce, the only son of a very ordinary family: mother a secretary, father a mechanic in a small car repair business, both parents now deceased.

The letters in his pockets are all on fine gold leaf paper, in languages unimaginable for a humble bus driver from Puerto Rico. One letter is in a dialect of Aramaic – it looks like the work of a scribe of 300 A.D. The second is in Sanskrit, perhaps (so experts say) drawn in ink on paper brought back from China around 200 B.C. The third is in Japanese from around the twelfth century.

One is a letter of recommendation for a driver of chariots living on an unspecified island in an archipelago renowned for its lush vegetation and extreme heat. It commends him to the notice of the higher ones. The second in Sanskrit describes an individual’s past or future life as a tree. The third consists of incantations, a spell, a recipe, a promise to a beloved. As the man sleeps over the next five years the letters are interpreted, translated, recited. Their chanting fills the night air around the man. Their breath is the slow caress of hands over his body. Sound’s weight accumulating, fine traces of shadow hands: a dust descending from the sky. Their breath slowly gathers into the one word, the imperative singular of the Sanskrit verb: Live.

After they undressed him at the hospital to monitor his vital functions someone noticed a strangeness in the texture of his shirt. Under a certain light
you could read, fixed deep in its fabric, spirals of words from many
languages, letters and ideograms like countless fingerprints weaving him a
many-coloured skein of protection. These things breathe forth their strength.

I had planned to transcribe these letters in their Spanish version here. I
had planned to copy out the text of his shirt, to set these things down here as
a spell to protect my beloved as she drifts in and out of the haze of
medication. I had hoped to weave round her the chanted spells of the bus
driver from Farjado. Life does not always give us what we plan. Our room
opens on a small garden and the chill coastal breeze sets a small web of
pentatonic chimes reverberating. As if the East was trying to reach us, trying
to set up the spells that heal even what the spiders of cancer have devoured.

Let these words stand in for the spells I cannot find.
Let the letters of the bus driver of Farjado though I cannot find them
stand in (the image of them) as
four paper screens unfolded
four spirit hands upholding
(stand in for) guardianship
of earth and air
the spell of all peoples
whispering its silken wall
woven (the sky’s tent casting
its four shorelines of protection) round
one person,
my beloved.
Discovered in a rock pool

A star-shaped object rising up out of the water – five wavering arms, five spokes of a chariot wheel, five curved cylinders, at their centre a cluster of grey barnacles, small pearls, a silver light,

the water that drips from them heavy with salt, oxidized incrustations. A star tiara from a drowned mermaid, the wheel of some vast chariot washed up. And, as it breaks the surface, this sharp sudden

fragrance like plants left too long in narrow vases, the water like urine drained out of dried twigs. The wheel is a ghost of a wheel. The fiery chariot’s return to the kingdom of salt. And everything

shrinks and is less than a token miniature apple, a walnut placed as a skull-shaped offering on an altar to placate the goddess of devouring. Effigies stored in a rock pool. This is surely someone’s

childhood not mine. Such simple things might be placation or destruction. Starfish or a galaxy intact as its detritus. Burnt out. Cooling off,
cooling off in a solution
of brine and midday sun.

-- Whom do you seek?
The woman at the centre of the starfish-wheel asks me.
-- I am after another life.
Arnica Artemisia

To arrive some November morning,
rain-washed banners wilting on the wide terrace.
The house eaten from the inside:
earth spilling from the lining of cupboards,
worms trapped inside water-drops
cascade from the ruptured web of pipes.

Arnica:
it's spokes pounded like a wheel.
Eleven needles in the fabric of morning.
Wings of lepidoptera: wings of broken comfort
and a small star from the back of my eye
takes flight.
The migrating horde of dust mites
takes flight.
In the fuse box all the wiring spikes
like a flowchart of vital signs.
A family of possums enters
to offer cheer, to exchange bewilderment.
My head alone in a house alone
as a small mermaid crafted by the fisherfolk of Peru
floats dangling from a final rafter.
Light from the spiderwebs,
rainbows on the floor.

Arnica: star-bright
small jewel of light
my memory.
Arnica Artemisia
mugwort sagebrush
salve against malaria and the fever of not yet being born
star at the core of my hand
at the door of the ruined house
you signal a narrow bridge into myself
the rainbow is your younger sister.
Iris

She was called Iris and, why I don’t know, we were climbing in and out of an earth-pit winter home that was also a Seven Eleven somewhere in the provinces of China. A wealth of automatic dispenser machines hungered for our coins, holding – imprisoned behind glass – white mounds of dumplings, Styrofoam containers of glass-thin noodles, hunks of pork, quartered moon cakes with the egg of promise on display in the middle. Her name reminded me of the rainbow but also seemed to signify her hair which was golden and bunched into looping curls at the back, held in place by a long clamp of multicoloured plastic. I was intrigued by the distance in her eyes and the fretful way she seemed to chew over her words, while all the time waves of silver light flickered above her shoulders and face.

Beyond us both, the street twisted uphill towards the water tower, the pagoda, the region of teahouses and a university village that had a wide view across the rising tiers of the outer sea that flows unbounded, stretching as far as those lands we have no names for, so distant any visit would require a new birth. I have seen places where doors are opened, winter habitations dug down into earth and opened by a flap that lets the sky be admitted or dismissed. I have seen a family hunkering down into a small space of cooking pans, many-sized bowls, mats and blankets laid out for sleeping at different levels, long pipes that are also heirlooms and runic messages. In the centre, controlling every gesture, a conical tower of embers.

The habitation – part store, part earth-dug felt igloo – was different from any place I have stayed in before, and Iris presided over it, hands on hips, a torrent of energy, my tutor and also a supervisory nurse briskly organising and thoughtfully consulting an anonymous assortment of those who have been intensely damaged physically. Their cloaks and pinned ward-gowns flapped gently, plastered as these items were over missing limbs or inner organs. In the background a range of further figures seemed to have fallen off the hillside and now be drifting into the lower reaches of the sky.
In Iris’ hands, as she stopped to speak to me, were five matchsticks and a small pot of glue. Quiet and deft, I said to myself. I took them as emblems of my terror, of my faith.

If I knew her as Iris it was because she was (among her many other names) a bridge in the city to which I had been summoned: on one side of the canal, temples, pagodas, changing cubicles with masks and long robes left hanging from hooks for the summer festival; on the other side, illness, death, the procession of the haunted. And her face was made of conflicting colours, split like the lightning bolt in the centre, her gold hair in its bun parted at the centre, and like that she walked, with the utmost dignity and reassurance, between the living and the dead.
Meditation

I had just closed my eyes in meditation
silence fell on the world
I saw it
there in the centre of my chest
in the space between
two almost touching hands
laid out in a long row
the fraction sign the sign for the square root of
a dense crowd of symbols
neatly lined up
the formula that spelt the length of my life
but more precisely
when this leg will go
when a tic will develop over the right eye
then the left
when the sex will die when speech will wander off
when this or that group of memories will leave
when the shoulders will stop lifting
when the hand will forget how to close
when everything will go back inside the heart
and the heart will slip away
to wherever the dust comes from
My lover’s shoes (this morning)

flip flops thongs jandals
sandal of many names and a single
plastic loop
orange they open
a platform of butterflies and spirals
fivefold petals brushed in white
sun’s intense childhood radiance
on a winter floor

although this dark world grabs at you
you have stepped
onto the soles of an altered shining
that these simple swirls of colour may
spiral up your legs into your inmost
core of being

others have spoken of the ‘shoes of wandering’
for this morning, my lover, you have chosen
dazzling splotches of summer
bearing the grace of all you were,
of all you are
Extracts from a letter written by Ernesto Ray to his friend Nancy Jones six months before his death.

. . . . By night faces and images swirl in front of me – troops of lost children, they wander the corridors of that vast hospital that’s still there under the great wintry lake of this city. Gargantuan carp swim across the tiny chamber where my first bed was. Before the lake. Before forgetting.

What I wrote comes back to haunt me:

*Like a shadow on water, the beautiful.*

*Two shadows on water, love.*

*They came with their mouths brimming “rescue”.*

*By dawn all that’s left was blood.*

. . . . . .

You know my first big hit “Street Kid”:

*It’s spelt on the cans you open.*

*Its words keep appearing in the soup you’ve begun:*

*Listen, Turgenev, stop flexing your muscles.*

*The day is too old for this, your life too young.*

To give the Latino street kid the name of a Russian novelist – not Juanito or José or something, anything, you’d expect. No street kid called himself Turgenev but suddenly they were all doing it. And I thought, So? Is this it? Is this what fame means? It’s bullshit.

When I was in my early thirties I kept getting these dreams. I kept being woken up at night by José Martí and I’m not even Cuban. “Compadre”, he’d say, “this is bullshit. You can’t make a revolution with these crappy
songs. And on this side I know. You’re not Cohen or Dylan – and don’t let them fool you into thinking it’s the translators. It just doesn’t hold a candle to them. The days of revolution are over – not here, not now, not New York. Give it over. Do something different.” And Martí showed me a monastery between mountains and cypress trees, somewhere in East Asia. I didn’t know it but it was the monastery outside Kyoto. He kept telling me my songs were worthless and I had to get away, travel far from it. The last time he ever appeared to me, a week before I really decided to go, I was awake, I swear, and I still saw him mumbling in the corner. With a sad look he turned back towards the infinite corridor of his own travels and with a shrug he just muttered, “The only revolution is yourself.”

Perhaps I have no identity. Perhaps I was born in China in the twelfth century. As I approach my own death, no longer slowly but hurtling towards it as in film footage of a train crash where over and over all the carriages sandwich together, fold into each other, I have no sense anymore of who I am, who I was. Everything prior to this moment evaporates, floats off, and my mind, my habit of weaving stories, keeps fabricating different roles I played, different names I had, works I wrote, women I loved, cities I lived in, journeys I made or failed to make. My long dead parents come back, their faces taking familiar form in different landscapes, speaking different languages, decked in strange costumes. My mother floats above a lake of water-lilies and in her altered voice I recognise a forgotten sister of Marcel Proust’s. Then suddenly she is standing next to a precipice and a wind-bent signpost: it’s maybe 1700 and she’s just stepped out of a carriage halted near an inn somewhere between Spain and Portugal. Soon she will enter a nunnery where, through long fasting and prayer, she will attempt to dissuade the demon who will reincarnate into General Franco from launching the Civil War.

Approaching death the self loosens its grip. The world’s demonic history rushes at me, wanting to unpick me, to send my unravelled voices spiralling into the silence of God’s hidden void. I want to say mother, father,
lover, but everything rushes beyond that. I can make out a narrow path between rice fields. I balance on it, my arms outstretched, some spindly-legged black-white bird of prey about to take flight. What is it to come to consciousness in a body freighted with such strange incongruous weights? To imagine myself padding down the aisle of a shopping mall that is also a great medieval cathedral in the silver slippers of a young Chinese girl from some forgotten picture book? I feel my head spin with words that hobble me as I go the nowhere path across hills undulating like a single long last breath. My lover is the landscape, the road, the spiralling air, the white moment of vanishing.
Hammerblows

- Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes . . . Yo no sé! (César Vallejo)
  (There are blows in life, so hard . . . I don’t know.)

In subway cars
on a path below high mountains
storm coming down
in the 10 a.m. sun moving step by step
along a row of chairs lined up on a sidewalk
in the name on an envelope
under a thick smear of jam
in the suicide of buttons in a drawer of waiting knives
There are blows

In what you know hear want can’t say
fecund snowflake razors
there are blows

In the breeze that rises
when someone’s gone
In airports and the chill eternal
failure to set out
In the rewiring of memories
so every landscape every half-arsed jerking of
an ill-timed word
floods all the avenues
rains like ripe tomatoes
on the most umbilical umbrellas
there are blows
Like the sleek geek who won’t speak
rancid skies dripping death
like petrified vultures oozing lard
in the forecourts of the Four Winds Stock Exchange
or a banker on hard times sniffing glue that oozes
from a pothole of pock-marked
preferences to trade in the dark

Unarguably
there are blows
A tree to the knees
A quick slit to the left of the breath
A brief stab to the right trapezoid
and it flows
like rum of the Rialto
gone sodden gone
drenched fire
hung from heaven on a wire
like a dream going forward
or a tack stuck in a throat
that won’t pass
there are blows

Under benches
in safe cubicles
in a scrambled letter left behind on a train
in paper cups soiled plates
a fridge crammed with wedges of stale bread
or a road that twists its cracked spine under rain
there are blows
and in the imperceptible
accumulation of seconds
as a roof snaps
as a day drifts into darkness

in the flip of a card
in solitaire
in conversations morsed by the time-bleep of machines
in the crisp voice flooding like treacle
over the floor of an office
or the practised spiel rehearsing
the trajectory of endings
in our endings

Set upon by minions gagged by gargoyles
on the roof, feet kicking
drained of air like a deflated owl
crowd-surfed down corridors
dressed by ghost-fingers in
some tight-fitting cloak of lost arms
in the steady breath of midnight stillness
or the scratch-scratchings of pain rocking
on a makeshift trestle by the window under stars
my love
in every moan replayed
there are blows

In the trickle of the chicken that’s rotting
in the shoulder-bag of the boy of the third strap
of the last carriage that wavers above the
all blasted
their hands nailed to iron rafters
and yet the light is there

In the land of far away last night
where an old tart flicks her foxtail bathrobe in your face
in the pissoires of seventh heaven
where red pustules sprout from boys’ flies
and a certain stench
clenches your nails on the zipper that won’t budge
when you feel like a foetus growing old in a waterhole for ratsack
as the gaunt attorney
slips your fingerprints into the
state-owned deposition on the inventory
of purloined combs
that nails you there, right there
among tender ostriches
hanging by a thread

And there are blows
immaculate interceptions
disconnected calls to Mars
music that turns one last time at the threshold
turns back to gaze at us
once-only short-term spinners
left behind in the room for lost jars

like a wave going out
along the edge of the world
like some bleary-eyed bard of the doorway
who wears our face
and has no language

all the hammerblows it takes
to make a hammerklavier
the nails nailed into it
and when it soars
the still attentive fingers numbering death

and how
on the lowest edges of the heavenly choir
among the counsellors consolers
where the jackboots just now begin to reach
there are blows

How say it
beloved
now my face is
three swift kicks of death
on the night-patrol of nowhere
two hands round a thick jug gathering light
and yet and yet . . .

There are blows
GASTON BOUSQUIN (1957 – 2014)
I will start with the early background, much of which I only learnt later from his sister. As a teenager he left the family home in a small town outside Montréal. His father died when he was fifteen and there were always tensions and explosions with his mother. Up to a point he modelled himself on his uncle René, a constant traveller and dreamer of big projects that always fell through, but Gaston’s obsession with poetry took him in a different direction. After spending time in Montréal and British Columbia he decided that the problem wasn’t just his mother’s home or Québec province but the whole of Canada and the United States. He liked to say he was “allergic to the idea of north” and undertook his journey to South America to meet the true poets. (He had a love-hate relationship with his own language: “How much snow, how many fallen leaves can a poem take?”, he would ask and then add, embellishing a conversation he had many times with me, “Beauty, that is the curse of French – you are lucky, you have an ugly language.”) In Argentina he invited himself to Olga Orozco’s house and also got to meet Osvaldo Lamborghini; in Uruguay he visited Marosa di Giorgio but generally failed to impress the local poets who considered him an ill-mannered clown. He worked hard at his Portuguese as well as his Spanish and spent some nine months in Brazil, teaching English and French, both of which he was perfectly fluent in, though he rarely wrote in English and didn’t trust his ability to translate his own poems. He got to know Ricardo Xavier Bousoño and admired Wilson Bueno’s work, but they never got on well. From what his sister said, I think at this time he was trying to invent himself. He had a knack of offending people but he could equally be extraordinarily generous and considerate. Though he spent most of his time in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, he also made short visits to Medellin, Caracas, Nicaragua and Mexico, as an invited guest at various poetry festivals. It was in Nicaragua that he met the Belgian poet William Cliff whose book America, along with its sequel En Orient, became a Bible to him for many years, so Gaston told me. (Personally,
apart from the one poem in homage, I can’t see any resemblance between Gaston’s poetry and Clif’s.) [...]

[Gaston Bousquin arrives in Australia from Canada in March 1997]

I met Gaston for the first time at a book launch in Glebe, perhaps in August that year. Exuberant, filled with enthusiasm and energy, he gave me the impression (I think this is how it was for many people) that through him there was a unique access to the intensity that poetry truly was and that, for all the time you were talking with him, he held you in the immense arms of his undivided care. We spoke for hours of poetry, of his travels. The three of us – Gaston, Marie and myself – stayed on till after midnight at a café, then met again many times over the following months till work and family pressures on my part forced me to live a far more anti-social life. It would have been about a year later that I visited him on the houseboat on Middle Harbour where he was staying. By that time he had broken up with Marie and was on his own. I can still remember the sound of the oars against the water as he rowed me across in the darkness to the squat brown frame of the house that lifted and fell on the waves. “Nuit en moi, nuit au dehors,/ Elles risquent leurs étoiles,/ Les mêlant sans le savoir”, he recited from Jules Supervielle, then continued, “Et je fais force de rames/ Entre ces nuits coutumières”235. That night we spoke French all evening as he regaled me with stories of the poets he’d met, chiefly the amazing bruja Olga Orozco in her Buenos Aires apartment, still with the radiance of a powerful glamour in her sixty year old eyes, her elegant kaftan, her entourage of cats, her ability to see the future (inherited from her Irish grandmother, María Laureana), telling Gaston he would live one day on a houseboat somewhere in the far south of the world and that, when he died, it would be a terrible death that would send “ripples of warning” to many people. He also spoke of his friend Ricardo Xavier Bousoño whom he urged me to contact and to start translating. (“He is a great poet; not many people know about him”, he told me. “I’m sure you could translate him well.”) The houseboat was quite an extraordinary place, the one large living room all lined with books, a tiny kitchenette, a bunk bed in a kind

235 “Night within me, night without/They risk their stars/Unconsciously mixing them/And I row strongly/Between these customary nights.”
of fold-out attic, the spacious bedroom downstairs. When I left he insisted on my borrowing many books: Supervielle, Reverdy, Jean Frémon, Tahar Bekri, Venus Khoury-Ghata and Hédi Kaddour, among others.

It was to be almost eight months before I met Gaston again. The change in him this time was dramatic: he looked decidedly aged and clearly had a drinking problem, something never evident before. At one of these meetings he presented me with a large envelope filled with a selection of his poems that he asked me to translate. These were all, I believe, fairly recent poems, written mostly while he was in Australia – the poem to Olga Orozco was, I’m fairly sure, written on the houseboat. It is mostly these poems that I have translated here, though there are also a few earlier ones and four very late ones, given to me after his death by his sister, Isabelle.
Gaston Bousquin visits Olga Orozco in her Buenos Aires apartment, late summer 1981.

She eyes the aquarium with its one remaining fish and intones in the voice of the cat: “Tú reinaste en Bubastis.”

She goes under the water of her tiny aquarium and hides there, goby-like, under the greyest rock.

She is invisible, knitted into the long cauld of her days.

When she returns, full-woman-size, through the front door she takes a thin slip of paper from a box of dreams by the broom closet and watches the green and purple twists of smoke rising from its pyre. In the crook of her arm, on the white tips of her fingers, lie traces of that shimmering light things bring with them from the time they first moved out of water. Exiles in the strange land of carbon and air. She is a deity of the other world. Through the sunken eye of a rock-face, down the spiral of chiselled steps she precedes me, the taut sway of her African kaftan grazing the stone, into the tropic garden of my future.

I am destined always to misunderstand her, to misrepresent her, to be a small carrier of her transmuted inoperable virus.

She reincarnates and is born backwards among her Irish and Italian ancestors. Even perched on this sumptuous chair, she feels puncturing her face.
the stones that will lie above her grave.
Though I am talking to her in my halting Spanish
I already feel her presence
in the houseboat I will rent on Middle Harbour
and her smile, her shyness is there
waiting like a second shadow to greet me
beside the gruff Immigration Officer
at Friday Harbor. She is present
in the cigar that stuns me and weaves
circles of trance in my expensively imported head.
I walk out onto a balcony over a gully
and she is sitting there, nursing a cat –
it finds the hidden milk behind her long-dry nipple.
I sit in the chair opposite.
Neither of us can find words.
We both know what it is to come from the moon.
“Continue walking,” she says to me without speaking.
“It is your destiny to walk to Patagonia.
Once you reach its final rocks you must pledge
always to stay south of the Equator.
You are not destined to find any home –
settling anywhere would prematurely tilt
the balance of your cerebellum into some
wayward dash into death.
Never trust the algorithms. Place yourself securely
in the isolated helm of going under.
Keep your eyes fully open
as the vampire insects of the cosmos swarm towards you.
Trust this solitude and what it says to you,
this reticent tongue-tied intelligence
that moves only in singularities.
Gleaned from what is much older than human,
recite the authentic contours of falling.
And now to cross this bridge of arsenic, as we say.
“Choose
but don’t cheat, don’t whisper any counter-spell,
any words of return.”
The Mass of the West Wind

for William Cliff

glory to those who dwell
in the silences of the world
in the hull of the tramp steamer
in the cargo freighter’s oil and rust, the narrow cabin
hole in the wall of darkness
this bitter unglorified monastic cell
afloat in an ocean with no gods

glory to those who have rested in honesty
in the places where there is nothing
where evil has shaped its sharp
enduring scar –
lifeless avenues, spectral streets,
bars where no one risks crying or touching
or speaking anymore

glory to those who persist
in places where there are no words no images
no consolatory swirls of rhetoric
where to stay for five days
is to know the circle Dante
was too frightened to describe

glory to those who impose on the world
only the openness of their eyes
their truth
to each face of suffering
their tiny drained
willingness to be there
Underneath suddenly black water
wavers – a flash of primal dark between
the trembling planks of the restaurant.
Between one step and the next I stop
frozen: at once I know a whole continent
is draining by underneath me.
Mudflats and icefloe, badlands, urban waste,
all the forest’s soft-bellied creatures,
the teeming eyes of the drowned, all rush
helter-skelter under these planks where
I freeze, hoping some stray lone hand
won’t pull me under.
In whose flesh am I standing?
The prawn soup that is lunch trembles
six feet away but here, suddenly,
an arm’s length from me is a space
I’ll never cross.

In the whirling vortex of the world
all movement hushed:
the pouring of the dark.
To Alejandra Pizarnik

I have been troubled for days by the dream I had of you, your face seen so clearly, your thin thirty-year-old self occupying a flat on a corner of George Street, Sydney. I do not know what to make of your insistent beauty, the art works I glimpsed in corners of your room, and your brusque persistence in smoking while the first storey window misted over with the chill dawn off the southern ocean. I could go into the city right now and find you but I’m frightened of what your eyes would see in me, so little, and your confident knowledge of how to write beyond your death. In my dream I was going from entrance to entrance in the hope of finding the poem you left for me. The first entrance was a bricked-up wall like those false doorways masons built to hide the maze that descends towards the Queen’s Chamber of a pyramid. The second an open bar that had run out of drinks where the stairways and landings of three floors fed back into themselves like an Escher print of a Moebius tube. Only, above the fake third door, a rope ladder dangled to take me to your studio. I didn’t dare climb up. You were wearing a beret when you leaned out to drop something, an eagle’s feather, a plastic earring. I’m guessing even now at how little I mean, jostled by the throng of New York twenty-something party girls in mini skirts, all so blasé about sharing their building with the starlets of film, fashion and literature. And what do they or I know of what it costs to persist despite illness and death? I can’t explain why this dream has lingered under all my waking thoughts for over a week now. Maybe I had been summoned there to play some bit part in the vast saga you were writing of interplanetary grief. Maybe the feather and bauble were meant for me after all, hungering always for the lightning flash of poetry, arriving at your apartment, Montevideo 980, ten years after you’d gone for good.
At seventy-nine uncle René recounts his list of blessings

That the sun rises

That the colour blue has occurred in more than one place in my world

That I have known oceans, slipped into them, been stung into life by their unexpected surges

That light has gathered around me in mist-wrapped valleys under dank trees, that the spiders have continued untroubled connecting the threads of light

That water persists in falling, from clouds to earth, from high escarpment to sudden gully, to the tug of subterranean streams, to pools that gather their crystalline essence of sky, to the steady drift towards deltas, to collapsed citadels, the vast inverted mansions of darkness

That I have entered water, have dreamed my way under its shelter, have stood inside the waterfall, been gripped by it

That stars have listened, just by being there have listened, in ways I can’t understand, ways trivial and profound, have heard my voice and other voices, all night have heard seas building and collapsing, have heard burrowers and possums and every nocturnal creature attending to the scratched hum of their own silence

That the stars have lasted and are still there, listening like the grandmother of all grandmothers watching over the generations, nodding, then turning aside, gone back to some endless routine of renewing the fires of the cosmos

That fish are still here despite everything, despite the millennia of killing, the centuries of poisoning, that they investigate, dart off, breathe fire through their bodies
That houses are still inside me, that I can recite the location of cupboards and fireplaces, can look out a back window and number the chinks in each rock, that I still hold the thread of their labyrinths

That I have stood in the narrow room, have been that close to the glittering living statue, the Eternal Couple, he always erect and inside her, she straddling him, her legs holding him firm, the lovers who sustain the world
Evening, Scotland Island

On inward-tilted hills
a still shadow.
Sky wide bats glide down darkened air.
Out there the last caw, last
jittery shudder of a bough.
Look – from circle to circle
now the inner glow of things.
Final unpublished manuscript given to translator
I had only seen the poem “Threads” in manuscript form on Bousoño’s bundle of separate pages. The form, though unusual, was easy to grasp. In book layout, I suddenly realised it becomes more difficult.

Think of a page as having three positions: the left margin (1), the centre (2), the right margin (3). A thread is hung in any one of these positions. The first thread starts in position one, the next in position two, etc. Once a thread has been hung it can only stay in the position where it has been suspended. So, for example, a thread in position three will stay in position three as we turn the page. If a thread is lucky some word in it will generate a new thread. For a while both threads continue to drop down the page together but soon the old one dies. The movement of reading is downward and slow, staying with the thread, and turning back the page where necessary to pick up a new thread that has appeared. In turn the new thread spawns another thread. We shift in order from position one to two to three, then back to one. Eventually the thread finds no word to trigger its continued life in another thread. Finis.
Threads

Here
in the forest
clearing
where
names disappear
and the wailing
of revellers' songs
down laneways
at 4 a. m.
can no longer
keep the
ghosts at their
distance
all that clears
is blue light
a thinness
I've
never known
a silence more
foreign than
the furthest language
there is
no more
distance
to walk
emptiness
pours into me
transfixed by
nothing I can name
all the world
behind me
closes its
doors
If
I am
lifted up
I will enter
the air
Who is
guiding me
who is
almost at the edge
of speaking
sunlight
white
presence
of
no matter
no being
in
one
line
cleaves me
my past
walks away
and is
stillness
of
gardens of
pure air inter-stellar
spores
long
fingers
the toadstools
leave
skat of
the first
invisible microbe
excreting
that
dank
moisture
we have
no name for
decomposition
of the cosmos
soft
transformed to
hard
transformed to
soft
wisps
of grey-green
spittle
become
a
hand

soft
lover
whose breast
I hold
in whose
body I
move and live
and afterwards
whose mouth
takes me
and
brings me
again
sky
beyond
the sky
while
a tap leaks
a siren
flares up
then moans
sullenly
for hours
unheeded
in the din
of death

unheeded
memory jolts
as washing
gathers in
the sink
soiled clothing
my other
life pouring
out between
the scrubbing knuckles
voltage
in the pipes
and I see myself
(exile days
as under
other roof)
at Atocha
the train
to the south
just left
seconds before
doors
closed now
like cells
inside me
taking their
own path
to head off
down
blind forking
corridors
some switch
within the
body’s code
gone wrong
or in a Paris room
leaving at dawn
hunched
in each one’s
private failure
against
a sky
of endings
that now in
the washbasin
become this
against
or
in the name of
the Unspoken
One
they erase
debt of our being
shit and blood a life’s
bric-a-brac china cups
flowers on balconies
cupboards crowded with
these small photos these small photos
gazing outward hunched
bundled off and swaying
by hands in sterile at the piano
gloves (another of
doors sealed the my tribe who
evidence got away)
removed my lover
a quiet burning the pianist
like corners clinging
folded back against
creammed invisible
in the incinerator hurricanes
of all we were as on the
raft of
his life
a plaited band of
string
at his wrist
his black
hair all
swirling
lost in
where he is
as I
will never be
the small
sharp light
of a makeshift
stage
an unknowable
attunement of
earth’s chaos
drilling itself
into the wild
focus of
his fingers
a ghost’s
presence
stepping inside
his
flesh
ek-stasis
his
way out
(for
each of us
burned into
memory
faces of those
we loved
prisoners
loaded on
planes tossed
like sacks
into the white
and frozen
ocean)

into the white
blaze
of silence
these sounds
I utter
threads we
weave to lay
hold of
the past
the sounds
are
the last threads
holding things
after they have
vanished
after the
nameless ones
smash the china cups
shred the photos
empty
our apartments
and remove us
from
the list of beings
so that
a moment ago
may not
altogether vanish
I enter the forest
where trees
soar over me
where I am lifted
among leaves
and I go down
the stairwell
of the syllables
criss-crossed
birds’ speech
creak of branches
balancing me
mulch ticking
with spores
migrating
roots
burrowing
I enter the
darkness
which is not
silence
sounds
echoing off
the walls
of the world
of the world
I come from
under
small town rain
small town
terror
the streets
clogged with mud
the corner store
sprawling trees
gnawed at by
the sky
the square where
servant girls
trade stories
farmers’ wives their
entourage of baggage
pools
of slime
after rain
second-best shoes
mud-stained
I’m walking still
among it
a whistle from
a doorway
and the quiet
vicious intensity
of ordinary
deaths
chokes me
this evening
the twelfth day
of
searing heat
of
a certain
here in my light
ninth floor flat falling
Veracruz all around
June 11 our silence
in the tenth year of this island
the new where I
dying might have gone
millennium the two
young operatives
the bullet
to the brains
the processing pit
that is
a faint grey
streak
across the
day
this morning as I
tilt the
phial
of morphine
balancing
the searing
fire
of pain
against
the extra hours
of being here
I write
script
of some
divine
(some joke)
chuckle
poor lebens
dolmetscher
or in a
kitchen where
whisked eggs
frothing
into omelette
laced with sumac
and the ring
of a bowl
accidentally
tapping a
fry pan
are a lover’s
tilted gaze
in
a rented room
far elsewhere
unbuckling belts
all that
our fingers
found
of the breathless
gliding
at the level
of tin roofs
our view
across favelas
into this
momentary
stillness
of God
this
now
always
memory
instant
between
between
the (three
years now)
sharp
knife blades

between
each breath
the mind
descends
(the blurred
pain
all over me
fine nails
brushing fire
against the shell
that holds me)
I enter the
millwheel
and
clock-house of
the benevolent
spiders
from far off
I hear
voices
(tides of
anger
about to
break
over me)
a child before
my father’s
downtown office door
the silver gleam
of its surface
where
trapped forever
I see
my awkwardness
this body
I couldn’t
own or give
back
or in the
spider’s inner
clock-house
I see myself
aged twenty two
walking off the bridge
into Brazil
free and alive
a clean slate
for the decades
to inscribe
all the wild
colours
pouring through
the
third eye
in this still
space
between two breaths
a
nowhere-bubble
bearing
all my life
crests of calm
this
emptying
out
this
momentary
ghost-becoming

a
nowhere-beacon
flares
behind
barred windows
glow
of two bodies
on rainy season
nights
a simple trust
that flares
beyond the world
bright
tramcars
on steep streets
bells of
vendors’ carts
beside a
church’s
small
side entrance
poised women
strolling
on evenings when
a storm has
almost come
bright
flutter of kites
above a line
of housetops
avenues
that open to
the sea
bougainvillea blossoms
bangled wrists
and ankles
shimmering their
music
scents of
fried bananas and
dried fish
narrow doorways
children
huddling
while
a great rain
passes
I
hold fast
to what is

(Ricardo Xavier Bousoño: manuscript poem given to the translator, August 2010.)
Acknowledgements

*Ghostspeaking* is a work of fiction. The imaginary poets are composite characters and are not intended to represent, much less caricature, any individual poet. Like Proust’s Vinteuil, Elstir or Bergotte, they each have aspects of several people to which I have added details from my imagination or from my own life. The poems and prose passages are not intended as pastiche or parody. My fictive poets do, however, bear traces of various poets and writers. Sometimes it is a trace of a poet’s style, a favoured subject matter or a form for writing a poem. Sometimes it is more an attitude towards poetry. Occasionally it is an echo of some part of a poet’s life. The reader will have already encountered in this book the names of many of those real poets so traced or “ghosted”. There are others to whom I am indebted whose names have, so far, not appeared. Among them I would like to acknowledge respectfully Gastón Baquero, Gerardo Deniz and José Kozer.

In Ernesto Ray’s "My lover’s shoes (this morning)" the phrase "the shoes of wandering" is from Galway Kinnell’s *The Book of Nightmares*. In the mysterious figure who meets Antonio Almeida one critical night in Montevideo and, with characteristic humility, does not wish to give his name, the reader may well detect the presence of the visionary teacher Chouchani, whose life is explored in Salomon Malka’s *Monsieur Chouchani*. The article Bousoño refers to in his interview is by Mark Danner, *New York Times*, January 6, 2005.
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE SPANISH OF JOSÉ KOZER

Índole (Of Such a Nature)

and Carece de causa (For No Known Reason)

Note:
Carece de causa was originally published by Último reino, Buenos Aires in 1988 but was republished by tse=tse, Buenos Aires in 2004. The text I have used is the 2004 edition.
Translator's Acknowledgements

As part of the creative component of this Doctorate I translated two books by José Kozer: Índole and Carece de causa. In conformity with the word limits for a Doctoral thesis a selection only is included here.

I would like to acknowledge gratefully the assistance of José Kozer who helped with the clarification of difficult and unusual words and phrases and patiently explained a range of local references and Cubanisms. His willingness to answer my various questions and point out various confusions on my part has been invaluable. The final responsibility for these translations is my own.

My translations of José Kozer’s poetry have also been informed by the interviews, commentaries and scholarly articles gathered in Jacobo Sefamí’s La voracidad grafómana: José Kozer and by the lengthy interview in Sefamí’s De la imaginación poética.

I am also grateful to those who have made various readings by José Kozer available to the general public, making it possible to hear Kozer perform his poetry. This experience has been of great benefit to my translation work. Among many such websites and Youtube postings I would like to mention the recordings made at Saint Vincent Latrobe Pennsylvania and the series of interviews recorded by Paul Nelson.
From Índole (2012)

Wherein it is seen how, when all’s said and done, it comes out a draw

Ah Shelley, I don’t encounter the Universal Mind, the mind’s singularities confuse me. Palpitations. Loss of appetite. Bouts of diarrhea. There’s no cure, at my age nothing changes, better that way, it’d only be for the worse. I’ve not managed to subjugate even one of the seven demons bugging me since youth, I saw the meditation mat before me, the restful easy chair, the idea of inwardness, I took a step, stretched out my arm, rested my forehead on a window pane, Oh intellectual feat, and everything vanished. I understand nothing. I see what a crab sees immediately on leaving its cave, grains of sand falling in a clepsydra, a bottomless clepsydra, in its depths water dissolving water. I see the shade the dazzled lizard
sees as it darts, quicker
than the blink of an eye,
under an enormous rock by
the roadside. The rock
hides, it doesn’t protect.
In truth, I don’t know
anything. One afternoon
after another I read (Hymn
to Intellectual Beauty) my
retina useless, and my
head, as it’s said (or at
least used to be said in
Cuba) a sieve. Remnants
of Nothingness, its
secondary traces,
lumps crumbling
away in the dryness of the
final stretch, in the end, in
general, not much reason to
disturb my nights. Can you
tell I’m a philosopher? An
intellectual mind? I’m
wearing suspenders
again, my pants
have grown short,
now they’re hanging
loose, now tight. There
in the wardrobe you
see three pairs of
faded jeans, I can see
them, can see the body
they cover, they share in
the insubstantial. In the
immaterial. Pure
handiwork, the fabric’s
(body’s) appearance.
If I put them on inside
out I glimpse my bones in
x-ray. And worse, a nervous
system on the edge of
collapse. Ah death, easeful
Death, an imposter
as well. To hell with
cheeky life, let it go
back where it came
from, let it sink in
its foul sewer. Astral
crucifixion. And at God’s
side, Nothingness. A slow
collapse, see the waning
moon darkening the sun
as it tries to disturb the
night hours. Grandmother,
what have you got tonight
on the wrought iron tray
that has me drooling?
Drool, drool, granny. I
come close to the vase, the
first cowslips, some
plastic, others
cloth. Enough?
The veil of unknowing
falls, ah, truth made
manifest, now I see the
green caterpillar
arrive moving blindly
forward on the dirty
table cloth in the
dining room: it’s hungry,
I’m counting on my hunger
inside this present lack of appetite. Both of us (two mechanical beings) contemplate close up, apathetic (in our depths tributaries) mulberry leaf, brown bread.
Wherein it is seen how the navy officer does not reveal his secret life to us

Five minutes untying the knot, he cast off, the boat moved away from the left shore with its white houses, red tiles, the house of black tiles vanishes after the first bend: a deep river, navigable in all its length as far as the end of the world, as Judgment Day: he has put on the military uniform of the Great War, an officer in the Marines, an emblem on the black cap, white stripes, scarlet visor: and two medals on the left lapel, the yellow one was gold, the copper-colored verdigris: a medal of silver, gold and platinum, then, he always knew how and to whom they are awarded.

He rows. He lifts the oars, the upright one (drips) in the relentless sun, not one shadow in the distance or on the water’s surface: it was about time oars cast no shadows. He stopped the flow of thought.
About the waters, *per se*: slow waters. About the birds, on this morning of summer heat rowing (spring is beginning, the almond trees have flowered, the rows of cherry trees will flower) (in the distance); and about his thoughts. They assault him, he cuts them off. He softly intones the first verses of a sutra he’s repeated inwardly, each time more inwardly, for years.

A sailor. An entire life kept secret. He has remained a bachelor. Has ignored regulations and the world, has escaped. After adolescence he didn’t cultivate his intellectual curiosity, he used to read mountains of books, knowledge he’d dismiss. One fine day (to be precise, a certain afternoon, at sunset) he stopped reading. Out of the blue. Sold off his books cheap or gave them away. First editions (Conrad, most of all) signed
books, incunabula he’d paid for dearly, and his collection of African figurines: set fire to his letters, notebooks, diaries, the eye that jots it all down, love letters, the next day he set off for the first time, towards the end of the world, to Judgment day, to fish. Pike

and
tench,
one
pike
and
one
tench,
breakfast (smoked fish) and
dinner (sliver of pike without bones) spring water kept in
demijohn:
with
these
his
eyes
he
wept,
Oh
nymphs
of
Judaea,
another
night
watching
the
prosecutors
file
in
two
by
two.
Wherein it is seen how buried always inside me is a Jew

To howl out ballads,
to hear plainchant up ahead, constantly, right to the end.

To tread ears of corn
on Judgment Day, and
see wholegrain bread
emerge from un-graspable trays.
On the

elm foreign
to all

representation, without being an apparition, to make out,

and this no miracle, a juicy desert pear, its wealth. Of water.

Brought to the mouth.

To bite, eyes half-closed. A holy silence haloes those gathered at the

table:
such
that
I
am

mother. And I see father come from the blast furnaces with his
leather apron and the
hot tongs in the
pocket of the hardened
smock that

still
holds
us
in
awe.

The three of us. And him. Mother serves in roadside
inns, father forges in
a glass crucible at the
exit of villages, wandering

parents,
sons
of
a
daily diaspora which they are made accustomed to by, I
was going to say God, but
these are matters of
History. Of the angel
of darkness that
sometimes transforms to

exterminator.
At
home
from
childhood
on

we learnt to eat pears from elms, we feed unleavened
   bread to the pigs and
   sell the pigs to the

neighbors.
We
are
(so

the song says) bearded merchants who speak half-half (mixed
together) six or
seven languages, and
we rest (part of our
knack for feigning) on

Sundays.
Bring
on
the
festivals
where

we are dead to joy, to the robes of the
   Prince and the chaste
   maid, we are rag and
   bone people, we live

in
a
language
hidden
among lowly trades. Let the rest have the
lion and the lamb:
for us the filthy
sack with the
golden coin to
enter

into
the
Beyond.

For my part, till the end, among all the mixtures, I
will sing for the
Beloved couplets
of Sefarad, so
we can leave I
will pack the

suitcase
(cardboard
and
rope):

in abundant supply dreams of new lands, at the end of the
day the Messiah,
anyway, here at
home, I help
I count I

can
stuff
the
cabbages.
Where it is seen how everything has its solution

Someone points me out the road to the East, someone else insists
I stay in the
south. It’s a matter
of financial un-
certainties, a family
matter, at least the
losses have settled down,
and though the figures
don’t add up, and the idea
of a favorable balance
is a hopeless dream,
maybe taking the road
East, trading, coming
back a smooth
talker, might solve the
situation. At least in
part, maybe a large
part, further down
the track, without
being prosperous, our
family situation will
be ok. Always nonethe-
less there is a third
road, nothing to do with
cardinal points or places,
a road dense with forests,
household animals living in
harmony with the mythic
elephant of the Hindus,
two-headed creatures and
tiny crawling creatures
waiting to get their
names from Adam: and from French savants imbued with encyclopedic ideas, a complete classification.
This road has one advantage, if you follow it you never run into any twists or sharp turns that lead you to other paths. It’s possible to sit down, even find a permanent settlement, a house, a hovel, a cave, a shack on stilts, from time to time the inner bedchamber of a Palace (with a concubine and everything). A Palace isn’t Paradise but at least you can eat, sleep calmly, count on the warm affection of a woman with meticulous training. Top class training. What happened to the family, to the financial problem that stole our sleep? For months now at dawn my head stings, when I scratch it sand falls, a sometimes black sometimes blond sand. What’s the name for
the animal that in
moments of necessity
hides its head in
sand? Is it a flying
bird? The Greater Rhea, a
marabou stork? A
flying fish, a lyrebird
that doesn’t sing? I’ve
seen the light, it’s all
been pure neurasthenia
as when isn’t it with me?
I slow down. I slow
down. I avoid things. From
a balcony I see bands of
starlings fly by that
the Lord feeds according
to the Bible, the birds don’t
look worried, they don’t
go about divulging their
situation to the four
winds, they pass by
(have passed by) they’ve
come back.
Wherein we see what gets written listening to Gorecki while reading Mandelstam

They are perishing in the air, a collective death. Ghosts, faint trace of their shadows, unperceived lightning bolts, one after another they slip away and die: darkness falls, a congealed drop of honey falls, and finally, remnant of remnants of a multitude in the fearful depths, the bee falls. Of the swarm never even a trace of those perishing in the air, drunk up by death. Summoned, by the gods of grottoes, subterranean galleries, and sometimes on mountain peaks by the goddesses of anfractuous places: depositions of death, fecal waters. The bees that lived in thrall to pollen, being one with procreation, drinking in sacred music from a greenwood flower, syrups that in reality are ichor hidden in
the veins of gods. Let them die and become models of continuity. The bees. How astonishing bees are. They’re bipeds, in their own way. Sparks of Hephaestus, rustling sounds of Pan in the scrub’s most secret hiding place. Companions to minor gods, gods of all shapes and sorts. The bees go to watch these mischief makers in the dense forest. The eye of a genital God in the hives’ peephole. Sometimes a fury, pure secretion. Sometimes impoverished flies rushing upwards, to what, the nuptial flight of transformation. Into sandflies, to hornets. To black holes where cells of hexagonal honey disappear, lacking fresh deposits. And the old lady with the black apron, her hair a tangled mop, starched cap, light blue clouded (blind) eyes red stiletto shoes, looks and looks at them towards sunset: at times
Proserpine, at times
Diana. She crowns them.
The old lady. In her
rocking chair. She’s going
to crown them later in
other spheres, ring,
circle, a concentric
circle of furies with no
center: swarm of all
species, and of a single
creature. There the
steaming cup of
chamomile, there
the old lady stirring
the warm tisane
with pewter spoon,
ulmo honey, rosemary
honey, honey of
all incandescent
forms projected by her
Face at midday: a final
face condensed in a
swarm of bees, needle
that pierces the air as
the cap falls, as starch
falls, as bees
fall to the ground,
spilling pollen from their
mouths. Secreting sun
(set) ants’ nests, the gods’
millstone grinding out a
whirring of soot, of
lapis lazuli that was bee
and brooch in the blank
head of Baucis.
Wherein it’s seen how, even for someone Chinese, it’s impossible to understand writing

Yang Wan Li looks at the clouds level with his gaze, sometimes rushing past, sometimes (unreachable) he sees them move away into the West.

He sits up, the grass has engraved his back (will this be indelible?): in his flesh it leaves the ideogram cloud beside the ideogram gaze, and the reddened hieroglyph, in its origins green, that forms the ideogram West.

What is inscribed is addition, it changes the universe. Excessive intelligence worries the gods, an excess of letters they find repugnant. Yang Wan Li, from his gaze, or maybe from the ideogram gaze, as any lettered samurai would, challenges the unique eye of the gods: it’s easy to confuse the hundred-eyed god, difficult to stop being a subordinate of the clinical eye, in truth the inhuman eye, of the
Cyclopean god.

His defiance leads him to inscribe clouds (two strokes)
gaze (his own and gaze
in general) the ideograms
green (reddened) and
West on one sheet of
silk paper which to his
limited intelligence
looks indestructible.
Good luck Yang Wan
Li, the longing for
eternal existence has
nothing to do with the
reality of the gods or the
make up of the
Universe.

Signs of autumn. From his house’s high look-out tower
Yang Wan Li watches
flocks of pelicans fly
past, gannets of no
background, cranes,
silent herons: he sees
his own existence pass
by, for years now this
other muteness: what
to write down? Now the
years and the birds have
vanished.

Handwriting crumples, collects as specks, traces, excesses of
ink or brush (the hand
tends towards an
absence of harmony):
one final leaf from the
foliage, a red hibiscus
flower that has just
fallen. At most it records
the ants of a calyx, their
jaws dirty with
pollen, their open mouth
a black cyst.

At most, and this with luck, as he rolls away the silk sheet, Yang
Wan Li will see again,
see and immediately
forget, the appearance
(disappearance) of a
few clouds rushing by,
Western lands about which
he knows nothing, and
the grass, rough (sharp)
vexing his back.
Wherein it’s seen how happiness is achieved with a little imagination

Yesterday the two stark naked eating tuna fish cakes,
white wine, spring
water, on the oak
wood clothes-horse
hangs the courtesan’s
dress, on the floor
the leather gauntlet
lined with fox skin, the
falcon, the crossbow,
two fish cakes lifted
to the mouth, a swig
of wine (Chablis)
(gargle): my
Lady’s breasts
wobble, my dick
hangs.

On the other clothes rack the Mandarin’s costume my
Lady will wear in the
evening, fake
pigtails, no one can tell
the difference between
a stuffed toy Pekinese
and one of flesh and
blood, no difference,
we provide some
distraction for the
neighborhood, there
are some who pull
out their folding chairs
to await us as we
stroll by arm in arm
talking of secret loves,
fabulous riches, open
sesames and
abracadabras
towards an
imperturbable
state of
happiness.

This because fundamentally we are people who have
achieved simplicity.
We would love to
have persuaded the
world of the road
to follow, by
God, if it’s so
simple: two meals
a day, stark naked
at the table, three
attractive changes of
clothes, control of
expenses, sufficient
income, and the most
basic home-made
possessions: a cigar-
factory reader (a
function my Lady and
I alternate) reading
to each other, while
sewing, doing
repairs, a batch of
bread, some
simple pastry, novels
by Dumas, Hugo,
Balzac (it’s even
Our most prized symbol is the walnut. The patio’s walnut tree we see everyday from a retreat many would love for themselves: a not at all deep cut that instantly scars over in the bark of the walnut tree allows us to share a glass of watered-down black resin (the resin that Marina Tsvetaeva dedicates to her lover Sofia Parnok): the
rest, knitting
singing, eating
fish cakes, taking a
walk (we have
to take the dog
out we can’t let it
fill our bedrooms
with dog-poop
and spit-balls
of wool and cotton)
(they’re real beasts
these stuffed toy
dogs): and so, get
home, strip
off, strip off and
prepare ourselves
to wait for the
cranky bitchy Bitch
who never turns
up as a couple and
whatever anyone
says is always just
us, each in
our own time and
on our own.
Wherein it is seen how the sleeper verifies the elements that in the end make up his dream

In

the last stage there’s only dreaming, time spent among poppies. Flat on your back, fed on imaginary food, a single voice (in my case a woman’s) below: above (rings; swivels) its echo (links in a chain). The dream’s content can be described in two words. Such and such. The images, domestic. An ovenbird finishes his nest, the first white flower opens in the apple orchard, suddenly seven or nine (whatever) appear and immediately (a geometric progression) the orchard is full of them. White flowers. Red (green) fruit nothing more real. (Truly) yellow islands. Hands made for gathering. All the wicker baskets reinforced. All the
ladders in aluminum
(easy to reach the
tree’s top). And the
dream still hasn’t
vanished? To see
God, for example: now
and then, between thick
clouds made of vapor
(they’re nothing but vapor)
(ridiculously thick). He
appears, they listen to
him, what the hell, how
many languages does
he know, or in our last
phase, through some
innate knowledge, will we
have understanding of the
language before Babel?
Abel. For him no doubt
about it things went very
bad, a real hell. To live
Abel’s fate, that’s the
truth in the end. Abel
dreams Babel, Cain
turns up, a donkey’s
jawbone in his hand,
threatening to sit
down and eat a kid goat
(Abel prefers taro). Will
universal peace triumph?
And where the dream’s
thread begins to unravel,
white thread, a great
hole among the stars, God
stands firm at the foot of
the Throne, vision slowly
adjusting reveals to the
dreamer, a sleep-walker in
a deep trance, white clusters
of flowers, a few gnarled
trunks, laden baskets,
first bite, first worm in
the apple’s, slightly
acidic, slightly dry,
flesh.
Wherein it is seen how the dreamer discovers that his is the best of all possible worlds

I deliberately go on sleeping, let the rooster sing when it feels like it, its violet crest encrusted in my dream, I refuse to wake up: I can’t imagine dawn any more.

A little cream on the oats, a few mouthfuls of coffee, the potbellied satyr’s lost his hooves, on my behalf he leaps out of bed: attends to the necessities of ablution, runs his tongue along the motes of dust in the sun’s ray that enters through the (half-open) window he’s busy: I don’t interfere, don’t bat an eyelid, stay sleeping, surrendering completely let myself be undressed, flipped around, I’m like a rag doll they wash, dust with talcum powder, perfume, and they’re wrapping the doll only
in white, the white of
the eyes and the
starched (passive)
white of shrouds: the
new (bright red)
vestments of the
rooster perched on
the fence, one meter
from the satyr, the satyr
urinates, the rooster
covers him with muck,
and I laugh my head off
holding on to the rail
of the iron bed.

And so the day goes by out there. I wash my hands of it.

Dirty socks, foot
odor: you can
still squeeze out
the drop of violet
ink that pools
there: wood shavings
the drop forming a
puddle, my pointy nose
a door-stopper.
I’m going to write it,
hobbled, the room
at dawn cut short
by sleep. I wrap myself
up. I bring in from
outside my best
memory, unique,
glass or wood, it’s the
same to me: because
it’s concrete: in
Feldafing: after siesta and my second panic attack in February, stretching wide, the lake in the background, that day we didn’t even look at it. I left to take a walk my arm around her waist, on that date my tremors began, chutzpah in both our eyes: in the forest of umbrella pines we sat and smoked (we who never smoke) fell silent (we who never stop conversing). You had to see it, that thing, the sibyls, Diana and the three white geese, the old man with his threadbare overcoat (a pure fantasy on my part) and best of all, the jackdaws about to mate and dancing, if only I didn’t have to wake up.
Wherein it is seen how, as Eduardo Espina says, it’s all in the mind

Gradually I’m stretching out dawn, that continent:
star-filled
dawn, with twice
the planets of our
solar system, I name
them, and so the new
planets won’t be
duplicates, they’re
inhabited: I prolong
my ablutions with
warm water, soap
made of lavender-and-olive-oil-scented glycerin, I
rinse, brush my
dentures one tooth at
a time, gargle
with hydrogen
peroxide (nothing
cheaper): and I clean
the gaps and behind
the teeth with dental
floss. A toothpick with
fine bristles for my
tightly squeezed
houri’s teeth,
I avoid by all possible
means dandruff and
tartar. Ten, fifteen
minutes where I’m
without shadow, with no
thought, I feel
the act of cleaning
as if I were going
deeper and deeper into
the most inward
dwelling place,
one of those Saint
Teresa might create in her
vision, my mind’s power
amazes me.

Petronila, help here to stretch out the iron folding
bed where I
squeeze in tight
as in a coffin.

Let’s go and sit at the table in couples and watch the long
crusty loaves
come out of the
baker’s oven.

The bread doesn’t just appear on the table straight away: come,
Petronila, let it
settle slowly. In
the seed’s labyrinth
what’s inside
must blaze
outwards: the
ear of wheat must
take hold. Watch
how like a patient
ant the grain
ripens. Reap it,
thresh it, fan it,
let it rest (leave
fallow) grind it,
sift it, now help load
the jute sacks to
bursting when the
rain’s been good
in the fields.

The bread is fresh, our hands sore: everyone’s happy,
good health to the
globe, and the day
scarcely begun.

My friend, digestion has its own system, from throat to
sphincter the
distance is long and
all animal instinct. And
consequently, with a
little effort I could
stop the long stretch of
mineral time, could
keep myself
apart: and while
God does his own
thing, and the world more
or less competes in
acts of destruction, what do
I care, with a shrug of my
shoulders, hiding in
my bedroom, still
in (striped) pajamas
they mightn’t be a silk
purse but I’m still no
sow’s ear.

The only clock in the house, a flower clock. Equidistant from the
sundial in the
square. Three in the afternoon it isn’t, any more than eight in the morning. A desert caravan. The guide, Petronila, directs my gaze from the edge of the folding bed to the sketchbook (one hour) to the open book on the writing desk (another hour) to the enlightened horde (hour of the bodhisattvas): insects thronging there outside, the hundred-year-old tree on the sidewalk leaning against the window. Here I could wax a little more expansive, rush about, make connections, start to spot places of ambush and sparks in the shadows, but maybe that’s now a bad (mental) habit.
Devastation

Don’t anybody move, God’s leapt into action, wild seeds
invade, (pharaonic)
locusts carrying woodworm
on their bodies, lay waste:
to die, to die, what a relief,
no more limping along, feeling
the loss of breath, loss of
appetite, at last to stop being
the household cripple,
hemorrhoids bleeding in
the morning, unless
there’s another life, and in
that life hemorrhoids,
crippling diseases, halitosis,
underarm odor and mother
who gave birth to us
let them go on ruling the
roost: our body
forever hooked on
death. Don’t anybody
move, I’m going to start
dancing among locusts,
on my jacket’s lapel
wild seeds, woodworm
on my lips: to dance
arm in arm with Osip
Mandelstam, Nikolay
Gumilyov, Bely, Blok,
in Slepnyovo, Tsarkoye
Selo, with Akhmatova,
blowing raspberries at
Lenin, farting in Stalin’s
face so he can smell
his own dead. Don’t anybody
move, the day is
irreversible, it’s right
off the grid, the hour
shatters the sphere, into
splinters of the number,
now Arabic, now Roman,
God directs the rabble: not
much sound, dancing feet
of air beat against the windy
steppes devoid of distance,
step-less, no way through, no
exoneration. Noise of jaws
grinding, of wild seeds invading
Pharaoh’s granaries, the Tsar’s
granaries, gnawing sound of
woodworm in the wheat
sprigs, in the wooden pith
that forms the core of a set
of chairs round the dining
room table, in the thrones of
some new potentate or other
hiding from God. Out front,
and all in Indian file, follow
the guide, the old bird who
knows everything, knows the
perpendicular paths, the
diagonal way, the diameter
with no future, the vertical
plummet of the final smash.
Laugh. Everything rushing
to death. Three or four
Russian poets who saw it
all, a few locusts glutted
with wild seeds, their mouth and anus covered in woodworm. The last sound, a little sawdust, a contrapaso, in performance. I break my foot, twist my step, not a leaf stirs on the terebinth, casein oozes from the red cow’s omasum, dead casein, the voice of dregs on the heights no sign of God.
Cuba, padlocks.

On the iron doors of hardware shops, you could
   of course call them
   ironmongers, call them
   slag, useless liquid
   iron, it’s all
   one.

Cuba, iron dross.

Red hot, embers burning holes (still now?) in stores
   made of concrete,
   the cement’s paint
   worn off, fountains
   of rust, liquid
   manure. I could
   call it guano
   dust, palm leaf
   dung, at these
   heights, the plumbago’s
   tight-locked shoots,
   truly it’s all the
   same.

Quintessential island confirmed its entire length
   in dung
   heaps, paupers’
   graves, broken
   tuff to the East, a
   narrow strait of
water, where’s
the center,
where’s the
center, to
the West
stone quarries,
crumbling away.

The caiman has gone, those left have gone,
we’ve all gone, you
can recognize us from
the twist of corn stalk
knotted into the
buttonhole of a
jacket.

A red leaf-cutter ant, a stamp of fire, comes
to raze the ground,
goes off to eat the
buttonhole, lock it
up as we leave.

The flame-throated warbler, an ember about to land, an excited
hummingbird above
the hibiscus’ wide
open corolla, vanishes
exhausted its blazing
barrel in the dust.

The last questions of red tape, through what door, which grilles,
what rusted iron
bars, let’s go
step by step: first
to fold away the
mirrors, empty the light
of dust motes, the
cleaning rag of fluff, lift
jute shavings to your lips:
down the hatch, citizen,
the iron rod, in the end
for us to sit down as
a family, easy chairs made
from rough vines, all
squiggly, loose threads
of tobacco, to lick the
corners of your mouth
clean and start telling
stories.

Of leaving, of the din of burrowing insects piling walls
on top of walls to
close finally for
good: double
locks, half-eaten
hummingbird, the
leaf-cutter ant’s
delighted, emptiness
has been emptied:
bury it, drown it
in three o’clock in
the afternoon moonshine,
pure liquid, and it burns
end to end.
From *Carece de causa* (1988)

**Retributions**

Between his hands the butcher encompasses the cow’s immeasurable arch.

At his back, in the garden wild oats have broken out climbing plants have mounted the trellises.

The spout of the cracked cement fountain lies open to the horizontal thirst of the heavens.

The butcher stepped through an entrance door in all his visibility he tempts appetite, in the empty space.

It was the cow’s slaughter the location of the slashes before the whiteness of a door, opened.

Now it has fallen, has been heard: the butcher’s hands whirl above the table like meandering white chalk giving shape to another cow another lamp inward, inaccessible.

In the garden in cap and gown magistrates converse with ladies in bonnets the table set.
And beyond in the paddocks the yellow stream of
the wheat field flows
by again again flows by.

The silent cow is calm between its hooves the
sickle at one with
the growth flourishing
in the fields.

It chews chews just in front of the arbor the ladies
are chewing as evening
falls.

The cow in the fields pisses quietly ladies and
gentlemen fall asleep in
wicker easy chairs.

With one sound the sickle flew with one sound rooks
flew a door shut
cowbells stopped
silenced.

Night traverses the closed doors the striking of a
sheep’s small bell in
dreams the decisive
strike of a scalpel, shatters
the empty space.

The city fell silent its verdict is night.

Alone in the fields the cow plots the placidity
of immeasurable
domes freshly sown
winter fields
fields of August
grains.

And the butcher is present stays present as he
gazes at the cow,
immeasurable.

In the night his hands affix with chalk against the
night the generic
shape of cow its
vault size.

We will see at dawn one more time the stream of the
slaughterhouse in the
irrigation ditches.

One more time the cities sealing themselves off in their
domes their gardens the
visibility of their doors.

Take heed, take heed: from the sheepfold flowed the shape
of the cups hunger begins
wine begins on the
walls the shadow’s other
side begins the apogee
of breeze among the poppies
splashes the walls.
Things near at hand

The old ladies lie down under the frost: truly, they are sleeping.

All morning they were taking out the indoor plants in deep winter
they thrust their hands
into the earth they spoke
of a forest wheat that
cleanses the stomach
of horses (they spoke,
softly) we are women of
wheat and ablutions they
won’t be able to diminish us;
the two birds that on
meeting were suspended
a few moments in the sky,
they need us.

We are, after all, women of ablutions: no height at all.

They dug, two flowerbeds in a cross: they speak, laying down conditions.
   Without our hands in
   the garden-beds nothing
   will germinate again no one
   will see our pastures in
   the depths of the wells whoever
   goes down will have their
clothes soaked in the scarlet
must secreted by the
mushrooms’ disease; they
will drown.

Since they are proof, burning phosphorus: our children.

Enormous, in their rocking chairs: and among them I hear someone
name the fires in the sky
(the sea sparkle’s
disorientation
in the waters is now
purple) the whistling
of three grebe,
frightening.

We stood up, I’m small.

They take their buckets woodwork brushes, they are going to
trim the tree in the
backyard: we laughed;
they’re not going to
come and settle in
our house they won’t
nest in the two aspen in
the patio nothing will
gnaw their immemorial leaves
and from the catkins will
burst forth the spark
paper fodder on the
wet-nurse’s breasts.

They whistle shrilly, let them whistle: I hear, on the roof
against the patio’s red floor
buckets moving
large new pans
fermentations.

I hear, cow-dung falling: I withdraw among the men their
enormous hands sunk
in their aprons, obedient;
they’ve become intoxicated,
they bury their fists in
their pockets looking at
the tides looking at the
shimmer of sea sparkle
on the patio tiles
(I celebrate, density) (I
celebrate the swarm of
fireflies that have come
out of the mildew) moths
nested in their large
winter coats.

The candle, in their eyes: a gnat (birds) in the pockets of their
agave overcoats.

Wearing a toga, with a hood: they look, where to dig. Under the
frost, the thick scrub of
flowering begonias makes
us drowsy from my
tunic a mushroom
sprouts (I hear) (flower
of the breeze, a shrill
whistle) the eaves
blooming the
shoot of the old
women on the cornice.
Harvesting

They go down the hill, their baskets filled with apples.

One onyx-green apple one wax-red apple: and behind them apple trees.

The kestrel’s shadow going down the hill between the sycamores on the path.

Thorax, the one that opens the line stopped.

A straight line (rungs of a ladder) a straight line: all have stopped.

The kestrel opens its shadow its wings a sudden downpour of rungs a straight line to the heavens.

A rustle of sparks among the sycamores.

The oldest one dazzles lifts her green skirts (all of them, pale-faced) they blur the blazing red fire of a half-moon among the oldest one’s skirts two half-moons her cheeks.

Her shadow incrusted on the firmament: it will snow.

The onyx one sets down the wide linen tablecloth serves the fruit’s red ember on
chinaware places
a white bunch of
chrysanthemum in
a tall (immanent)
vase.

The women round her with one blow of the hand half
open the apples on
the table: Ceres
(Ceres) gathers
in the bowl of her hand,
the seeds.

(Broken) baskets roll downhill.

A deafening noise onyx wax of legs (petticoats)
(wings) chatter
of the women (twelve)
(hieratic) figures.
Traces, of the inscribed

The tip of the middle finger of his right hand is stretched the whole length of the verse spoken by Isaiah (5:24) the tip of the index finger still wet (wet and deep red) poured (that one) (that one was Elijah, in the sky) in the direct forward rush of the tip of that finger as it traverses the whole length of a verse (it stopped) they spilled, the wineglass: David with the harp at the foot of the seat (God, so much the greater) rust (blockage) the chords of the harp (at the slightest touch) it will crumble: this one, he was an insatiable king; and these now his future generations like that man who sat at the head of the table (head shaven) (myopic) he rocks he bows ah he is filled with emotion (and sways) is attentive is upright is swept under by so much destruction rising like a wave against Jerusalem endless kings rode up to the borders of the slime, and crumbled: with that index finger (he) pointed to watch-towers that look like
white linen burnt to ash (he pointed to) the borders where Adonai left the cattle stranded set the horsemen’s cloaks on fire (intoxicated they were, inwardly) they rode towards the border (he) pointed them to the verse where it says fire says enormous burning to ash (bone) cattle stranded on that border of his own (there is no other direction) the cow’s skeleton oxidized (rust) the strings: King David (yom) night.

The finger of my grandfather Isaac or Ishmael or king now nameless or named Katz or named Lev or Heart of Judah (points towards) the word where the true labyrinth of words stopped, foreign king: the finger, on the ant-hill’s mouth.

5:24, fire: of bones.

The fingerprint is what remains the fingernail still gives voice to some Hallelujah on the strings of the harp.

Let them bring out, his harp: the frames of King David’s window the ledge of his window as far as the full height of the watch-towers are linen poured out,
rotting: the harp,
rotting.

Let us praise him: He understands his concerns; He understands what is alive in the stranded object:
water or wine of inundations, once the border is crossed:
Elijah, at the head of the two-horse chariot of the horsemen who ride.

The sweet yoke of sleep, fulfilled.

Fulfilled: crossed over (yom) the fifth hour of evening of month five day twenty (it is precisely him: my grandfather) the (smooth) index finger placed on the reins of his (gentle) mount the verse that might lead him that leads him to the narrow (precise) border of his ant-hill.

Among riders: pointed out.

All of them, the same: left arm branded by the fire of phylacteries shoulders (branded) by the voice of the linen in the torched cloak that once again covers the shoulders alike of any one or this one (another) or that one, each the same
all kings.

Their mounts, reek: the repentant one who has performed expiation, reeks.

Yet the stench is privet (a grocery store smelling sweetly of raisins) death on top of grandfather (its fornication) an aromatic plant.

He is there, in the living room: at the head of the longest table with the great harp of his vision at the right hand of his position there, before the book.

And at the foot of the harp, a spittoon: for spitting.

His death his steeds his ritual gallop of (foreign) words: composed; of cardamom seeds (seeds) of safflower for the nuptial anointing of his cloak his baldachin his ritual yarmulka (anointed) by the (nuptial) drop of wine that he holds below his tongue: the dead man.

Everything around him (anointed).

And much further on, along the circumferences: on the last border, the living room.

In the living room, a Cuban indoor plant: the areca propagating.
The window ledge is of immortal stone.

The frames of the window are of immortal boxwood that neither storm winds nor cyclones of ants nor any decomposition, alters.

My grandfather is of the genealogical line of David, before the harp; a young boy. Among drapes. Among harnesses. In his pavilions. The entire right arm extends to the maximum the ritual weapon of the archer (extends) the crossbow at the maximum stretch of crossbowmen in their watch-towers the arrow he will shoot is a still-life of words a still-life of liquids his anointing, pours: from there it reaches the house reaches the long long Passover table at which we are seated: this one (the chair) this (back of the chair) these strict judges let them judge us: this is the book of Isaiah (open) on the verse befitting the day on which it befits us to be gathered again as the Lord’s dead leaves burnt
to ash, to lower our
heads beneath the
contemplative weight of foreign
words that they may rise to
the sound of harps to the
sound of the most inner
zithers to Elijah so high in the
sky guided by an anointed
chariot with two horses (nothing)
limits it: I am free; in my
imagination I am free. I
can make out the harps of
King David, his watch-towers:
(I smear) his body with
aromatic oils of cardamom
the tips of my fingers
bruised by dill wash the
living buccal cavity of David:
great king great lineage, the dead.

This one, descends from Israel: he is called Isaac (precisely that)
he is dead (my grandfather)
on the 20th of May, night more
or less well advanced.

And it is now that he makes his way across the always inexhaustible
verses of the book each
word the tip of one
of the fingers of his
right hand touches,
opens: on the border
(it opens). Beyond the
line of wars (line) of
intoxication the tip of
his finger (touches)
softly on almost
imperceptibly on there in the
book, words: one is chair one
is leather one parchment
(all of them) horse.
**Last night’s lamp**

Some fifth-rate flip flops, of the most wretched sort now half fallen to pieces, the mask or face of indigence, my feet overflow their soles: open seams, my feet. They’re not worth a brass razoo, my feet and flip flops, what’s there for me to rest on? What are these scarlet flip flops going to rest on, industrial matter, a bargain-basement shrunken existence? In other times my shattered feet were embossed leather, sky-blue stretched canvas, mistletoes and ferns parted where I walked; the scarab beetle would tremble at the mere lifting of one of my feet enclosed in a hemp-rope sandal, silk slippers, ankle socks embroidered (with arabesques): one foot, the next foot and their shadow on high for one moment, the scarab beetle would fall to its knees (what am I saying, as I walked by all flora and
fauna trembled like a leaf):
Sunday, Mahler, the
Fifth, the Adagietto,
now I understand, my
guts turned to jelly,
the big toe of my right
foot over and over
(shamelessly) terror-
stricken, a trip to death
and back, my left foot
every inch of it trembles,
falters, won’t move forward, I
understand (now) the
insect’s fear the fear of
ferns that had a premonition
I’d come here from
the outside (always
from the outside)
to flatten everything.
I half close my eyes, go up
some stairs (to be precise
thirty two steps) (there
were sixteen of us) and
I kiss her, she smells
of fritters, one turn
to the left, another
to the right, an oversized
bed along with
wardrobe and dressing
table takes up the
whole bedroom: I
set myself down firmly,
bow, open the narrow
door (midday) (I
hear her softly chanting
in Yiddish) (what do the letters from right to left say?) I take out the pair of flip flops that belong to me, a fragrance of old leather, fragrance of things locked up pointing me now clear and obvious my own way: I’m at ease. I sit down on the doorstep, what are you reading? Goyim books. What? Flaubert. She moves away (going flip flop) (frying) (checked kerchief, on an angle) (what would the sea have meant to her?). Red Sea. The waters parted. A carriage. Two (harnessed) mares. And a hat with feathers, plumage, that would have sparked her imagination for sure: a promised land. Armies. The waters return to their seabed (we’ve touched land). The Pinzón brothers and St. Elmo’s fire. Read, read Yod and gematria, read Qof and Haftarah, Kidush Hashem. And of God’s praises, what to say? Take to our heels again?
Villadiego once more?
Queens forever? We’re out of here. She
(Konzentrationslager) (one indivisible wail) falls from the fourth step of a hand ladder, she was going to hang a garland of vine shoots of jasmines intermingled on the whitewashed wall, inri, inri, her head dazed (crown of thorns) she plummeted. Death, indivisible.
And I pray. I cling to her feet, and pray. The shadow of a ladder in plain sight. In plain sight, pharaohs, the parting of red waters, a whitewashed wall. I lean on one foot, it turns out I was the scarab beetle. I stand up, raise one arm, the waters part, behold (sixteen) promised fields (already parcelled out) for grapevines and apiculture, swarms and buzzing, history (a lot of history) in the hollow space (vine-shoots and suede) of a night table.
Union

My mother is of widow’s cheap black wool of jute or coal is the skin my father will shed.

The blue of fire left in the thickets the firebreaks’ narrow path,
    they walk by: a
    sore stretches across
    her cotton
    chest-cover.

It festers the dark-green spot that touches it with a
    bitumen blue,
    it infects.

Two gusts of wind rip a strip of widow’s wool another of jute, they’re intertwined: my mother caresses the open fontanel the drop of liquid coal that crowns my father.

Of cottonwool, they were: it’s snowing (fire’s blue echoed in the blizzard).
    Sometimes thirst echoes in the stag’s tongue as it cleans the sand (the gazelle turned round into the blizzard).

Blacksmith friar-bird sparrow sparrowess, in the air:
    beating the air, their chirps.
Crumbs that trace a path they recognize by the blue resin of the forests: they did meet each other.

With cardamom they made the sign of the cross smudging each other’s foreheads.

I am going to be born with the avocado colour they have (here) their stubble.
Portrait of DK at 76 years of age

He smells of swamps a clot has made its home in his
groin (he opens his
mouth: in a trance)
stretches out his
arm (pretends) to
touch some crimson
roses made from a
putty bread
crumbs he (doesn’t)
dare (they might
break loose) some
clots nestling in
his bowels (they moved)
his bowels in the
early morning (he
remembered in
his country they
call evacuating, making
your corrections) he forgot
he’d gone and after
second breakfast (very
Slav, very literary) asked
them to purge him.

How much grief they give him his lower bowels.

And afternoon, immobile (he watered the two
areca plants the devil’s ivy
in their white
flowerpots, encased
in imitation bamboo) he
readied the bed for
his nap (how much he’s
slept) he whistled faintly
(the whistling stopped
suddenly) papaya
trees motionless in the
garden opposite (if a cow
should stroll by if he should
hear a cowbell: Lord, a
cow a small herd of
yearlings Lord) (a hand-
bell: they announced
nightfall so well, before
when he smoked) (Lord,
a terrace) and the
yellow ants forming an
ellipse parallel (more
or less) to the crack in
the white façade of the house
(creeping upwards, the crack) their
larvae their cocoons their
tiny intricate animal-self from
which a large white
butterfly will emerge
(imminent, it’s imminent)
some afternoon or other.

And the yellow ants (clepsydras).

He wears himself out immersed in the button hanging by
a thread from the
sky-blue bathrobe a
sky-blue bead of
saliva hangs from his
lower lip (it will)
break loose the sky above
the afternoon the asphalt
reflection in the sun of these cities the cantankerous sky will make its heavy hand felt a black flock of birds will appear from a crack in the sky with no background no squawking (they’ll float by above they’ll plunge with a sickle’s slash these black birds into emptiness) his bathrobe (the flaps unravelling) will be fastened (spellbound) by the monogram on the pocket with its sheaf separating the letters of the name which of his surname’s names: he is called both judge and plaintiff king of hosts and the bird’s transient slash in the heavens (he is) bird God (he is) bird his archangel (birds) they are the three clots making their nest beside the deep aneurysm in his bowels (God’s anger) in his mercy (it will burst).

They will drown him.

In his wakefulness (it’s increased) the aneurysm (God’s clamps) half an inch in
a few months (he’s exhausted) the areca plant will shed its leaves when a ray of light brushes it coming through the curtains into the semi-darkness of the living room (Lord, Lord: the small herd of yearlings is bleating in this very room) there’s no house there’s no study with polished blue mahoe reflecting tea baskets of pastries the tray with two cups sunlight a small trail of crumbs on the table (he’d always wanted to eat straight off the wood) the time for second breakfast sounded on top of the blue mahoe there are no pieces of furniture (one) window locked by three boards three planks painted green for the month of September his hurricane season (they took) an armchair outdoors (to the edge, of the meadow) he sprawled out (dozes) (sleeps) (whistles faintly, mouth half-open from which a
thin blue thread of saliva hangs that as he sleeps will wet the mouth of his pyjama pants reproductive mouth with no ancestry): and down through his sleep in the living room armchair drop the re-assembled yellow ants of his most distant adolescence (deposition) of caterpillars they are (pustules) they are insects in his resting arms embroidered with freckles scribblings stains that are the handiwork of God (depositions) of God’s yearlings marking the small space of his arms open in repose on the living room armchair.

He is up and about again.

Of the whole living filigree of his activities that he’d begin at the dawn bell with calisthenics in pyjama pants and T-shirt (eleven hours always his breathing exercises that’s how it seemed) he’d slurp in
big loud dollops his bread soaked in café con leche he’d light his five-cents one-leaf cigar (1936) his twenty-cents one-leaf cigar repeated eight times in eight-fold ritual (1953) the year of my initiation I swiped a cigar from the dark drawers of the chifferobe smoked it turned white a merciful hand lifted me into bed, in my Sunday best: we were fully grown (at last) complete (men) up for the daily life of those burlap sacks seen on the shoulders of wharf labourers in that city of cargo stowage white hibiscuses with their unfathomable abundance of ants in a lively centre of activities (we’d sink) schoolboy and street salesman participant in books and the wholesaler who once said he’d put suits on half the population wearing Sunday best in the parks of Cuba’s provinces.

Of kindness, the sure eye of his needlework.

The needle, he shuddered (quicksilver) the clock (it’s
four) night’s
coming (he will
die): it’s him, as
always (this time, him)
who’s here to wait (he’s
got nothing to do) till
they call him (till they
ring) till some
shadow comes to his
door takes pity on the
interminable day when
they don’t in the end
knock on his door knock of
shadows imperceptible
strumming of knuckles on
the door so that (wet with
urine) from the belly
down (loved) by
flies from the heart
down the day may pass
(nadir): birds in a
flock there outside are
building a giant halo
waiting for the sky’s
nimbus it filters down
like the noise of fish or
birds splashing from wing
to wing (glittering)
scales, the sky’s light
descends in a wide fan of
stripes towards the
city’s flat tar and sandstone
roofs (it spills) light
oleanders light (shady) papaya
trees light these Lenten days
that glide on wide wings
combing the wind as it
rocks the banana leaves that
today is February (he will die)
three knocks (rooks at the
door) (rain at the door) on
the power lines
(rooks) outside everywhere
(facing west).
The tailor’s requiem

This man, on the warp unravels the threads that would need
the bias to shape the
fabric (then) they call
for the cutter to run his
shears down the path
traced by the chalk (that)
is covered over: the night
is cold; it has come.

Ah he stretches out the palm of his right hand (ah) the speck of
cotton, it has a burr:
scattering, the
fabrics (let all be covered).

His hand (everyone’s) on his head (at) the crown the round shape
of skullcaps, blessing
(the fabric): the tailor
unravels the threads that
at God’s direction will be
shaped into skullcaps; and
the crowned flesh of the
scalp stays standing
smooth (skin) (ah, it’s
all sores, now) of beasts of
burden, His works: like a
horse-blanket (fleur-de-lis,
black background) the cloth
covers the lower flesh
of the four beasts,
dressed up.

Plumes, tanned saddle of beasts: useful (clothed)
animals.
The tailor created (domes) curved smooth (they are) the rump of horses; perfect, hole-punch: he’s a craftsman our flawless tailor who protects the fig trees with netting spreads sendal on flowering tobacco in the fields (restores) flesh on the redundant bones of his dead: that he has stepped into the enraged centre of clusters of bumblebees who spin and spin (flesh); blind scholars of God, in their cells.

For me, he came: I was afraid it would be my father, once again: and raised my hand to my head (unaware) a reflex movement.

This one, is different (by profession, the same): his name is tailor (harp) (David) (frizzy beard) (strong calves) (a hard bee-hive, his heart): nothing to do with rapid progeny of edible bread his (different) crumb; how, where do I
gather words the
sound of a tiny
fleck of words the
strand (manna) of
words to say (now)
this tailor is in the
damp depths of a
backroom of a street
we can call Villegas
(Delancey) Gorojovaia
street (he is) in the
lepidoptera depths the
damp depths of (sacred,
animal) flesh: leap
(leap) towards me.

I bow, as I germinate to gather the cotyledons with
which the tailor shaped
the (filigreed) geometric
borders at the edges of, his
cloth: I cover myself.

My hand, to my head: in the left lapel some grass (it will
flower, pangola): here beasts
will come to graze where
my pauper’s suit was
(my white clothes): they’re
not enough for me to
speak of God the old seven-
branched candelabra the
frieze of repeated blue on
white (linen) background
of a stole: I lift, this book of
psalms so he may know me.
In the end, I am nobody: the tailor’s son.

He died, hired horses pulled the carriage in which they transported his perfect carrion with striped pants long black (shirt) of (the craftsman) tailor: led from the depths of a backroom to his conclave of (crumbling) earth: it rained, in the north in the south all night it was cold the fig tree suddenly withered, in the back yard: a birch tree in spring, shed its leaves; in the place we will return to, in the middle of the tropics, a ceiba tree died, covered in frost.

It doesn’t matter is of (no) interest: the tree’s seed-pods, fell: threads of fabrics disintegrated like dust, all chalk.

Nothing: the constructor is different. My father is one more of his off-shoots who took the profession of tailor everyday (bumblebee): he concocted (and) concocted complete fabrics of living myopia
seated one foot on a
footstool the sharp edge
of his pupil piercing the
flesh (lifting) a thread to
the sky (poor) bumblebee:
he dressed me dressed
(countries): (febrile) at the
end he shared out, his
threads; (off-shoots splices of
linen blue (fields), of cotton:
(spliced) we have remained
hand in hand both watching it
snow (here) outside (hand in
hand) watching threads on
a slant snow in the sky
(you, cashmere suit so you
look like a nobleman despite
the suit’s cuffs of vegetable
waste; I, a fish coming up
to suck the fibre broken free
from your scraps.
The figure of the primogenitor in his place

My father is a loom of dark pattern (a cup).

From his threads dawn comes down amid snow my father descends from his threads.

Snow pumice notice on the diamond laminated with snow (edges) his face.

The halo of snow on his head for his reconstruction.

White stitches notice they’re causing a grey shrub of hair to sprout on his crown.

Of pumice (tonsured) his locks of hair bunch together lashed in the flurry of snow they interweave the slow threads fall down (rest) on his full-length clothes, untangled.

On his throne the sewing needle at an angle thread to eye (he smiles) recognizing the pupil in the diamonds of snow, untangling: he makes his suit of pine marten on all the trees snow has fallen a simple inseam makes for the resurrection (birch tree, trunk) white trousers.

Marten’s cape white pants shirt of polyps.
He’s a king; one of seven times (king) it’s over.

Stains of flesh leathery scalp, scalding ashes.

Will he have caught fire (flakes) in the corpuscles’ final eye?

Tree, to its bowing.

Empty them, female of skirmishes: her vegetable membrane gives birth to domes hemmed in by the snow of home in foreign cities of minarets foundations of hyacinth: the arch of the domes bends as it splits upwards archangel downwards, tree.

The river of his village washes the shards in its bed of death its shape polishes the pebbles’ smashed diamonds: and each species has its mineral site, my father transmigrates.

Shards his beard diamonds his pupil a migratory species his flesh.

He has arrived: above the dregs of snow measure a troop of seeds (he opens his mouth) to his resurrection.
He sits down, he leans: the deep high-backed chair receives
his left-sided shape
fist under chin.

He takes out a pattern (tailor’s soap) (hole-punches) hears the
wind die down (die
down) in his flesh the
threads (still) tremble
chords, the threads:
notice he is the throne’s
lute to the tree’s
slope to the slope
they carry him on a litter
(a placeless place) to its
porous side.

It’s snowed in the field he is king on a low throne his chair of
fresh maple, resins: the
passage of stone passage
of snow piling up is my father
David’s whiteness (chalk)
stitches laborious tacking,
the harp dissolved.
The Gift

I was born in the dying man’s house; his corpse is exhausted: I don’t
shake him any more, he
is calm now.

He lies, his feet to the East.

They are enormous; stalks, of my blood: even now, from far away
in that other country
they distil his smoke-rings smelling of
camomile; oval-shapes,
the oval of his shaven
head still fading away
on a pillow; and look, on the
pillow-case they’ve
sketched a fish with
golden scales the arrow-dart
of a diagonal bird:
immersed, he prays in the
linen of the pillow-case;
he’s far away, from the
white place of linen: and
from pity he climbs onto
the fish the needlewomen
simulated a wild outburst; of hops.

Their golden threads brought the scales of the fish back to life.

I know them: in their chairs of blue mahoe with lyre-shaped
backs, embroidering; for each
one who dies a sackcloth
shirt smelling of sweat or
lavender, a fish a bird
so the head may rest
gently in the mud; the
needlewomen, polish; the
dead man’s head shines, shiny
his feet: the shirt, all silk; softest
sacking, the pillow-case linen.

A most ancient batrachian, the corpse.

He is not diminished: flies nibble him, intact. A swarm
of suppuration shines
intact in his pores, open
linen: each flying creature
is his; quiescent chrysalis.
Everything that flies is
removed from his breasts
each time more remote,
over-flowing: the
needlewomen remove
the dregs-like yellow
tacking from these depths,
they shake out the caterpillar.

They exude, a thread of glass.

A concavity, with no chronologies: a sketch. And on the
bed, he does not die: they
adorn him. He is new; in
red plush shirt loose
beige pants, scrunched up:
among the braids hanging
over his chest they interwove
garlands of flowering
legumes: even-handedly.
He sits up; they have helped him.

His large naked feet exude the rust of nails ants
in their ant-hole
sip: the petals that fall
from his clothes form
a black voracious wasps’
nest at his feet; birds of
dregs fish of linen come
helter-skelter, to drown:
he smiles.

He recognizes in the curved patterns of space, a door.

Suns, in the East: the neighbourhood’s silversmiths
smell of cardamom the
necromancers, stretch
their limbs: they
position him. And
they take out the
kneading troughs
filled with sifted
ovals of flour, into the
town squares: flocks
peck at the crumb of
bread shining in his
arms raised on high.
Echoes

Certain animals whose names I don’t know came to eat once from my hand.

They were of bronze or maybe some alloy in stages that without my understanding it ended up as flesh.

In any case they were hungry the smell of food drove them crazy though the fruits were onyx the liquids all rust.

They scratched me I understand from frustration at their hunger; I slammed the gate shut with a thud that sounded like the metallic echo of the oldest instruments a triangle or vihuela could imagine.

I gave up since it also concerned my nasal voice of all the wiseguys in the neighbourhood also a kind of food they call thingamies in the country with it they name loggerhead turtles or if they have to feed their
horses they say
corn stalks.

These are words from which those animals ate that time they crossed the threshold and settled down right there in the garden.

I can describe the garden as clasps of dyer’s rocket that buzz at the moment of greatest immobility subject to four opposing winds round some calyx.

Then they leave then the sound of the gates closing the large doors of two barns on the district’s outskirts click shut you hear the exact instant of the vertical flute when it commands.

Everything stops, Orpheus the females the clay in the pottery’s very shape: the animals of only one existence, draw back.

Only then do I hear that a window has just opened do I recognize for certain the voice that from the side calls me almost as if it will call my name that holds the
name cast in
bronze of several
very ordinary animals
that have disappeared.

I turn round since I think I’ve been standing all this time, I feel hungry.

My wife who has blonde hair done in a spiral whose gathered strands are a flounce cast in yellow, is naked: opposite her with everything placed on the table with praiseworthy precision I see myself with the dark blue woollen sweater under which I’m wearing a sienna polka-dot tie a double knot that looks like I don’t know whether the heart of the orchards or what lies below the city another city Ich möchte rauchen doubtless of recently-rained-down slates.
Rotation

The people in the neighbourhood appeared this morning with their picks their hoes; the people in the neighbourhood woke up with the rooster’s spur stamped between their thighs.

Towards the north, fields.

In the mornings, they’ve been fertilized: nestled under waves of fog; the thaw will overflow them. And for my part I’ve given up: with the mountain frosts coming down, I will leave; with a tin-bucket umbrella, for the high plains.

With no table.

I can hear hailstones striking I can hear the puddles down there, I heard the silence of the snow: my boots up to my calves are polished boxwood the hood that I put on tightly they’ve made from the foliage of an impassive herd of sheep: this is the horizon: it will confuse us.
And I stop right next to the window: I mark it.

They leave, scattering every which way: they’ve abandoned their
   gardening tools the
   implements are
   rotting: rain after sun, after
   the deserts the shattered
   amphorae of the vestals
   back there, we are: the
   whole community
   gathered as one to see
   the fury of the blades spin
   their old parchments very far
   from the barns, to see rain
   run along the blades; dawn
   frost over: and they are
   puddles of hops the sheep drink.

In our wineglasses, hops: warm: life’s epithet.

We stand firm on the earth arms akimbo legs spread wide: I can
   hear the song of
   our reproductive
   systems, overflowing;
   instinctive lights: I hear,
   urine spilling down
   our women’s thighs
   we dry our hands
   sweaty from stirring
   about in their clothes; today,
   the tides that are
   always at our back have
   put to sleep the spouse
   and his nubile wife:
today, soaking wet.

The dovecotes, at our back: filled to overflowing, the city.

A fluttering of excrements a cooing of vihuelas, the doves: and my house, today; there at the far end, made glowing at dawn by three women who stretch out in the kitchen, talking of fragrances: they point out to me the hoes against the door jamb at the entrance they point out the path that leads to the sea the old city’s sea the promenade with its parapets its walls of decayed stone: and from the table at the entrance to the house I see, the basket of fish.

I’ll go out, I’ll go to the forests: to gather moss, fistfuls of mushrooms.

My hood, will do as a net my long boots will bloom with bunches of red raspberry my umbrella with its deep goblet will receive the battering of the winds, its
depths will be
full: suckerfish tiny
eggs the umbilical
fleshiness of
mushrooms; they
are, my gear: at the
back a window.

I hear, the rotations.

From this window: behind me is the pregnant woman with wide
hips in whom the whole
of that city fitted; just
below the window a few
dead people are tilling
their strips of garden,
marked out: with my
knuckles, I knock; and they
look up, hail a deluge of
rain glass seedling
boxes: for their
trees, the farm tools
will just hang there.

My three generations.

There, in the background: at the foot of the mountain the water in
its identity will
open for us the
times’ rotating
floodgates, their
epithet in order:
in some anfractuous
spot we will sit
down touched by
immutability:
fast and nimble;
fast and nimble the
tributaries of so
many waters, in their
womb: memory,
an interval; an
interval fists in
pockets, standing
among the people.
Gift, of clay

“the potter is the judge”
(Wisdom 15:7)

There were periods when I stayed standing before the wood and wrought-iron bench we had at the garden entrance always as if just recently painted red and black: it’s behind the entrance gate, under the pepper tree.

I know I’m standing, I’m sure.

I was sitting the book remained open beside me, the unlit cigarette between my fingers: I looked at it from time to time, fragile stuff; among other living creatures, of that place. Maybe they were the last potters of that place who from the seed ruled the fragile creation of the world; definitive: in its order. Their hands, calloused: crusts of white, in their eyes.

Crowded times, those potters.
They were seated on the cement floor that covers the whole entrance to the garden to bring between themselves and the clay, their amphorae: they were humming. The wind doesn’t sweep them away, unmoved: they fill the enormous communal basket with their pots; their far off voices change into that hum that sets the potter’s wheels spinning (producing) that transmutes scaling lees to must, darkness into vines: it’s fair.

They stand them up so their continuous pieces of pottery may fill up: a mouth, to their laps.

Pieces of blessing, of fertility: the rains that penetrate there, rest; the unblemished liquid of holocausts covers the base to the height of an inch: the maximum depth. And they are behind me, the potters; standing I
see myself seated
in that garden
with the red and
black bench the book
open the catkins of
an ancient tree falling
male catkins female
catkins curling up in
my hair: struck hard,
their white sparks
leapt out.

Dry scruffy hair, falling to my shoulders: my words, fallen into
disuse.

So then I reached this place closed in on the potters seated in their
circle insulted them
with three blows of
my knuckles broke
their invisible
impenetrable doors: and
I saw them moan
that they were like
children led there
on a tight leash to
forge the world on
a die; pots: which we,
all of us, gather inwardly.

A small, sanctuary: one is mine; I will fill it.

The potters sated with the same old same old shape will come
up close to show me
behind my back where
the rain came from, out
of all proportion: that
soaked me. I was looking at
myself on that garden
bench where I’d withdrawn
to read from the unforgiving
book it’s open on the
page of the almanac that in
its Gregorian year the year
five thousand eight
hundred and I don’t
know how many more
the rain has its cracks
uncloistered rivers so
thunder and lightning can
leap out of the sky like
stage scenery, I’m
frightened: the
plumbagoes will be
producing cherries for
those pots, since we’re
dead.

Pots, we smell of camphor; right to the bottom.

And from inquiries I see the rain is coming in, in its calm
form: the potters bend
to pick up their bowls
to load up the
donkey that from
the hill gazes straight
up at the heavens,
corporeal alleyways;
they descend; and they
are the hawkers of water
with big unmoving
eyes who sing the country’s
nectars, its own
wines.

Till night comes, with the tawny owl: to look.

They will have gone ahead to bring to my spot marked out in
the garden the large jar
of white liquids, blessed
with clay: I will
sit down. They’ve
sat down, today’s
people; in concaves:
and I among them
we talk, of
just who it was going
house to house crying
out the shape of spinning
wheels potter’s wheels
the cracking open of
honeys sickles
ants as the large jars
tipped over.
The conifers in the north are perpetual plants

The country is divided in six equal parts in sixteen (equal) parts it is divided.

Equally the quartered cow is divided, it represents us.

Flying level the green herons represent us (a bend) they’re invisible.

The butchers have snowy aprons snowy hair flocks fly past in the sky our birds.

Strips their leathery hands a whip-crack the one who chases away the one who receives.

Only the ragged man of the country shouts out (in its centre) green herons fly past he’s soaking wet.

They splash the woman opposite the flowerpot he was going to take out the weeds her man he was going to trim the forests of the country.

Arm raised she (was) (bending over) both soaked.

The people of my country look at each other tap their lower lip with the index finger.

The men with their guano knuckles the women with door-knob voices door-latch voices.
There are no doors in my country a territorial stealth (behind).

The man in rags stretches out his hand to eat our birds as they scatter in disarray.

Fire clears away in the ovens fire bakes the hollow die cutter for flowerpots.

From its hollow space the men of my country windbags its women windbags.

The women from balcony to balcony shouted their heads off the men watched the green herons fly past.

In her own place the woman in high heels strikes the man who travelled to other denominations, strikes.

Only the one who truly looks sees the centre where the birds stopped.

The man who was soaked bends down puts shoes on the (snowy) male female butchers of the country: it’s a country in its cracks grass grows.

The man in rags feels for the breakages feels for the open gaps.
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